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Migration and Gender Politics in Southeast Asia[1]

Brenda S.A. Yeoh

Abstract. *As a region that has experienced major socio-political and economic transitions in recent decades, Southeast Asia provides a rich and variegated terrain to explore the gendered lives and experiences of men and women in a globalizing world of increased migrations and mobilities. Relations of equality and complementarity between Southeast Asian men and women have long been thought to be a regional characteristic (Andaya 2007) but much has changed in recent times. Deeper incorporation of the region into the global world order provides a mobile context shaping the gendered experiences and micropolitics that men and women sustain in reproducing and resisting socio-cultural change and economic development. By the closing decades of the twentieth century, Southeast Asian women, in particular, have seen their lives transformed by rapid but uneven economic growth and development, the penetrating reach of global capital and international business, the strengthening of economic-cum-cultural nationalisms, the accelerated pace of urbanization, downward trends in fertility, and the increasing feminization of labor migration in the region (Yeoh, Teo and Huang 2002). At the same time, Southeast Asian men are also experiencing pressures to perform masculine subjectivities differently or more flexibly, even if deep-seated transformations in gender ideologies or scripts are more resistant to change (Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Ford and Lyons 2012).*

Introduction

As a region that has experienced major socio-political and economic transitions in recent decades, Southeast Asia provides a rich and variegated terrain to explore the gendered lives and experiences of men and women in a globalizing world of increased migrations and mobilities. Relations of equality and complementarity between Southeast Asian men and women have long been thought to be a regional characteristic (Andaya 2007) but given that much has changed in recent times, gender relations and politics in the region deserves renewed attention. Deeper incorporation of the region into the global

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world order provides a mobile context shaping the gendered experiences and micropolitics that men and women sustain in reproducing and resisting socio-cultural change and economic development. By the closing decades of the twentieth century, Southeast Asian women, in particular, have seen their lives transformed by rapid but uneven economic growth and development, the penetrating reach of global capital and international business, the strengthening of economic-cum-cultural nationalisms, the accelerated pace of urbanization, downward trends in fertility, and the increasing feminization of labor migration in the region (Yeoh, Teo and Huang 2002). At the same time, Southeast Asian men are also experiencing pressures to perform masculine subjectivities differently or more flexibly, even if deep-seated transformations in gender ideologies or scripts are more resistant to change (Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Ford and Lyons 2012).

Despite large socio-economic disparities among the countries making up the Southeast Asian region, there is strong rationale for addressing migration and gender politics in the region as a whole. First, the meanings, experiences and reworkings of 'gender' and 'migration' across the region have to be understood in the postcolonial context of new nation-states continually grappling with notions of 'self' and 'other' in the midst of "tensions between unfinished pasts and unstable presents" (Raghuram, Noxolo and Madge 2013, 124). Contemporary racisms, nationalisms, femininities and masculinities in the region cannot be divorced from the dynamism of cultural struggles over the distribution of wealth, power and prestige characteristic of postcolonial milieux where "gender politics are seldom merely about gender" (Ong 1995, 187; Ong and Peletz 1995, 2). Second, the region is accelerating towards "an intra-regional bias on trade and migration matters" (Kaur 2010, 6), and in the build-up to the formation of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 – heralded as a major milestone in regional economic integration – the rising demand for low-skilled guest workers among the region's more developed economies (e.g. Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand) is drawn heavily (although not exclusively) from the less developed parts of the region (e.g. Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam) (Asis 2004; 2005). Third, the region is the font of what has been termed the 'feminization' of transnational migration, where in the face of rising male unemployment and underemployment, women are undertaking temporally managed contract migration across international borders of neighbouring countries to seek work in highly gendered occupational categories such as factory, domestic and care work (Yeoh 2014). While women are accessing a wider range of economic opportunities and life chances through transnational labour migration, it has been noted that the 'gender gap' remains pervasive in many domains including the family, economic participation, politics, health and religion (Devasahayam, 2009).

Amidst the unevenness and unpredictability of change in the region, and in the face of multiple oppressions and opportunities at work in men and women's lives, my argument in this selective review draws on the view that

an understanding of gender politics in a migratory context needs to take on board analyses of gendered subjectivities and power hierarchies operating across interrelated spatial scales: the body and identity politics, the familial politics implicated in household reproduction, and the rise of gendered activisms vis-à-vis the nation-state. Such an account of migration and gender politics in Southeast Asia would also underscore men and women's agencies and strategies, depicting them not as passive victims of state control, patriarchy and capitalism, but as social actors working out their own lived realities under specific material circumstances (Gaetano and Yeoh 2010). In framing gender politics from a 'ground up' perspective, I have given less attention to the role of state ideologies, policies, apparatuses and programmes in producing gendered migrant subjects, not because this is in any way less important but because these are richly discussed in the extant literature (for different approaches, see for example, Piper (2004a) on gender and migration policies in the region, and Rodriguez (2010) on the 'labor brokerage state' using the Philippines as a case study). In a similar vein, I have also given priority to highlighting work on intra-regional migrations which have received much less attention, as opposed to the large volume of literature focusing on transnational connections of Southeast Asian migrants elsewhere in the world.

Gendered subjectivities, the migrant body and identity politics

Feminist scholars have long argued that 'identity' is relational and socially constructed, and that the politics of identity constitutes an important mapping of the basic contours of politics and struggle within the social body. Identity politics - the contested social processes whereby people articulate, challenge, suppress or realign hierarchies of identity that are played out through claims and counter-claims about 'self' and the 'other' - are often expressed through embodied practices and everyday routines. Women's embodied behavior, in particular, is often used as an ethnomarker to differentiate 'self' from 'other'.

Southeast Asia is experiencing a feminization of migration flows as a result of changing production and reproduction processes worldwide. Women in the region are on the move – often across transnational space – in response to increasing demand from at least two fronts: export processing zones and industrial parks that depend on cheap and flexible labor with severely diminished rights; and globalizing cities and more developed regions with increasing care deficits (in terms of childcare, eldercare and care for the sick), which are addressed by importing care and domestic workers. In this context, a new generation of young women from across rural Southeast Asia, in refusing to partake in the gendered cultural politics of identity maintenance, often migrate to the cities to take up factory work, domestic work or find a job in the urban informal sector, and in the process remake themselves as 'modern', 'fashionable', 'economically independent', and 'relatively worldly' compared to their rural peers. By drawing on what Ong and Peletz (1995) calls an 'inter-regional version' of 'Southeast Asian factory girl' femininity, these women not only challenge parental authority steeped in patriarchal notions of gender and wrest

greater freedom from the community gaze, but also resist state ideologies that position women in the domestic sphere or as 'mothers of development' (Elmhirst 2002, 94). In a region marked by rapid change from one generation to the next, gender politics played out through the corporeality of everyday routines and practices is hence inextricable from generational tensions and conflicts.

Migration to the cities of Southeast Asia creates the opportunity for young women to fashion the self in the image of consumerist modernity. With greater freedom from the parental gaze and community control over their own economic resources, Southeast Asian women are able to 'makeover' themselves from so-called 'rustic peasants' to 'modern girls,' thereby expanding labor market options, developing confidence and enhancing social status. Such gendered identity politics may however play out differently across the urban terrain; and migrant women who gain certain benefits in terms of consumption practices, status or self-esteem outside the factories or employers' homes may experience exploitation inside the gates of the factory or house where they are often unable to negotiate work conditions in these constrained settings (Phouxay and Tollesfen 2011, 433). The 'makeover' from 'rustic peasants' to 'modern girls' in some cases may also be temporary, as patriarchal norms, filial piety and familial expectations may require young women to marry and become parents, and as a result shoulder traditional responsibilities for both their natal and marital families (Esara 2004; Agergaard and Thao 2011). Despite the physical distance from familyhood and domesticity in rural villages, the experience of many migrant women in urban areas continues to fall within the 'reach' of familial expectations rooted in a discourse of moral duty and women's responsibility. In reconciling their own economic and consumption aspirations with their familial commitments, migrant women's identities are shaped by an ongoing process of negotiation and contestation between and within available subject positions such as 'dutiful daughter' or 'modern woman' (Mills 1997, 38; Yeoh, Chee, Vu and Cheng 2013). Conversely, for 'left-behind wives' when husbands migrate in the context of rural Southeast Asia, they may find themselves negotiating forms of farm work and responsibility that are 'culturally prescribed as 'masculine'' (Lukasiewicz 2011, 577).

Moralizing discourses centered on traditional notions of femininity and 'a woman's place' are further compounded by sexualized and racialized constructions of women's bodies in the city, as women are often deemed 'unaccounted for' outside the protective wrap of family life and male authority figures. Women who work in the nightlife or sex industries in Southeast Asian cities are often stigmatized as 'deviant' and 'out of place' (as are also the children, born during the migratory experience, of migrant women working in precarious jobs as Constable (2014) has recently argued), and in turn they resort to building new lives and identities by distancing themselves from their natal villages and creating female-dominated domestic spaces as a shield against social opprobrium, although this is often at the expense of widening the gulf between themselves and women in general (McIlwaine 1996; Law 2000; Hilsdon 2007).

In sum, while women's identities continue to be subject to asymmetrical power geometries structured by global capitalism, exploitative labor control regimes, and the patriarchal gaze of family and the state, the move to the city engenders changes in migrant women's identities and practices, including bodily appearance and comportment; consumption patterns; views of romance, sexuality and marriage; and importantly, their ability to imagine a wider range of options, life chances and pathways towards a more open-ended future.

While paradigmatic understandings of gender relations in Southeast Asia have tended to focus primarily on women, a limited vein of scholarship has emerged in recent years, which trains the analytical lens on men and masculinities. While there is no one regional version of hegemonic masculinity in historical times, centuries of colonialism in Southeast Asia have subjected native men to emasculation and rendered them subjects of civilizing missions. In the current phase of neoliberal capitalist globalization, the emerging scholarship has turned attention to the plural and dynamic nature of male subjectivities, as well as the intersectional character of gender identities and relations (Malam 2008; Yea 2013). Hegemonic masculinities, constructed on the basis of state-sanctioned hetero-patriarchal narratives of economic prowess, heroic nationalism, entrepreneurial mobility and macho-ness, are increasingly challenged by the rising educational attainment among Southeast Asian women and the feminization of Southeast Asian global labor (Pingol 2001). The resultant gender politics has produced a wide array of hegemonic and non-hegemonic, dominant and subaltern, alternative or localized masculinities, including, for example, the courageous masculinity of Filipino seafaring bagong bayani (new heroes) (McKay 2015; see also Fajardo 2011) and the re-scripted masculine performances as gangsters and gamblers in the face of female empowerment in Indonesia (Elmhirst 2007).

Familial politics and household reproduction in the context of migration

By embodying notions of home, family, gender, masculinity, femininity and sexuality, Southeast Asian households are central sites for the cultural expression and reworking of ideas of the 'modern' as well as for the expression of anxieties around the costs (and benefits) of reproduction and development (Brickell and Yeoh 2014). Intra-household relations represent a continuous, fluid process of negotiations, contracts and exchange – whether altruistic, reciprocal, unequal or oppressive – within the context of broader political, economic and social change. As the 'culture of migration' becomes normalized in many parts of Southeast Asia, the household is "stretched across space and seen more clearly as a contested domain" (Kelly 2011, 481). Within the household, Southeast Asian women play a critical role in ensuring the physical and social reproduction across generations, even though the normalization of the gendered division of labor and feminized care work often leave women's sacrifices and resilience unrecognized and unrewarded. Inasmuch as women are expected to be the lynchpins of the household responsible for shoring up the reproductive sphere, they are also blamed for household negligence in cases

of marital dissolution or breakdown, as vividly demonstrated by Cambodian women's struggles for legitimacy in the face of stigma and shame resulting from the physical division of the marital house into two after a divorce (or other forms of marital disruption) (Brickell 2014).

The ideological and practical placing of women within the domestic sphere, alongside the overall expectation that the household functions as a major provider of care and welfare, is also reinforced by prevailing government policies and discourses in the region (Ochiai 2009). The neoliberal strategies of the state in minimizing institutional support for household reproduction as part of economic restructuring in both developing and more advanced nation-states in Southeast Asia have led to the privatization and commercialization of care work, where women are expected to subsidize the economy with their caring work in the household.

In the case of Singapore, for example, the rapid decline in fertility rates, coupled with increasing life expectancy as well as higher proportions of delayed or non-marriage, has led to looming child- and elder-care deficits within families, which have to be plugged by global householding strategies (Yeoh and Huang 2014). These strategies include, for middle-class households, the market-based option of bringing in women from less developed countries in the region to serve as low-paid, surrogate care for children, the elderly and the infirm as well as perform domestic work (Truong 1996; Douglass 2006; Lam, Yeoh and Huang 2006). While eldercare work may also be 'outsourced' to (mainly female) migrant healthcare workers laboring in the institutionalized space of the nursing home, the prevalence of gendered ideologies based on 'Asian familialism' means that families continue to prefer to relegate the duty of elder-care to the privatized family sector in order to conserve some semblance of filial piety. In this context, the 'live-in foreign maid' emerges as an increasingly common substitute to provide the care labor needed to sustain the household. By outsourcing domestic and care work to other Southeast Asian women from less developed economies in the region at a low cost, socially and economically privileged women trade in their class privilege for (partial) freedom from the burden of household reproductive labor. This has the simultaneous effects of subordinating other women to work conditions governed by retrogressive employer-employee relations and minimal mobility; devaluing, racializing and commodifying household labor as unskilled and lowly paid work; and further entrenching and normalizing domestic and care work as resolutely 'women's work'. Compounded by state policies which treat migrant domestic workers as transient labor with diminished employment rights, the gender politics of the home is negotiated between local and foreign women vis-à-vis a racialized grid of highly asymmetrical power relations, while men continue to abdicate their household responsibilities. The politics of household reproduction that develops in many middle-class homes in Southeast Asia hence features mainly women – migrant women struggling to present themselves as docile bodies amenable to the disciplinary gaze of domestic governmentalities on the one hand, while disengaging from the role of the deferential inferior on the other (Rudnyckyj

2004; Yeoh and Huang 2010).

Somewhat analogous to the practice of middle-class families recruiting migrant domestic workers for householding purposes in the cities of Southeast Asia, working-class families without the financial means draw on unpaid care labor by recruiting 'foreign brides'. With globalization and expanding educational and career opportunities for women, Singaporean and Malaysian men from the lower socio-economic strata who feel positionally 'left behind' by local women's participation in the workforce are seeking to fill the care deficit in their households through international marriage with women from the less developed countries in the region who are considered more 'traditional' and willing to take on procreation and caring roles in sustaining the household (Yeoh, Chee and Vu 2014). In this context, the larger structural inequalities of gender, race, class, culture and citizenship operating across a transnational stage are integral to an understanding of familial politics and household reproduction in Southeast Asia.

Developed as a result of scrutinizing the underside of the feminization of transnational labour migration in Southeast Asia, Rhacel Parrenas' (2012) notion of the 'international division of reproductive labour' alerts us to the fact that by moving down the care chain as opposed to across the gender divide, a system of gender substitution of care labor dependent on exploitative practices of extracting cheap labor from migrant women is emplaced. The transfer of care work and domestic duties down a series of personal links between people stretched across a hierarchy of nation-states and sub-regions results in the 'off-loading' of care work to others down the global chain, often ending in unpaid labor performed by the migrant woman's kin at the least developed end of the chain. The nature of familial politics involved in household reproduction at this end of the care chain appears to point to the durability of the woman–carer model, where the care vacuum resulting from the absence of migrant mothers and daughters is often filled by female relatives such as grandmothers and aunts. The continued pressure to conform to gender norms with respect to caring and nurturing practices explains men's resistance to, and sometimes complete abdication of, parenting responsibilities involving physical care in their wives' absence. At the same time, more flexible gender practices of familial care and household reproduction are also emergent. In place of the image of the delinquent left-behind man who is resistant to adjusting his family duties in the woman's absence, some Southeast Asian men strive to live up to masculine ideals of being both 'good fathers' and 'independent breadwinners' when their wives are working abroad, by taking on at least some care functions that signified parental love and authority while holding on to paid work (even if monetary returns are low) for a semblance of economic autonomy (Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Lam and Yeoh 2014). At the same time, gender ideals, particularly those concerning motherhood, continue to remain resilient even under migration in the transnational context. While mothering at a distance reconstitutes 'good mothering' to incorporate breadwinning, it also continues maternal responsibility of nurturing by employing

(tele)communications regularly to transmit transnational circuits of care and affection to their families and children left in source countries (Parrenas 2005; Sobritchea 2007). The rise of transnationally stretched families and global householding practices at different segments of the care chain may hence give rise to different kinds of gender politics influencing the social provisioning of everyday and generational care in different Southeast Asian households.

Gendered activisms & the heterogeneity of women in the nation-state

In the last few decades, globalization and modernization processes at the supranational scale have strengthened the hand of global corporations and nation-states, often at the expense of the vulnerable – including women – who find themselves pushed into casualized and flexibilized work. In Southeast Asia, these processes have in turn generated their own specific, situated politics, including feminist or 'womanist' politics and emancipatory struggles at different fronts (Yeoh, Teo and Huang 2002). In this context, gender politics feature as a critical element of social organization as women's agency and activism emerge from the inner workings of life to challenge or inflect powerful corporate or nation-state discourses, practices and structures of gender, family, class, ethnicity and citizenship (Piper 2004b).

In contrast to the relative silence surrounding women's roles in Southeast Asian nationalist movements, there are in more recent times greater visibility regarding women's place in the rise of national and transnational civil society groups and networks of activists in creating new geographies of political action (Law 2002). Indeed, the region is increasingly animated by "processes of networking and organizing" and "formations of intimate connections across distant divides" between "groups and nationalities, through time, and across borders" (Constable 2010, 3). In the globalizing cities of Southeast Asia, women's movements are often linked to the increasing number of women from the educated middle classes whose concerns revolve around reproductive rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment, tax reform, childcare, pornography and gender awareness education. The growing presence of migrant women in these cities has in recent years stimulated a developing activist discourse around the case of female transnational migrant workers, in particular, a rights-based approach which has the potential (as well as limits) to provide a strategic frame to open up spaces for emancipatory political practice and transnational activism (Piper and Yamanaka 2008). Championed by intergovernmental organizations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the language of rights has been deployed by non-governmental organizations and activist groups to challenge exclusionary citizenship practices and advocate workplace rights. However, the gains in many Southeast Asian countries have been relatively limited, primarily because of the gender-blind association of rights with the public sphere, hence rendering the migrant domestic worker invisible and domestic work unrecognized as 'real work' (Piper 2006; Yeoh and Annadhurai 2008). Also significant are the contradictions between universal notions of human rights and the particularistic notions of citizen-

ship in authoritarian regimes, which tend to debilitate claims to rights among migrants as they are often viewed as transgressors of the nation-state. Labour activism in relation to migrant workers is, by and large, circumscribed by legal constraints on civil society organizations, while the forging of progressive feminist alliances and solidarity among women partly crippled by racialized and classed differentiations among Southeast Asian women. Gender politics in a region under rapid transition will hence continue to play out among men and women through complex strategies, flexible alliances and across a diversity of sites for action within what remains largely patriarchal worlds.

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