

## Foreign Maids and the Reproduction of Labor in Singapore

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Following reports of East Asian development have likened them to be "more like...advanced European states... Hong Kong is the Manhattan, and Singapore, the Switzerland of Asia... though without the unemployment and other shortcomings of structural rigidity in the older societies" (AWSJ 1995). Whereas rapid expansion of export-oriented labor-intensive production regimes has typically spurred the early stages of a potential tiger's development, the more mature economies of East Asia are shifting to rely on broader, more sophisticated bases of organizing industrial production.

Yet, amidst optimistic projections of sustained growth over the next few decades, certain sectors of these Asian economies are still clinging tenaciously to outmoded and traditional modes of labor organization. Specifically, we can point to the use of unfree immigrant labor in the various Asian

economies of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, and Singapore. This article is chiefly concerned with the question of why and how particular segments of an East Asian economy have lagged behind to avert restructuring themselves to mirror the radical overturn of traditional modes of labor organization experienced by sectors such as manufacturing, finance, and the services. In particular, this article focuses on the use of foreign workers in the domestic sector.

Traditionally, maids from neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia have been deployed to work and are still working in Singapore. This study, however, focuses on maids from the Philippines because they comprise the most numerous category of foreign domestic workers employed in the reproduction of labor power in contemporary Singapore. It is contended that the availability of foreign maids serving as some kind of bonded labor has been

pivotal in propping up customary patriarchal relations in family and society in Singapore. In contrast, the departure of maids from their homes in the Philippines has only added to further erode traditional forms of family relations which have already been destabilized by the out-migration of male members to the Middle East and elsewhere. Paradoxically, since the opportunities that have provided the space for women to redesign their roles are also steeped in deprivations and oppression, these women could therefore not fully grasp their potential for autonomous growth and development. Instead, many who work as maids end up losing their own integrity and that of their families.

The first section of this article provides the historical context for the study of foreign labor in Singapore. The second section discusses the early phase of Singapore's industrialization to show how this had impacted to restrict the supply of cheap domestic workers, leaving middle class families to grapple with the problem of designing new arrangements for reproductive work. The third section looks at uneven development of capitalism in the region and how this has thrown up a cheap and plentiful supply of foreign domestic workers, which quite suddenly helped staunch the nascent process of rationalization of domestic work taking place in Singapore in the early 1970s. The final part examines how, in the context of strict structures set up by the state to regulate employer-maid relationships, maids have adroitly managed to carve a life for themselves which hope to match the Singapore Dream concocted by the Singapore state

for its middle class families, regulations notwithstanding. Information for this study is derived from three sources: secondary materials, personal experience, and data from informal interviews with maids and employers.

### *Background and historical context*

Securing labor was a perennial problem for the traditional rulers in pre-colonial Malaya, of which Singapore was a part. The small population base relative to a large land mass of difficult terrain and extensive primeval jungle had made it difficult to mobilize and control labor adequate to work the fields and mines, to meet administrative purposes and, most importantly, to do battle and plunder. Slaves and subjects were acquired at great cost through pillage<sup>1</sup> and purchase.<sup>2</sup> Proprietary claims on peasant labor were thus enforced with harshness and a great deal of force.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the coming of the Dutch and the British, slaves, corvee, and other forms of bonded labor were commonly-used modes of labor organization.<sup>4</sup> Eager to open up virgin jungle land for capitalist production, the British especially promoted a *laissez faire* policy to encourage the immigration of peasants from land-hungry neighboring countries of India, Indonesia and China (Malloy 1926).<sup>5</sup>

On the eve of British colonialism (Penang was the first settlement colonized in 1786), production was carried out by using a variety of forms of labor organization, including debt bondage (*orang tebusan*), corvee (forced labor), indentured labor, free labor (who had paid for their own passage), and slavery. The Straits Settle-

ments, composed of Penang, Malacca and Singapore, were emporiums for the labor market that supplied the tin mines and plantations located in the Malayan and Indonesian hinterland (including Borneo) to even as far south as Australia. Prior to the firm establishment of the British colonial state in the 1860s, Chinese secret societies were operating as the chief regulators policing the movements of farmers and immigrant labor, to ensure that workers did not abscond before repaying the advances and loans given out by financiers and merchants located in the Straits Settlements. In fact, merchants, coolie brokers, and mine owners were known to be members of secret societies (Doyle 1879, Wong 1965, Munshi 1975). Initially, capitalist production for tin mining and, later on, for the plantation sector could not be based on the wage-labor form. Because of the small population base and the availability of large tracts of land, it was not viable to base production on the mobilization of large-scale waged labor. Mainly for this reason, the large-scale import of foreign migrant workers had to be encouraged. In the subsistence sector of rice-farming and mixed agriculture, sharecropping had prevailed and remained a preserve of the Malay peasantry, aided by the Malay Reservation Act which was passed to prevent migrant workers from turning themselves into independent farmers.

The quantity of different types of labor could not be exactly determined at any one time. One estimate (Low 1882) showed that slaves made up eight percent of the population but this precluded those held by the most powerful slave owners such as the

Sultan. In another estimate, the chief merchant in Malacca was alleged to own 5,000 slaves (Swettenham 1875). Members of the *Kerabat* class (royalty and aristocracy) owned between five to eighteen slaves each around 1915 (Burkhill Commission Report 1918). Prior to the third quarter of the 19th century, practically all immigrant labor were indentured. But, by 1890, the percentage of indentured to paid migrant labor had fallen to 8.4 percent (Campbell 1923). In 1910, indentured labor from China was banned by the British (*Ibid.*:26). The open-door policy on the immigration of free labor was upheld until 1933 when it was changed to correct the sex ratio by prioritizing the immigration of women.

It is not surprising that the forms of labor found in the domestic sector<sup>6</sup> of colonial Malaya reflected very much the composition of labor in the other sectors of the economy, viz., the mining and the plantation sectors. On the one hand, there was the professional domestic worker—the houseboy and uniformed *amabs* (Gaw 1988)—for whom housework was a career with pay as high as that of English-educated clerks (Lai 1986). This was made possible by employment in the households of the rich and the wealthy, a trend also observed in the more industrialized countries of the West (Palmer 1989, Gregson and Lowe 1994). On the other hand, at the lower levels were found the bonded domestic workers known as the *Mut Tsai* from China, young peasant girls sold into domestic service (Lai 1986). They were incorporated into the employer's family by taking on the latter's surnames, and could either be retained for life as servants or be married

off at maturity. In 1936, the immigration of *Mut Tsai* was banned, although the practice of this custom was continued with the supply coming locally from orphans, wayward girls, or daughters from poor families. The author's own family (extended and immediate) enjoyed the services provided by a few *Mut Tsai* who were orphans obtained from welfare homes for wayward girls.

Over time, as the number of unsecured workers began building up, waged work became the dominant form of labor organization. This process was particularly rapid for Singapore relative to the inland areas of the region. Located at the confluence of two monsoons (Southwest and Northeast), Singapore was a natural meeting place for trade and the transshipment of goods, and it was a convenient refuelling center for the triangular trade between China, India and the West. Surplus from long distance trade supported the masses with a relatively high standard of living. It also allowed the wider practice of the waged form, apart from providing financiers with the capital to venture into productive investments in the sprawling hinterland of the Malay Archipelago. But, whereas waged work was the predominant form of labor appropriation in Singapore, the Malayan hinterland still boasted a substantial proportion of independent producers who continued to make a living without having to sell their labor in the market.

In retrospect, we can say that the waged form, though dominant in contemporary Singapore, is a relatively new form of work organization. Corollarily, even though industrial capitalism seems to have taken hold in

Singapore as mirrored by the huge skyscrapers and modern conveniences, direct coerced labor is neither unfamiliar nor confined to the long forgotten dustbin of history. In fact, to the middle-aged and older generations (about 45 years old and above), this mode of labor organization is still fresh in their memory and forms a constituent part of their identity as citizens of a modern city-state.

### *Industrial capital and the female waged form*

Singapore became independent in 1965. The loss of the Malayan hinterland, coming so close to the Confrontation with Indonesia and the withdrawal of the British military base, all combined to threaten the very foundations of its economy which was based traditionally on its role as the entrepot, trading and financial center of the region. After independence, Singapore was pressed to lessen its reliance on merely creaming off the surplus produced by neighboring countries to craft a role for itself as a center for productive investments.

At this particular juncture of history, American capital was restructuring and relocating to cheaper production sites overseas. It was at the height of the Cold War and, with the encouragement of generous fiscal incentives, American MNCs (multinational corporations) were channeling their investments into the frontline states bordering China and the USSR. To this stream of US capital Singapore turned in its dire struggle to restructure its economic base to a more productive one. Fuelled by demands generated by the Vietnam War, the first phase of Singapore's

industrialization rapidly took off from around the end of the 1960s. A labor-surplus economy experiencing an unemployment rate of about 12 percent turned around to re-emerge as a strikingly successful economy plagued by acute labor shortages ever since the late 1970s.

More to the point is the massive employment of young, unskilled females who would have formed part of the labor supplied to the domestic sector. Additionally, the entrenchment of large electronic and textile MNCs and the expansion of the apparatus of the developmentalist state all worked to generate plentiful jobs for the still non-existent new middle-class knowledge workers. In a regime of considerable economic growth, women were easily absorbed into the numerous middle-class jobs generated by the rationalization of the economy and society. The rapid rise of female labor force participation rates can be considered a seismic development for its impact on the mode of labor reproduction. The immediate knock-on effect was the disappearance of daughters of the working class, who since then assumed new roles as production operators in the manufacturing sector.

In the face of the situation of acute labor shortage created in the domestic sector by this turn of events, traditional arrangements for reproductive work began to unravel, giving way to new modes of production. Parts of reproductive work were fragmented, broken away, and became subject to commodification. Most obvious was the commercialization of food preparation. The many food stalls in the innumerable

hawkers' centers found interspersed amongst the many newly built housing areas put up to accommodate the working classes and to turn them into stable and disciplined workers/home owners became extremely popular and well frequented. With the passing of time, the demand for cooked food reached such a level that mass commercialization became viable. It must have been so profitable that MNCs, such as McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Burger King, started entering to carve a slice from the expanding lucrative food market. Lately, increasing varieties of ready-to-eat food have become more and more a staple amongst the working classes, as noted by a spokesperson for the supermarket chain run by the National Trade Union Congress.

Next, cleaning and laundry were farmed out to part-timers who were paid on a piece-work basis. For the married female who was still held responsible for the daily labor of reproduction, piece-work represented a flexible alternative that could be mixed and matched with their own domestic responsibilities. Most importantly, due to the strength of labor in the market, many more job options sprung up, and females needful of employment could avoid live-in domestic work which continued to be poorly paid. Despite the difficulty of sourcing for cheap domestic workers locally, wages for this class of workers did not really rise much, except for the very small number fortunate enough to work for families of the rich and wealthy. The long tradition of debasing the work of reproduction and maintenance of labor power (perhaps because it had since time immemorial

been relegated as the responsibility of low-status women) has ensured that such work persists stubbornly as a relatively low-paid job.

The other reason for resistance to pay increases for domestic workers could be attributed to the relatively low incomes of the middle classes, which were generally not large enough to afford them the luxury of employing a maid (a fact that, at present, can continue to be submerged with the availability of cheap foreign domestic maids). Anyway, industrialization during the 1970s could not provide a living for the middle class adequate enough to drive the price of local maids up to a level that could compete with the work and conditions offered by the corporate sector. Thus, even as the virtual disappearance of the live-in servant had raised the salary of the live-in, the indignity and loss of autonomy this job entailed also made it most unattractive. So, apart from becoming a bit more expensive, the live-in servant was on the way to becoming an anachronism.

The difficulty of sourcing for the cheap domestic live-in worker also turned individual women to consider other strategies for reducing housework. The net result of these individual decisions was registered in the decline of crude birth rates as disclosed below:

1957	42.7
1970	22.1
1980	17.1
1992	17.0

(Census of Population, various years)

Conversely, as the figures on female labor force participation below show,

parallel to this declining trend in crude birth rate is the increase in the rates of participation of women in the Singapore economy:

1957	22.4
1970	31.1
1980	44.3
1992	51.3

(Reports of the Labour Force Survey in Singapore, various years)

Deprived of the cheap supply of local stay-in domestic worker, middle class families had to make do with the day worker. This change was crucial because it meant that employers were now deprived of the absolute control they once held over the body, mind and time of the workers under their servitude. The improving strength of domestic workers had succeeded in removing the employer-maid relationship from its embeddedness within the web of personal relations and employer maternalism.

These incipient trends are reminiscent of the change in mode of labor organization found in the domestic sector of several other advanced industrial countries such as the United States and Canada (Palmer 1989, Giles and Arat-Koc 1994) and suggest several compelling generalizations regarding the dynamics of transition in the reproduction of labor following the process of industrialization. However, at this critical stage when all these new arrangements for reproductive work were just emerging, the presence of cheap foreign maids made its appearance in the Singapore domestic scene and the whole momentum of change was put on hold. Patriarchy was preserved, and

the middle class Singaporean woman was saved from becoming a servant in her own home.

*Waged work and Industrial capitalism  
in the Philippines*

Emigration of surplus labor from the Philippines has for some time been a commonly sought option used by both state and people when faced with difficult problems of economic survival. World Bank figures show the Philippines as the largest source of permanent migrants from Asia (Bulatao *et al.* 1989). The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration said that 488,621 registered contract workers went overseas in 1995 (*Stratts Times* [hereafter *ST*] 1996f). If we compare figures from the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) that 800,000 new entrants join the workforce every year, the outflow of workers is quite substantial. The most recent spate of mass outmigration of workers occurred in the mid-1970s as a result of the oil crisis of 1973 and 1978 (Gonzalez and Holmes 1996) which threw thousands of workers out onto the streets. Ironically, these circumstances contributed at the same time to the enrichment of the Arab states which then embarked on the building of mammoth infrastructural projects which drew thousands of male construction workers to the Gulf states. This situation did not last. Falling oil prices and the completion of the mega infrastructural projects around the mid-1980s put an end to the large inflow of construction workers, and the composition of Filipino migrant workers to the Arab states began changing to reflect the new requirements of the expanding service sectors. More

to the point, the mass migration of low-skilled male workers was moderated, giving way to a new flow of low-level female workers to serve the domestic sector. Such changes illustrate well the conclusions reached by scholars who have argued that a gendered migration perspective provides a better understanding of how socialization predisposes people to take the role and status of domestic helpers, even as it also reflects acquiescence to global demand predicated on racist and sexist assumptions (Tyner 1994:609).

Nonetheless, constant mobilization of male labor in and out of the Philippines had had a deleterious effect on traditional family relations. Allowed an unprecedented degree of independence, women left to cope on their own soon gained confidence as active agents responsible for the fate and welfare of their individual families. By the time the male migrants returned to reassert their role in the family economy, the women were ready to turn the tables on them. First, the income made available by male migrants had pushed family consumption to a level that could no longer be supported by proletarian work in the local economy. Noting that skilled migrant workers returning from abroad often did not use their skills at home, TESDA Director-General Jose Lacson had elaborated that "a plumber returning from Saudi Arabia will not work here because the wages he gets is peanuts compared with in Saudi...so he will instead buy a jeepney or taxi" (*ST* 1996f). Micro-level data (Lindquist 1993, Interviews) reveal that the purchase of a house or the completion of mortgage payments were compelling

reasons justifying the important decision for married women to migrate to work as domestic workers. Other studies confirm that migrants do not necessarily represent the poorest strata of the Filipino community. For one thing, a large sum is required to buy the services of middlemen, such as recruitment agencies, immigration and other officials, labor contractors, and even the state. Families have been known to sell their land or to get loans at usurious rates from loan sharks to support the initial capital required to start off the immigration process.<sup>7</sup>

For the single female, migration offers adventure and liberation from confinements of patriarchy and poverty, just as migration for the single male worker provides an escape route from parental authority and the realization of their dreams for adventure. In fact, seeking employment in Singapore and Malaysia has become the norm for Boyanese men who do not consider themselves manly without having attempted to stay abroad (Mustain 1992). More so for the young female migrant workers who appear to be "temporarily suspended under the illusionary force of promised freedoms and material success" (San Juan 1994:121). One such single maid who headed for Singapore in May 1993 filled with the hope of supporting the education of three siblings told a *Stratts Times* reporter in an interview in February 1996 that she was left high and dry, save for the charity of friends, because her employer had confiscated her passport and papers. Her family in Quezon Province is now living on the income of her elder brother, a rice farmer, while she awaits the outcome of a court case against her

employer charged with physically abusing her in February 1994.

Timing and historicity are thus important in providing part of the explanation for the huge presence of Filipino female workers in Singapore. The problem is that, because this initial phase of the development of industrial capitalism in Southeast Asia has released massive numbers of unskilled workers onto the international market for labor, it has created a vast gap in the balance of power between employer and migrant worker. Foreign workers like maids in Singapore are engaged in labor relations that can only be described as slave/serf-like, if we compare the parameters under which they have to labor against the basic hallmarks of slavery as outlined by scholars such as Orlando Patterson (1979). But bear in mind that, because this form of unfreed labor is located within the dominant mode of capitalist production organization, a certain degree of ambiguity/space is built into the system for individual play/initiative in the actual realization of such relationships in everyday life.

#### *Structuration of maid-employer relations*

Maids in Singapore today work under the framework (termed guidelines) of regulations governing employer-maid relations laid down by the Singapore state in 1986. Foreign maids are required to have a work permit before being allowed to work in the Republic. Before this can be obtained, employers have to post a security bond of S\$5,000 to the state. The work permit can be renewed after two years, and at the discretion of the



state. Additionally, employers have to pay a monthly levy of about S\$330 to the state for as long as the maid is in his employ. Maids are prohibited from marrying Singaporeans, and they have to undergo a pregnancy test every six months to ensure they do not conceive any offspring while still in employment. Maids have to get a release letter from existing employers if they want to work elsewhere. This practice harks back to the archaic Discharge Ticket System employed by the British to prevent indentured labor from absconding before settling the advancements provided by merchants and employers (Wong 1965:95).

The vast disparity of economic power between maids and employers can be said to be greatly exaggerated by structures placed by the state to regulate their employment as maids. Payment of the bond allows Singaporean employers to justify even the most extreme of action they can take to ensure that the behavior of maids does not jeopardize the monies posted with their government. The bond sets up employers as security officers, thus emphasizing not only their power over the maids but also implying state sanction for this power, which in some cases have been interpreted and used rather capriciously. On top of this, with the payment of the monthly levy, employers get the feeling that they pay a large inflated sum for the maid, justifying their ownership of the maid, body and soul. For the male employer, molesting and raping maids could therefore be considered logical behavior to be expected under such circumstances. On the part of the female employer, playing out this logic entails

physically abusing their maids. The social isolation of maids behind the privacy of individual households also allows the violation of their bodies to be continued with impunity. What is more, given the technological and economic gap between the two societies, and the fact that entering a strange country tends to fill one with the worst of expectations, when maids are violated they can only remain transfixed/immobilized. They are incapacitated from acting to protect themselves in the normal fashion because, separated from kith and kin and plunged into an alien and threatening environment, they can marshal only enough initiative to continue with evocations of so many wild imaginations. Just as naked direct force is a precondition and forms a continuous part of slave relations, the distinctive nature of the maid's powerlessness is also constituted by open possibilities for violence.

Because of the wide open nature of maid-employer relationships, it is quite difficult to predict how any single relationship will materialize locally. Perhaps we can say that, precisely because this unfreed form of labor is situated in the dominant capitalist mode, there exists the space/possibilities for the formation of a plurality of relationships despite the presence of severe structures of control established by the state. On the one hand, we should not be surprised to discover the healthy and positive contours of maids' relationships with employers who come from a tradition where labor rights constitute an inherent part of culture and identity. Work is likely to be structured and delimited as day work. Maids get a day

off and are not on call 24 hours. She is entitled to overtime pay if required to work during off-hours, e.g., when employers are entertaining late into the night. Some of these employers even encourage their maids to use their off-hours fruitfully by offering to pay for their training, e.g., in word processing or in learning English. At the other end of the spectrum are employers still caught in a time warp of 19th-century Colonial Malaya. These are showcases illustrative of grotesque brutality and gross exploitation. Maids are fully utilized around the clock, sometimes to service several families and even their workshops. Rest days are unheard of. In one case, a maid had complained that even during the very morning of her departure for home, she had to wake up at 4:30 AM to handwash the clothes and car on the insistence of the employer. She missed her breakfast and boarded the plane in a dizzy, nervously chattering to herself while constantly wringing a pair of hands defaced and discoloured probably from long hours of immersion in water and detergent. This is a sad ending to the hopes she must have nurtured when on her maiden flight out to Singapore.

Instead of accepting powerlessness as inevitable in the open situation constituted by maid-employer relations, some maids have managed, when circumstances permit, to build up a small nestegg before reaching the end of their stay. One maid has confided to me that she has a saving of a few thousand dollars in Singapore, apart from supporting the educational expenses of some relatives and completing the payment of the mortgage on her house back in the

Philippines. Perhaps it was to escape the problems of an adulterous spouse, this maid has devoted enormous energy to remake her life in Singapore into something palatable. She has thrown herself into all kinds of part-time work, including house-cleaning for two other families (in partnership with another maid) during her free time. Life has also been made more enjoyable with the company and monetary contributions of a Singaporean "boy-friend." Of course, all this has been made possible with a liberal French employer who has treated her as a waged worker laboring on specific tasks within a given number of hours of work.

According to Patterson (1979), part and parcel of the large gap spanning the position of slaves and their masters is the slaves' loss of custodial capacity and rights to patrimony. Their lack of autonomy entails their having only a delimited kind of relationship with others and with things around them. As a consequence of their extreme powerlessness in relation to their employers, foreign maids in Singapore have also been denied a substantial part of their species capability to act as autonomous actors and agents of their own environment. The pregnancy tests undertaken regularly ensure that these females are deprived of the greatest symbol of their right as women, that is, to bear off-spring while employed as maids in Singapore. Loss of their subjectivity is well exemplified by the fact that maids can have sex or even cohabit with Singaporeans, but they have no legal claims against them because they are prohibited from marrying them. Loss of subjectivity is also evident in the way

some maids are denied the use of natural adaptive mechanisms like shedding of tears: one maid not given adequate sustenance was forbidden to go out of the house to feed herself; when she hid in the toilet to cry over her fate, she was prohibited from doing so because, according to the employer, it would bring bad luck. From these respective illustrations, we can only conclude that, unlike waged workers, maids have indeed lost a substantial sense of themselves as custodians with rights to patrimony (including rights over their own bodies).

Like the slaves of ancient times destined for social death, and approximating the condition of slaves who have no self but are mere extensions of their employers, cheap maids in Singapore have ironically been cast in the role of symbols projecting the wealth and social status of their employers. Just as slaves do not have a life of their own, maids owe their life in Singapore to the initiative of their employers. Even their little wards treat them like pets and toys to be shown off to their friends. As aliens in a strange land, maids have to bear the pain of their isolation which is underscored by conditions that allow employers to restrain and regulate their mobility (e.g., by holding on to their passports, by locking them up in the house, by requiring that permission of the employer be obtained for change in employment). Though located in the heart of Singaporean families, maids are separated from them by a deep divide (e.g., eating on their own after everyone else has eaten their fill) in both family and community. Even as they worship in Singaporean churches,

maids do so as a congregation set apart. Or, when they huddle together during their Sunday breaks in downtown Singapore, they stand out as a homogeneity prominently separated and distinct from their surrounding environment. Their massive presence in this most prestigious of Singapore's real estate, the Golden Triangle with its posh Orchard Road, has caused some nervousness amongst the locals because their intruding presence represents a bold assertion against the state of Singaporean invincibility enforced on the maids for the rest of the week.

Part of the reason why the violence underlying the relationship of extreme powerlessness characteristic of slavery could be sustained is the fact of natal alienation (Patterson 1979). Maids in Singapore are also cut off from the protection of their kith and kin. Recruited from across national boundaries, maids are migrants in a strange land. As such, they can be said to be deprived of community support/presence that can help avert incidences of unmitigated aggression. Cut off from the protection of any natural group affiliation, maids are suspended in a state of kinlessness. The weakness of the Filipino state has made possible the continued oppression of Filipino workers in Singapore, just as its arousal by People Power after the Flor Contemplacion<sup>9</sup> case succeeded to push the Philippine state to reassert its sovereignty, by putting its weight behind the lot of its constituents in Singapore. It took the death of a humble and powerless maid to mark the change in relationship between Singapore and the Philippines. The

newly found leverage of the Philippines was up until then largely hidden and unrecognized. For some time already, Singapore has been experiencing a great deal of difficulty in sustaining the high rate of return it used to reward capital investing within its shores. The newly found power of the Philippines is therefore directly related to its increasing attractiveness as a lucrative site for Singaporean investments in search of new spaces to colonize. The death of Flor Contemplacion gave consciousness to this most recent vulnerability of Singapore, and thus shifted employer-maid relations to a more equal plane, newly characterized by the emplacement of stringent conditions to govern relations with Singaporean recruiters and employers of maids.

Finally, honorlessness, another attribute of slaves (Patterson 1979), can also be said to characterize the relations of foreign maids and their employers in Singapore. Without an independent existence of their own apart from the life given by masters, slaves cannot be accorded any respect. Similarly, due to their lack of autonomy and the absence of an independent self, no respect need be given to maids. Words uttered by maids cannot be taken in their full sincerity and intentioned meaning. This attribute has brought tragic consequences. Many a time, without any evidence, maids have been accused of stealing from their employers. The words of their little charges have often been accepted as the more truthful. In other instances, maids have often been unsuccessful when they attempt to establish stable relationships with men around them.

Since they are not considered as humans needing intimate relationships and love, their sincere offers of relationship have often been spurned. Instead, their offer of love is suspect as they are considered as without honor and thus good enough only as prostitutes. Seen as not possessing any of the fundamental attributes of the human species, maids cannot qualify to become a member of the human family, at least as defined by the Singaporean. Neither do they possess the dignity necessary for motherhood.

Sure enough, seemingly uncompromising structures set up by the state confer on employers a great deal of power over maids, leaving them vulnerable to the whims and fancies of their employers. Yet, we are reminded that attributes of employers and maids matter too in the actual shaping of relationships between the two parties in their daily interactions. The composition of the employer's household sometimes opens up opportunities for maids to strike up alliances to strengthen or remake their own position. Maid/daughter-in-law alliance is common for bolstering their individual positions, while pitting them both against the imperious demands of the mother-in-law. When the food of one of my respondents was strictly rationed, the daughter-in-law who also suffered at the hands of the mother-in-law bought food on the sly and stored it in the maid's cupboard. For the daughter-in-law, the uninterrupted services of a maid are absolutely necessary to enable her to build a career outside the house and to allow her an escape from becoming a maid in her own home! In

other instances, lustful husbands and maneuvering maids have ganged up to marginalize the "mistress" of the house. There are also cases where maids given kind treatment by employers have abused their privileges by going out at every opportunity, neglecting their work, or even consorting with strange men in the master's bedroom. So, despite the overpowering position of employers, slight possibilities for positive outcomes have been used by various parties to promote their own interests. Consequently, the ambiguity in the condition of maids may have allowed for the situation to be romanticized out of all proportion such that, as maids set out from their familiar environment of home and community in the Philippines to work in Singapore, both hopes and fears continue to battle and contend in their minds.

### *The Filipino maid and the Singapore dream*

Surveying the continued expansion of Asian miracle economies, one should not forget that the birth of industrial capitalism in Asia did not occur without notorious incidents of violent intimations, appalling abuses, and the widespread use of force. Placed in this perspective, the employment of unfree labor such as the foreign immigrant workers of today assume a depressingly familiar tune. Increased competition and fierce struggle to maintain and expand a slice of the world market have compelled the use of cheap immigrant labor. So argue authoritarian governments, all set to become number one in the league of competitive nations, notwithstanding that such labor forms are redolent of the

historical era of slavery and debt bondage.

The task of this essay is to systematically set out to question how work conditions allowing continued violence—which is an essential hallmark of any form of unfreed labor—has fundamentally impacted on individual, community, and society. Cases of extreme violence (from rape, molestation and physical abuse) by employers behind the privacy of their homes, so recently highlighted as part of media reports of court proceedings, illustrate clearly the social cost imposed by the continued use of this form of labor. Essential features underlying maid-employer relations such as violence, natal alienation, and honorlessness are conducive to eliciting wild varieties of disturbing behavior, such as: scotching maids with a hot iron (ST 1996b); raping them (ST 1996e) perhaps when spouses are not around, with the excuse that they can't help themselves; pinching the thigh; throwing hot water at the maid's face; hitting maids with a feather duster, the back of a knife, or with a whiteboard (ST 1996j); locking them up in a room (ST 1995); slapping cheeks, face and arm; kicking; pulling their hair and punching ear and arm (ST 1996c)—behavior which are so contrary to the official aspirations of Singapore to become a civilized and cultured society. Faced with a middle-class revolt because inflation has placed ordinary markers of middle class status such as car, condominium and club membership beyond their reach, the state has thought up this much touted alternative version of the Singapore Dream—to be

serviced by a maid—which they hope can help divert the attention of the irate middle class from the crisis of the new middle-class squeeze.

In laying the legal framework for the control and regulation of the importation of immigrant workers, the state has inadvertently created new spaces and opportunities for activities which are now regarded as criminal and socially undesirable. For instance, barriers erected to deter the building of stable heterogenous relationships between maids and ordinary Singaporeans have inadvertently paved the way for lesbian relationships (Kula and Alsagoff 1991, San Juan 1994). Despite heavy fines and harsh punishment (under the Penal Code forgers caught can be jailed up to two years), syndicates forging passports and endorsements are said to be flourishing.

Not only in Singapore but elsewhere in the region, the rising tide of international migration is spawning a sinister trade. Their growing success has transformed the trade in human traffic into one of the most profitable criminal enterprises (*JHT* 1996a). More specifically for Singapore, some of these groups have specialized in ferrying illegals into the Republic for a living: one was fined S\$8,000 for fetching a Thai prostitute across the causeway from Johor (*ST* 1996g). The number of overstayers have increased over the years from 6,000 caught in 1993 to more than 10,000 caught in 1995 (*ST* 1996a). Employers committing the offence of harboring undocumented workers, after the first offence, face a mandatory jail sentence of one to twelve months in addition to

having to pay hefty fines. A Singapore Ministry of Labour statement said that since 1995 there have been 361 convictions with deterrent sentences involving heavy fines. But it urged courts to impose jail sentences on such employers. The statement went on to say that first time offenders given jail sentences this year amounted to five, a figure covering the whole of 1995. One example is the proprietor of Sakin Construction, who was jailed eight months for hiring 44 foreigners without work permits (*ST* 1996h).<sup>9</sup>

Recently, as a result of the implementation of new guidelines on the recruitment of maids from the Philippines, a new bond of S\$5,000 has to be posted by Singaporean recruiters. Back in the Philippines, some maids cheated by bogus recruiters and middlemen have taken the law into their own hands to wreak their own brand of vengeance. These examples are illustrative of the fact that, although the employment of foreign domestic workers appears to be primarily a family affair, it has unwittingly brought some unforeseen and quite wide repercussions rippling through the society at large.

Of even more significance are consequences for working class solidarity. There is no doubt that the largess earned by the Singapore state from the monthly levy on migrant workers and the numerous fines collected from recalcitrant employers harboring illegal workers (perhaps to avoid paying the foreign workers' levy—according to the Public Relations Head of the Ministry of Labour, *ST* 1996k) has contributed substantially to

the state's pot of expanding surplus. Every Singaporean has benefitted from the presence of migrant workers either in the form of cheaper services, or from small disbursements distributed by the treasury to encourage Singaporeans to buy shares or to have savings in their Medisave accounts. There are, according to one estimate, around 65,000 Filipino maids employed in Singapore (Senator Herrera in *ST* 1996d). The state stands to collect a sum of S\$330 x 12 x 65,000, or S\$257.4 million. This can be considered rental for just allowing Filipino maids to work in Singapore. The Department of Statistics gave the Cost Review Committee the figure of 70,000 households employing maids in 1993. Apart from the Philippines, maids are also sourced from countries like Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and, now most recently, Myanmar.

However, we know that there are many more unskilled migrant workers in Singapore whose employment entail the state collecting a monthly levy of between S\$300-S\$400, depending on sector and quota of foreign workers deployed at the worksite. One report has alleged that there are 300,000 documented foreign workers in Singapore (*ST* 1996i). At 17 percent of a workforce of 1.69 million in 1994, this figure represents the highest proportion of foreign workers found in Asia. Unskilled male and female workers from Bangladesh, India, Thailand (estimated to number 50,000, *Ibid.*), Myanmar, Indonesia, and Malaysia are employed to work in shipyards, factories, construction sites, and offices. Fines collected from the numerous "criminal" up/downstream activities must

be enormous, judging from the tenacity with which the state pursues these miscreants. In one case alone, an employer (Four Seas Contractor) was fined S\$300,000 for harboring illegal workers (*ST* 1996l). The most recent case exemplifying the hardening of officials against employer recalcitrance was that of Ssang-Guan Ho Joint Venture which was fined S\$1,561,840 for harboring 188 Indonesians and Malaysians without the requisite documentation (139 without valid entry permits and 49 without work permits) at its construction site at the Tan Tock Seng Hospital (*ST* 1996o). The presence of these unfortunate workers acts as a constant reminder to Singaporeans that they should at least be grateful to the ruling government for working so hard to place them a cut above the miserable low-status migrant workers. In fact, some members of the working classes can now even afford to employ maids as part-time cleaners on their off-days. For these working class families, Filipino maids have allowed them a taste of middle class distinctiveness (Bourdieu 1984) at a deep discount.

The Monetary Authority's most recent annual report (1996) estimates that foreign workers contribute some 1.5 to 2 percent to Singapore's annual GDP growth since 1992. Foreign workers have also helped moderate inflation, allowing the stabilization of nominal wage growth rates which eased to 6.7 percent in 1995 from 8.8 percent in 1994. The figure is expected to decline further to 5.5-6.5 percent. Still at the macro-economic level, the employment of maids is expected to help release educated women into the labor force.

A 'foreign maid relief' is given to married women to encourage them to enter the tight labor market, and help arrest the trend of declining fertility. However, it must be noted that only households with annual incomes of over S\$30,000 are qualified to employ maids. The full extent of the economic contribution of maids can only be understood by observing what happened when the government of the Philippines imposed a ban on the deployment of maids after the diplomatic crisis following the execution of Flor Contemplacion. The recruitment fees paid by Singapore agencies rocketed to S\$1,000, from the pre-crisis level of S\$200. The agency fee for a maid was also raised from S\$1,600 to S\$2,000 (Wong 1996).

Wider social implications resulting from the use of foreign maids can also be observed in the development of gender relations in society. That cheap maids without honor have now been employed as substitutes to carry out the critical work of reproducing and maintaining labor power has allowed the continued debasement of domestic work. The myth that domestic work is unimportant continues to live on. However, because problems of working class families who have failed to cope effectively with reproductive work on their own have recently surfaced, small efforts are now beginning to be made to shift some of this work to outside agencies who can manage them professionally, for instance, in Family Centers. It is still an open question whether this would mean the resumption of the process of professionalizing domestic work initiated so hopefully during the early 1970s. It is

rather a surprise that, despite their wily tactics, Singaporean feminists have not succeeded in moving the state much in this direction. The remarkable thing is that, instead, youngsters on their own, with their spasms of street rioting and year on year increase in juvenile crime rates,<sup>10</sup> have succeeded in ranking a rethink of this issue.

The long-term plan of establishing Family Centers throughout the Republic to combat the crumbling of traditional family structures is a good start. However, in the face of statistics on teenage crimes, the state should go ahead to alleviate this problem socially, instead of waiting for individual families to come to grips with the unravelling of traditional arrangements which had once been so successful in getting the work of maintenance and reproduction of labor power done satisfactorily. As time has proved so convincingly for some families, their own individualized arrangements for reproductive labor have not turned out to be effective. As a result, society is now haunted by the consequences of this failure. Singaporeans perhaps require a paradigm shift in the tackling of this problem. The up until now experimental form of socialized solution constituted by localized family centers could prove more efficient as a long-term solution. Feedback from server agencies reinforces this view. Their only complaint is that, despite a deluge of demand, there is lack of resources to expand services abundant to serve the needs of community and family. Since maids have helped decisively to stabilize the traditional form of family for the middle classes, they have scarcely



added their voice to strengthen demands for socialized childcare. These facilities are still not made widely available to the masses at an affordable price.

If the employment of foreign domestic workers has debased employers in Singapore, it has an equally detrimental effect on maids and their communities in the Philippines. First, the large chunk of money maids have to come out with to service various parties in what can now be termed one of Singapore's booming industries, means that maids are left with just enough money for living expenses. There is therefore the push to make more money to service the debt built up on recruitment and to send home enough money to feed, clothe and house husband, children, parents and an assortment of other relatives.

While some maids are lucky to have a day off for rest, which they can then use to labor as domestic piece-rate workers or be involved in petty entrepreneurial activities like the sale of cakes in church, others have found much higher rates of pay as sex workers. Given that maids are treated as beings without honor or are forced into a state of social death, it is easy to slide down this slippery slope. Anyway, slogging many hours in manual labor does not leave one with much energy or enthusiasm. For married maids, long absence have deprived them and their spouses of companionship and love. Filipino spouses have, on occasions, used the remittances sent by their wives to start second families, and have been known to even neglect their own children who then drop out from school, resulting in a host of

other undesirable consequences for the family.<sup>11</sup> The absence of wives seems to have compounded endemic problems of infidelity in a society that tolerates adultery and even *de facto* polygamy (JHT 1996b, Tyner 1994). With such multiple worries building up, maids have tried forgetting these problems by committing suicide, or by getting themselves into illicit relationships with men around them, mostly already married. One form taken by such relationship is to become mistresses of lower middle-class Singaporeans such as taxi drivers and petty businessmen. One such maid was paid about S\$270 per month. In other words, because he does not have to house and feed the maid in his absence, the Singapore man can acquire this status symbol of mistress for a large discount. For the maid, it is easier on her body and mind compared with having to clean another house in her spare time, from which she may earn about S\$50 for four to five hours of heavy manual work. After all, since the state disallows her to legitimize such relationships, this is the way it has to be.

Since maids are living in social death, deprived of any custodial or patrimonial rights in terms of children and family, their attention and energies are easily diverted to playing the role of consummate consumer. Moreover, absence from family and the inability to carry out their role as mother already fill them with a deep sense of guilt and remorse. Giving of things help them compensate and expiate their sense of guilt to husband, children and the rest of the family. Now that the maid has achieved the enviable status of *balikbayan*, it behooves her to maintain the image of the "naka-abroad"

as a dollar earner capable of splashing on gold jewellery, imported toys and food. Thus, despite being buffeted by forces beyond their control, maids adroitly manage to carve a life out for themselves as best they can, given the very limited resources and personal assets available to them. In this sense, in bracing themselves to survive, maids have given their own new spin to the Singapore Dream.

For a long time, outward migration has remained the chosen strategy used by the Philippines to overcome problems of unemployment, underemployment and budget deficit. All the while, billions of dollars in remittances<sup>12</sup> and the departure of potentially disgruntled masses have acted as a safety valve allowing the national bourgeoisie to continue drawing exceptional profits behind the protection of high tariff walls and without being pressed to revamp/rationalize the economy. Each time that news of migrant worker exploitation surfaces, the anger of the populace has been directed towards the countries that have at least provided them with a modicum of living. One government-sponsored study even reported that the majority of migrant workers from the Philippines were relatively satisfied in terms of their experience and outcome of overseas employment. The majority had rated their experience as good or excellent. Only 1.5 percent (0.8 percent of service workers) polled said conditions were "poor" (Tornea and Habana 1989). The Philippine media have been more than liberal in redefining the problem as one of oppression of martyrs, when instead they should have focused on the economic tragedy that

has left many with no choice but to migrate, even though for some of the more unfortunate migrants this option has left havoc and trauma in its wake. The storyline of exploited maids is a natural for tabloids seeking to please the appetite of their massive readership with hoary details of faraway exploits. While denouncing the oppression of maids, the media have at the same time trivialized their plight by turning them into instant tabloid celebrities or film stars good for another money spinning movie. In this respect, the working classes can be said to be immobilized. Their attention conveniently diverted to a new external enemy, the working classes have been orchestrated to respond in a jingoistic fashion, averting their ever coming to grips with the real ills of the Philippine economy.

### Conclusions

Much has been written on the topic of migrant workers. The approach most frequently taken offers detailed accounts of the process of migration, viz., recruitment, routes taken, policy recommendations, and the more obvious details of exploitation and human suffering (Asian and Pacific Development Centre 1989, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 1993 and 1996, Liu *et al.* 1991). In other words, the questions posed deal chiefly with the reasons, mechanisms, and consequences of labor migration. This essay has chosen to take a different tack.

In this article, the use of migrant labor is placed in a historical context. Migrant labor is seen as similar to the kind of directly forced labor reported

to be widely used before the turn of the century. The culture supporting such archaic forms of labor organization is still very much alive and quite familiar to people living in this region of the Malay Archipelago. It is therefore not surprising that the older age cohorts of above 45 years of age constitute a substantial number of the abuse cases reported for female employers. Moreover, the hegemonic rule of industrial capitalism in the region was first established in many instances by resorting to physical violence, arbitrary rule, severe punishments, and coercion. The widespread circulation and deployment of migrant labor today is part and parcel of the wider process of transition to industrial capitalism in the region.

Indeed, the rationalization of labor in manufacturing and other corporate sectors of Singapore's economy was not carried out without resort to draconian measures and brutal suppression. Because incorporation of the manufacturing sector into the world economic system had drained the domestic sector of its traditional supply of labor in the late 1960s, the domestic sector was forced onto the path of increasing rationalization. However, due to a historical conjuncture, this ongoing process was temporarily put on hold, at least for middle class families who found they could suddenly tap into the plentiful outflow of Filipino maids entering the world labor market. The continued existence of the traditional family form among the middle classes, the role model of family relations for the rest of society, could be said to have given new life to patriarchy, which had just begun to crumble on impact

from the higher participation of women in the economy.

Foreign domestic labor has allowed Singaporean middle-class families to continue the reproduction of the "home as haven" ideology (Gregson and Lowe 1994). Despite increasing proletarianization, the middle classes have been able to defer "defiling contact with the sordid or disordered parts of life" (Davidoff 1974:412) because the uneven development of capitalism in Southeast Asia has thrown up a steady stream of cheap female domestic workers to service them. Unlike the working class women, middle class wives could avoid becoming servants in their own homes, thanks largely to the availability of Filipino maids at a discount. One consequence is the closer identification between lower class women and sexuality, the logic of which can be seen replayed in the sexual trysts between maids and male members of the household (Gillis 1983). Despite regular loud refrains broadcasting the Republic's identity as a Confucian society by the previous Prime Minister, his idea linking home as the natural place of women approximates closely the dominant gender ideology throughout Victorian Britain (Davidoff 1974).

One cannot presume that the solution provided by cheap foreign maids represents the end and that the process of rationalization of domestic work will not continue to move forward. Who knows what will happen when regional economies continue their startling performance, expand the middle classes, and provide plentiful jobs for unskilled women workers in

mushrooming industrial zones spread over the region. We do not know what will happen when family and women are reunited by new technology which allows them more flexibility in matching work with reproductive labor. Fierce competition inducing widespread use of flexiwork and incentive pay schemes may even see the beginning of a new blaze where both men and women, equally devalued by the world of work, will head towards the domestic sector. If economic processes linked to increasing participation of women have shaken traditional family relations, they have also thrown up multiple ways of doing housework. Each family should have the choice to select the option most suitable, given their peculiar combination of resources and membership composition.

Some studies have noted the liberating impact of migration for the women involved (Ellis *et al.* 1996). However, this study is also cognizant of the fact that, because the migration of women workers has been situated in a context of extreme disparity of power between employer and worker, the process is wrought with risks of personal violation and abuse. Even more sobering for all concerned, family, community and society are also eviscerated in the process.

As for the employing party, the huge imbalance of power provides much opportunity and space for eliciting the many forms of extreme and indecent patterns of behavior so maligned by a state ambitious to move Singapore forward to become a more gracious and civilized society. It is not conceivable that the state can play a leading role in creating the gracious Singapore society because of its complicity in generating and gaining from a whole new world of criminal and undesirable activities tied to the trade in foreign labor. Instead, ordinary people with empathy for the suffering of foreign workers, based on their own daily experience with oppression surrounding them, will be the ones to seek for improvements in their treatment. Commenting on the normal practice of fetching workers in open pick-ups and lorries, four of five motorists questioned by the press said they felt sorry for the workers. Said Teng, "On rainy days, I have seen them using cardboard, newspaper and plastic to cover themselves. They are treated like animals." Lim, a taxi driver who was interviewed for the feature, said that it is wrong to treat people like cargo (ST 1996n).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Referring to the ordinary folks in the hinterland states who were poor, Pires (1944:261) noted that "the men of Aru attack them and sometimes carry them off."

<sup>2</sup>A Chinese source pointed out that about the time of the 14th century, the Sultan of Pahang was "in the habit of buying from the Mausu pirates the men they have caught" (Hai Yu in Groeneveldt 1887).

<sup>3</sup>According to Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, "Anyone caught trying to do so (emigrate) would be killed and his property confiscated" (1838:70).

<sup>4</sup>Singapore being the entrepot of the region was advantageously situated to acquire this form of labor. For instance, pilgrims traveling to Mecca would be bonded to work in the plantations of Johor and Singapore if they failed to settle their debts to the merchants (Vredenbregt 1962) located in Singapore.

<sup>5</sup>Population constraint was still very much a problem even by the 1890s. For example, the Resident of Negri Sembilan wrote in the Annual Report for 1894 that "the first essential in these states is population, the second population and the third population." By 1891, as reported in the 1901 Federated States Census of Population, the four Malay states of Johor, Selangor, Perak, and Pahang with a combined area of 18 million acres had a population of only 418,527 in spite of the success of liberal immigration policies.

<sup>6</sup>Domestic labor and household work comprise a wide variety of productive tasks within the home: cooking, food processing, cleaning, sewing, mending, child rearing (Collins and Gimenez 1990).

<sup>7</sup>Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee E. Maceda alleged that syndicates charge as much as S\$750 per head for recruitment services which preclude the sums to be paid to immigration officials and many others along the line. The Charge d'affairs at the Philippine Embassy in Singapore had remarked that he had personal knowledge of one maid who paid up to nine months' salary to just get the chance to work in Singapore. A maid from Quezon province had alleged that after her arrival in 1993 she first worked for \$270 a month for eight months. But for the first seven months, \$250 went to pay the agency fees.

<sup>8</sup>Flor Contemplacion was hung in 1995 after being convicted of double murder of another maid and her ward. The hanging triggered a rift in relations between Singapore and the Philippines.

<sup>9</sup>For each illegal immigrant found in the workplace, the maximum fine is S\$60,000 and a jail term of two years. For each foreign worker without a valid work permit, the maximum fine is equivalent to 96 months' levy and two years' jail. Under the 1996 amendments to the Immigration and Employment of Foreign Workers Acts, the main

contractor can be held responsible for illegal foreign workers who enter and remain on the site.

<sup>10</sup>Referring to a recent case of appeal for a lighter sentence, the *Straits Times* (1996m) reported that, in "Citing the rising numbers of rioting cases and juvenile offenses," Deputy Public Prosecutor Wong K.O. had argued for a deterrent sentence for youths involved in cases of unlawful assembly, even though for that particular case no incident of violent or disturbing behavior was recorded. The case referred to six youths who were caught with twelve sticks and two poles after a staring incident involving twenty other youths.

<sup>11</sup>One survey mentions that only 57 percent of children live with both parents (*JHT* 1996b).

<sup>12</sup>An estimate by Senator E. Herrera notes that Filipino workers from Singapore (of which more than 90 percent are domestic workers) have repatriated a sum of US\$106 million, while the figure for remittances of Filipino workers worldwide was US\$4.7 billion for 1995. This precluded the even larger amount sent through informal channels. The Asian Development Bank's country review of the Philippines said that, without remittances sent back by migrant workers, the seven percent GNP growth rate for the first six months of 1996 would have been down to 5.05 percent.

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