

Migrant Domestic Workers and Placement Agents in the Debt-Financed Migration Regime

Brenda S.A. Yeoh (with Charmain Goh and Kellynn Wee)
National University of Singapore

Abstract

In ‘fly now, pay later’ systems across Southeast Asia, prospective migrant domestic workers accrue a snowballing debt, through recruitment processes beginning in their source villages and ending in their employers’ homes, which they repay through salary deductions. This paper examines the debt of migrant domestic workers as it circulates spatially across and within borders, temporally over the course of a migrant’s recruitment, and socially among a chain of migrant brokers and employers. Based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with placement agents, regulatory authorities, and NGO representatives in Singapore (n=48) and Indonesia (n=13) as well as focus group discussions with migrant women between 2015 and 2017, we theorise placement agents as debt-financed migration infrastructure, which channels migrant mobilities and debt, among other circulations. The capacity of Singapore placement agents to bear and pass on debt with limited knowledge about its decomposition allows debt to accommodate the low-level corruption in Indonesia, to preserve the profit of their cross-border suppliers, and to direct advances to the migrant and her family to secure recruitment. Further, agents are able to manage the risks of debt crossing the border through shaping the size and timing of advances paid to their suppliers, investing in phatic labour and relationship upkeep, forging cross-border relations with caution and pruning unsuccessful ones, and re-casting the business partnership through the regime of friendship. Finally, the collective capacity of agents to move migrant debt across the border creates the possibility of migrants escaping without monetary repercussions in cases of default.

Biography

Brenda S.A. Yeoh FBA is Raffles Professor of Social Sciences, National University of Singapore (NUS) and Research Leader, Asian Migration Cluster, at NUS’ Asia Research Institute. She was awarded the Vautrin Lud Prize for outstanding achievements in Geography in 2021. Her research interests in Asian migrations span themes such as gender, social reproduction and care migration; skilled migration and cosmopolitanism; higher education and international student mobilities; and marriage migrants and cultural politics. Her recent books include *Student Mobilities and International Education in Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, with R. Sidhu and K.C. Ho) and *Handbook of Transnationalism* (Edward Elgar, 2022, with F.L. Collins).