

# Social Support and Protection for Migrant Domestic Workers under Transnationalism

5 January 2019



Organized by:

Research Centre on Migration and Mobility  
Department of Sociology  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Date: 5 January 2019 (Saturday)

Venue: Rm. 422, 4/F,

Department of Sociology, Sino Building,  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



香港中文大學  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



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### Tentative Programme

8:30-8:40	Welcome by Eric Fong (Director, Research Centre on Migration and Mobility) and Raees Begum Baig (Board member, Research Centre on Migration and Mobility)
8:40-9:25 (15 min: Q&A)	Filipino & Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong: Their Life Courses in Migration, Employment, and Family Formation  Tim F. Liao (The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)
9:25-10:10	Formal and informal social support and the impact on migrant domestic workers' vulnerabilities  Raees Begum Baig (The Chinese University of Hong Kong)
10:10-10:30	Break
10:30-11:15	Social Protection for Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore: International Conventions, the Reach of the Law and Civil Society Action  Brenda S.A. Yeoh, Charmian Goh and Kellynn Wee (National University of Singapore)
11:15-12:00	Workplace Aggression toward Foreign Domestic Helpers: The Consequences of Blurred Work-Home Boundaries  Ying Tong Lai and Eric Fong (The Chinese University of Hong Kong)
12:00-12:45	From Weak Ties to Strong Ties: the Health Implications of Migrant Domestic Helpers' Family and Friendship Network within and beyond the Border  Feinian Chen and Jing Ye (University of Maryland)
12:45-1:45	Lunch (presenters only)
1:45-2:30	Employment Conditions, Social Network and Health among Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong. A Quantitative Survey of 1,989 Randomly Sampled Female Helpers  Roger Yat-Nork Chung (The Chinese University of Hong Kong)
2:30-3:15	The immobility turn: power geometries of transnational migrant care work  Danièle Bélanger (University Laval) and Rachel Silvey (University of Toronto)
3:15-3:35	Break
3:35-4:20	Much Ado about Nothing? Do Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong Benefit from Capital Accumulation?  Yuying Tong (The Chinese University of Hong Kong)
4:20-5:05	Precarity Chains: Serial Migration among Domestic Workers  Rachel Silvey (University of Toronto) and Rhacel Parreñas (University of Southern California)
5:05-5:15	Closing remarks by Eric Fong (Director, Research Centre on Migration and Mobility)
6:00	Dinner (presenters only)

## **Abstracts**

### **Filipino & Indonesian Domestic Workers in Hong Kong: Their Life Courses in Migration, Employment, and Family Formation**

Tim F. Liao  
University of Illinois

Our 2017 survey of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong contains a life calendar section of rich data recording individuals' life histories in the three dimensions of migration, employment, and family formation among Hong Kong's domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. This paper explores such life history data. In the paper, I apply sequence analysis to the survey data of the three dimensions. In the analysis of each of the dimensions, I examine issues such as duration spent in each state, cross-sectional and longitudinal diversity of state distributions, and numbers as well as patterns of state transitions. The analysis of these issues is conducted by comparing Filipinos and Indonesians.

### **Formal and informal social support and the impact on migrant domestic workers' vulnerabilities**

Raees Begum BAIG  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Informal social support from family and friends has often highlighted as the key form of support for migrants under different forms of transnational movement, particularly for female migrants. Drawing on the findings from qualitative and quantitative studies on Filipino and Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, the paper explores the ethnic differences in approaching formal and informal social support by the migrant domestic workers on the challenges they encounter during their course of migration. Through applying the intersectionality framework, the paper further discusses how the intertwining identities on ethnicity, gender, religion and work influences the challenges they face under their migrant work conditions and shape their understanding and expectations on the roles of formal and informal social support.

### **Social Protection for Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore: International Conventions, the Reach of the Law and Civil Society Action**

Brenda S.A. Yeoh, Charmian Goh and Kellynn Wee  
National University of Singapore

Although migrant women from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries fill crucial care gaps in Singapore through their employment in households as domestic workers, their social protection remains uneven, uncertain, and indeterminate. Framed as unskilled, women's work shunned by citizens and characterised by isolation in the privatised sphere of the home, live-in domestic work has invariably become low-status, low-visibility and low-pay work performed by foreign women who are engaged on private contracts. The access of migrant domestic workers in Singapore to social protection has thus triggered concern among international organisations, governments, and civil society. Through interviews with key stakeholders and archival research, this paper adopts a transnational social protection research agenda by

mapping how (in)formal institutionalised practices that reduce the vulnerabilities of migrant domestic workers in Singapore have shifted in the past decade. We begin by addressing the circumscribed—though possibly non-linear—impact of international conventions and origin government policies. Following our premise that the social support and protection of migrant domestic workers still depends largely on the host society, we devote the remainder and bulk of the paper to two interrelated developments in Singapore. Firstly, we examine the reach of immigration, labour, and criminal law in recent ‘maid abuse’ cases. Secondly, we consider the changing landscape of civil society through their successful campaign for a ‘mandatory’ rest day and the recent introduction of a ‘union’ for migrant domestic workers.

### **Workplace Aggression among Foreign Domestic Helpers: The consequences of blurred work-home boundaries**

Ying Tong Lai and Eric Fong  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Previous studies on workplace aggression and violence limit their research scope to the conventional formal working environment. Few recognizes the fact that there is an increasing number of people, especially female, working in more informal working settings. Our research on a random sample of 2,017 foreign domestic female helpers from the Philippines and Indonesia in Hong Kong proposes to switch attention to one of non-conventional workplaces, the employer’s home, and examines whether how conditions specific in this home-based place of work are related to workers’ abusive experiences. Findings suggest both the workplace environment (e.g. size of the home) and the nature of work (e.g. types of people served) are related to their experience abusive behavior at work by their employers in this domestic setting. The findings extend our understanding of the conception of workplace and highlights new factors contributing to aggression and violence against workers when work-home boundaries blur.

### **From Weak Ties to Strong Ties: the Health Implications of Migrant Domestic Helpers’ Family and Friendship Network within and beyond the Border**

Feinian Chen and Jing Ye  
University of Maryland, College Park

Migrant domestic helpers provide essential services to the families they live with, but they are not considered a part of the family. As a group, they are not well-integrated into the society and often suffer from social isolation. In this paper, we explore the potential health buffering effects of their personal network, in terms of family and friendship ties in both the local community and their home country. Existing literature provides inconsistent evidence on who and what matters more, as regard to the nature, strength, and geographic locations of individual personal networks. In this paper, we characterize the family and friendship ties by their locations (local vs. abroad), frequency of contact, and types of support (e.g., emotional vs. economic). Further, we investigate the association between these factors and one’s general self-reported health. Preliminary results suggest that family ties, particularly local ones, play a more important role in influencing health than friendship ties. We will further explore whether friendship and family ties have additive or multiplicative effects on self reported health, and whether they moderate the effect of religious participation and relationship with their employer.

## **Employment Conditions, Social Network and Health among Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong. A Quantitative Survey of 1,989 Randomly Sampled Female Helpers**

**Chung RY**, Liao T, Tong YY, Baig RB, Chen F, Ngo HY, Fong E  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

*Background:* Over recent decades, labor migration from less to more developed regions has been growing rapidly. More than 12% (8.5 million) of the female global migrant workforce are employed as foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in 2015. However, these FDWs are often vulnerable and deprived. They usually have alien status within the legal framework of the host countries, and their employment conditions and social networks are of particular concern. Given the complex legal, socio-cultural and economic issues related to FDWs, most of the existing research has focused on the policy and legal mechanisms of employment, the impact on their transnational families and children being left behind, as well as the gender, racial and class discrimination being encountered. However, there has been inadequate research work on the health and well-being of FDWs, despite clear evidence that they are at risk to adverse working conditions, deprivation and exploitation. While there have been studies that have investigated the association between employment conditions and health of FDWs, there is little population evidence particularly in Hong Kong which hosts a large population of FDWs. Although much of the evidence based on qualitative research have provided insights of living and working conditions and the social network of FDWs, unfortunately, these findings cannot be generalized at the population level or used for designing appropriate policy and program interventions.

The present study addressed these research gaps by quantifying and disentangling the risk of employment conditions on physical and mental health outcomes of FDWs.

*Methods:* This study implemented a multi-stage cluster random sampling survey and had interviewed 1,989 FDWs from the Philippines and Indonesia, the most representative countries for sending FDWs to Hong Kong. Our sampling method took advantage of the fact that many FDWs are easily accessible during their day-offs (i.e., Sundays for most cases) and thus we recruited our subjects on Sundays. The analysis identified the statistical association between different aspects of employment conditions (i.e., working/living conditions and material circumstances) and physical and mental health status among FDWs, and examined whether social and family networks moderate the associations. Physical and mental health summary scales were be scored according to the standard SF-12 scoring manual. Multiple linear regression were conducted to delineate the associations of various factors of working and living conditions and material circumstances with the primary outcomes (i.e., physical and mental health status), adjusted by other confounding factors. To test the moderation effects of different indicators of social and family networks on the associations of employment conditions and health, moderated multiple regression (MMR) that included the main effects and the interaction terms were fitted.

### *Potential Results and Implications:*

The study will contribute to identifying the important risks and exposure of FDWs to adverse physical and mental health outcomes, testing whether social and family networks are significant moderator of the impact of employment conditions on their health, and generating evidence for designing appropriate public policies and health promotion interventions to improve the quality of life and well-being of this uniquely vulnerable subgroup of migrant population.

## **The Immobility Turn: Power Geometries of Transnational Migrant Care Work**

Danièle Bélanger  
University Laval

Rachel Silvey  
University of Toronto

This paper analyzes the centrality of immobility for understanding transnational care work migration in a global perspective. Despite women's rising participation in care worker migrations transnationally, their mobility continues to be blocked, stuck, and constrained in gender-specific ways that transect global, national, regional, urban and household spaces. To situate the various facets of these processes, this presentation begins with a selective review of immobility research, which, we argue, indicates the emergence of an 'immobility turn' in migration scholarship. The second part of the article scrutinizes how some conceptual propositions about immobility provide a fresh and novel vantage point for considering transnational care migration. By taking a multi-scalar and encompassing perspective on care migration that includes skilled and low skilled workers, paid and unpaid work, as well as labour and family relations, we discuss the various forms of immobility that are produced and experienced prior to migration, during migration, and, when relevant, in the post-migration (or return) period. Based on existing literature and our own first-hand fieldwork with Indonesian, Filipina and Vietnamese migrant care workers, the analysis draws attention to the prominence of structural factors, with gender being center stage, while recognizing that migrant women involved in care work deploy numerous strategies to circumvent or take advantage of the immobilities they experience.

## **Much Ado about Nothing? Do Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong Benefit from Capital Accumulation?**

Yuying Tong  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

There were more than 351, 513 foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong in 2016, and about 50% of them were from Philippines, followed by Indonesians. As a large group of immigrant population in Hong Kong and largely composed of women, they have attracted many researchers' attention. However, most of previous studies about foreign domestic helpers have focused on their psychological well-being, their role in employers' family and their transnational relationship with their families such as parenthood. Few studies have focused on their labor market outcome, especially from human and social capital perspectives.

Human capital accumulation has been widely used to examine immigrants' labor market outcome. The accumulation of human capital such as education and working experiences play significant roles for immigrants' earnings increase and climbing social ladder. Empirical studies also have shown that social capital accumulation in the migration destination play very important role for them to find jobs and get promotion, especially after they gaining sufficient local market experience. The sparse research on foreign domestic labor market outcomes is largely due to the lack of career ladder for the domestic labor market. That is, domestic work is low skilled job and workers receive similar pay near the legal minimum wage, and the level of education and working experiences often do not matter than much. This

is in line with the dual labor market theory (Doeringer and Piore 1985), which argued that there is a distinct low wage labor market in which there is no returns to education and experiences, and there are barriers that prevent people from obtaining better position.

However, work is not only about pay. For domestic helpers, although their bargaining power on salary and promotion is constraint given the nature of work, their working environment could have a great variation, from living condition to timing of working. Whether their accumulated human and social capitals can help them bargain for better working environment and have small scale pay increment are largely understudied.

Using a unique data set collected in Hong Kong with a sample size near 2000 in 2007, we aim to examine whether foreign domestic helpers' human capital and social capital are associated with their current salary and working environment. We use underpay, normal pay and overpay to indicate their pay scale, and living condition and working condition hours as their working environment, and level of education, working experiences, language skill indicating their human capital accumulation, and their friendship network to indicate their social capital. The preliminary result shows that although education and working experience do not affect their earnings, English language skill does increase their salary level. Moreover, domestic helpers who have previous higher level occupation, longer migration experiences and English language are associated with a high chance to have their own room to live in employee's families. These findings indicate that although foreign domestic helpers may be constraint from using their human capital accumulation to improve their market values substantially, the human capital accumulation still can give them some leverage to bargain for a better working environment. We will examine the social capital in our next step.

### **Precarity Chains: Serial Migration among Domestic Workers**

Rachel Silvey  
University of Toronto

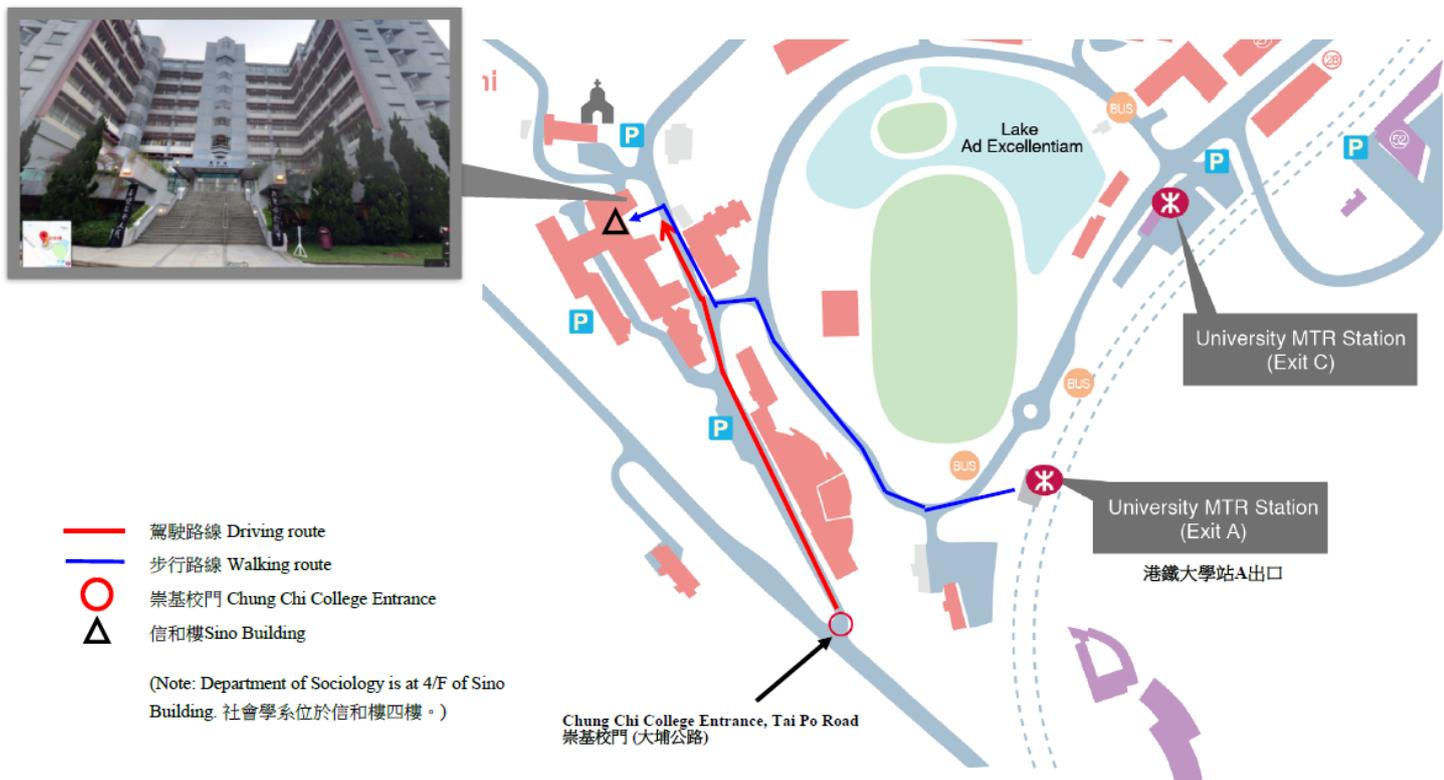
Rhacel Parreñas  
University of Southern California

Based on interviews with migrant domestic workers from the Philippines (n = 85) and Indonesia (n = 79) working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), this article examines how emergent *serial* migration patterns (Parreñas et al., 2018 [IMR forthcoming]) are tied to these workers' precarious gendered positions in the global labor market. It finds that domestic workers' labor mobility has a serial character that is growing alongside the number of temporary labor regimes internationally. While domestic workers are highly mobile in their travels across international borders, they remain exceptionally tightly constrained in their everyday spatial mobility, their mobility between employment sectors, and their socio-economic mobility. While the majority of migrants interviewed wished to return home to their countries of origin at the completion of their first contracts, they were generally unable to do so for any length of time because of their debt loads, low wages, persistent underemployment at home, and ongoing expenses associated with the social reproduction of their extended families. Their conditions of generalized insecurity combined with transnational family obligations keep them on the move, perpetually seeking a foothold that in practice only a small percentage will ever achieve.

## Conference Venue

Rm. 422, 4/F,  
Department of Sociology, Sino Building,  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

香港中文大學信和樓地圖  
Map of Sino Building, The Chinese University of Hong Kong



### **For other information, please contact:**

Research Centre on Migration and Mobility, Department of Sociology, CUHK

Tel: (852) 3943 6628

Fax: (852) 2603 5213

E-mail: [rcmm@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:rcmm@cuhk.edu.hk) or [shubinbin@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:shubinbin@cuhk.edu.hk) (Dr. Binbin Shu)

Website: <http://www.rcmm.cuhk.edu.hk>

Address: Room 442, 4th Floor, Department of Sociology, Sino Building, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, HKSAR