7. Temporality, self-development and welfare among foreign domestic workers in Singapore

Alex Ma

INTRODUCTION: OPENING THE BLACK BOX

A great deal of research has examined the burgeoning stock of international migrant domestic workers since the mid-1980s (Anderson, 2000; McKay, 2005; Parreñas, 2001). This chapter is interested in developing two underexplored themes within the literature: migrant temporalities and self-development. Though extant studies provide rich ethnographic data on the lives of domestic workers (see Asis, 2002; Constable, 2007; Momsen, 1999; Ueno, 2009), few explicitly focus on the temporality of migration experiences. Moreover, where early studies of labour migration have been critiqued for inadequate conceptualization of individual agency within the migration process (see de Haas, 2005 for an excellent overview), so too have subsequent studies co-opted agency into narratives of ‘migration-led development’ (Nyberg-Sørensen, 2012). This chapter aims to recalibrate the focus on investigating migrant agency through the lens of self-development across what I term the ‘migrant lifecourse’.

First, ‘self-development’ is examined through migrant education. This owes a debt to Sen’s (2004) theory of capabilities, which understands development not in static ends but as the expansion of individuals’ capabilities to achieve dynamic development goals, such as poverty-reduction. Moreover, education is conceptualized through Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capital. For Bourdieu, capital takes three forms, as in economic (money, assets), social (networks, group membership) and cultural (skills, qualifications). By examining education as cultural capital that is accumulative and convertible (as in qualifications to income), we can see how migrant welfare – defined expansively in terms of migrant financial and psychological health – is temporally contingent as one navigates the ebbs and flows of capital accumulation. Second, though
conventional lifecourse categories such as adolescence and marriage are important, migrant lifecourses focus on experiential–temporal transitions idiosyncratic to migrant domestic workers, such as adjustment and establishment. By placing time at the fore of this study, the processual, emergent rhythms of individual experiences are recovered from the temporal black boxes of labour migration (Adam, 2010; Griffiths et al., 2013; Ricoeur, 1992; Sheller and Urry, 2006), recalibrating the focus to experiential aspects of the everyday (Liu, 2015; Ueno, 2009; Yeoh and Huang, 1999).

To achieve this, this chapter investigates self-development welfare impacts across time by drawing on findings from 15 semi-structured interviews with female students at Singapore’s Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI). A church-based organization, every Sunday ACMI provides support services and educational classes in English, baking, hairdressing, dressmaking, computer literacy, wellness and beauty, and business management for domestic workers. The sample comprised ten Filipina and five Indonesian workers who have been working in Singapore for between three and 15 years. By interviewing domestic workers engaged in educational classes in Singapore for varying durations, I investigate the degree to which migrants seek self-development during migration and how this contributes towards individual development over time.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. First, I offer a concise review of the literature on domestic worker migration and issues on migrant agency and temporality. I then follow with discussions on the study’s charting of migrant lives along the temporal spectrum. I end the chapter with a brief summary and reflections on the trajectories of future migrant temporalities research.

SITUATING SELF-DEVELOPMENT

To set the theoretical basis for this chapter, I outline two key concepts central to our understanding of migrant self-development: agency and temporality. The concept of agency has always found uncertain footing within migration studies, often caught between two poles of inquiry. First, the bulk of early domestic labour studies are represented in terms of the economic (see Chin, 1997; McKay, 2007; Tacoli, 1996). In Southeast Asia ethnographies detailing poverty-driven migration have become commonplace, especially in the Philippines and Indonesia (Anderson, 2000; Constable, 2007; Parreñas, 2001; Yeoh and Huang, 1999). In development studies more generally, migrant behaviour was
recognized chiefly as a corollary to economic rationality (de Haas, 2005). Migrant agency, in this frame, is rarely considered on its own terms, but in reference to market structures and actors.

Second, studies have also focussed on issues of worker abuse and exploitation (see Human Rights Watch, 2005). Here, Momsen’s (1999) ‘Maids on the Move’ captures the academic zeitgeist of early research: though authors laud the potential positives of migration, often in terms of remittance generation and poverty reduction (McKay, 2005), narratives of the former seemed to predominate (cf. Chin, 1997). Conversely, towards the 2000s, authors increasingly adopted an activist stance, discovering how workers may be structurally disadvantaged but also capable of resistance (Anderson, 2000; Asis, 2002; Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Authors thus shied away from ‘helpless’ descriptors, instead uncovering how non-economic capital, such as knowledge conveyed through information technologies, can be organized and deployed strategically in securing migrant welfare (Lyons, 2007; Smales, 2010; Thompson, 2009; Ueno, 2009).

Similarly, there was an abandonment of the caricaturized passive, altruistic migrant, instead recognizing his or her potential to act on self-interest (Silvey, 2004; Tacoli, 1996). Feminist scholars, in particular, questioned the degree to which migration is disinterested, instead highlighting how migration might be self-interested (Brickell and Chant, 2010). McKay (2003), for example, notes the prevalence of Filipino domestic workers who leverage overseas employment to secure foreign citizenship, or deploy remittances to ‘selfish’ ends, such as the strategic maintenance of kinship networks (McKay, 2007). It is in this interface, between agency and self-interest, that ‘self-development’ finds a fitting theoretical departure. Following Sen (2004), self-development allows us to sidestep essentialist readings of agency, allowing the migrant to narrate how learning expands capabilities to achieve individually defined ends such as self-esteem and confidence.

Finally, a second shortcoming of domestic labour research this chapter hopes to address is the lack of resolution afforded on migrant temporalities. Griffiths et al. (2013) note that, despite increasing traffic in migration studies, temporal dimensions of the migration experience are poorly understood. In other words, the epistemological draw to the present or completed negates a meaningful understanding of how migration is tempered by processual, dynamic realities and imaginaries (see also Adam, 2010). By identifying temporal–experiential commonalities in the migrant lifecourse, it is hoped a more holistic understanding of dynamic and emergent migrant welfare is produced.
Though temporal analyses are generally lacking in the domestic labour migration literature, there are notable exceptions. Parreñas’s (2000, 2001, 2005) ethnographies, for example, evidence changing gender roles and household dynamics among domestic worker transnational households during temporal cycles of migrant absence and return. In China, Guo et al. (2011, p. 63) note the ‘bipendular flow’ of domestic workers between Beijing and surrounding rural villages, tempered by lifecourse milestones of marriage, childbearing and childrearing. In migration studies more generally, Kley (2011) finds perceived economic opportunity to be a strong predictor of migration, though migration is most likely to occur during major lifecourse transitions, such as from early adulthood to family formation.

Relevant to self-development, Sheller and Urry (2006, p. 213) remind us that ‘time spent traveling is not dead time that people always seek to minimise’. Though domestic worker narratives often appeal to the economic, it would be reductionist to understand their migration solely in terms of monthly wage and remittance generation. By examining self-development across the migrant lifecourse, we interrogate the migrant experience not solely as rationalized units of labour power, but also as complex interactions between agency and dynamic structural realities (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Here, we might understand how her stay in Singapore, however temporary, might be accumulative – and not just in economic terms. The next section will identify the temporal frames of the migrant lifecourse and situate findings of how self-development may lead to particular welfare outcomes.

OF FLUX AND STASIS: FINDING TIME IN EVERYDAY MIGRANT NARRATIVES

Structured by stages of the migrant lifecourse, this section presents two phases of what I term ‘migrant times’: temporality measured not in Gregorian terms but by common transitional phases throughout the migrant journey. This includes the initial adjustment for the uninitiated migrant and the changing priorities of the experienced migrant. It is this assemblage of everyday migrant times that constitutes the ‘migrant lifecourse’. Importantly, these transitions are not linear but contingent and dynamic, referential to wider realities such as market and lifecourse shocks, whether by mistake (as injury, employment termination) or design (as return, marriage, childrearing). By finding common temporal structures of migrant experiences one may standardize time to better identify the place of self-development in migrant welfare schemas.
After successive interviews, two phrases are commonly repeated as powerful indicators of migrant temporalities: ‘last time’ and ‘already time’. For the interviewees, ‘last time’ is used to describe the instability of early migration adjustment – episodes, mostly negative, in the migrant lifecourse that have been relegated to history. ‘Already time’, conversely, describes the established migrant, and seems to imply a certain sense of relief and optimism that also carries with it goals and aspirations of future imaginaries: it is almost as if, by uttering the phrase the goal is half accomplished – already. The following sections discuss each migrant time and how it relates to self-development and welfare.

**Last Times**

To break the ice, interviews began with questions about the migrants’ families and their time in Singapore. A familiar story is rehearsed: the majority of respondents cite poverty, financial dependants and inadequate employment opportunities back home as migration drivers. All interviewees remitted money home quarterly, and most remitted monthly. On first arrival, migrants were either single, or had dependent children, suggesting mild lifecourse–migration correlation; few married women migrated without first bearing a child. Where two interviewees initially returned home ‘permanently’ for marriage, the birth of children quickly necessitated a return to Singapore to generate income.

A universal feature of domestic worker temporalities is experience of the employment agency. The employment agency business model is simple: the workers’ cost of travel and paperwork is debt-financed by the agency at origin; fees are then repaid via monthly salary deductions in Singapore, reducing wages to an ‘allowance’ of just tens of dollars per month for up to eight months (see TWC2, 2006). It is during this period that migrants are least free to pursue self-development, when even the cost of public transport becomes insurmountable. Salary deductions are thus a powerful inhibitor of everyday migrant freedoms. Should a migrant terminate, transfer or renew employment contracts, all is possible for a fee, her place in Singapore never a breath away from the ubiquitous ‘agency’ (see also Jones, 2015).

Cultural capital is powerful in determining early migrant welfare. For example, one interviewee – Melody (three and a half years in Singapore) – managed to secure a comparatively agreeable agency fee online at ‘only’ four months’ salary deduction. Where the modal deduction period in the interview sample is six months and salaries ranged between S$500 and S$600, this has clear financial impacts for the migrant and her financial dependants. Temporally, the urgency of migration also secures
Singapore as an anomalously popular destination; interviewees often expressed a preference for Taiwan, which is believed to offer higher wages. Instead, the choice of Singapore is expressed temporally: ‘[In] Taiwan you have to wait six months because they do some medical examinations … Singapore you [can] just come’ (Joan, 12 years in Singapore).

Temporal savings are thus opportunity cost savings of earnings and remittances. Here, migrant agency is also temporally contingent: ‘last time’, she is free to sell her labour power on the global market. Upon arrival, however, she is co-opted into structures of ‘precarity’: unequal immigration policies, employment laws and debt bondage that quash agency and enable vulnerabilities to abuse (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Lewis et al., 2015). A lack of cultural capital, such as employment experience, further suppresses agency. For Lilian (four years in Singapore), this translated into an inability, or unwillingness, to negotiate on basic rights: ‘First employer I only have once [rest day] a month’. This ‘unfreedom’, to paraphrase Sen (2004), is further compounded by salary deductions that render virtually all expenditures outside the employer’s home impossible. In a comprehensive manner, her social, cultural and economic arenas of capital accumulation are radically contracted, and her capabilities quelled.

Importantly, unwillingness to negotiate does not always represent feeble self-censorship; it also represents survival strategy. Workers ‘last time’ have a vested interest in acquiescing to employer demands, as the sanctions for non-compliance can be severe; a fine line is trodden between everyday strategy and the potential for spectacular structural precarity (Liu, 2015). The threat of deportation, for example, can be deployed to devastating effect: ‘I work[ed] for [a] Korean family [for] three months, then they say pack all your things and go … I go back [home] and apply [to] another agency’ (Juliet, six years in Singapore). In Juliet’s case, she was fired by her employer, thus voiding her work permit and her legal immigration status; to re-enter Singapore, she then had to enter into a new employment contract and another period of salary deductions (see Jones, 2015). Here, labour migration cannot be reduced to an economic calculation, but one that is intricately entwined with the temporal.

Consequently, we must resist sensationalizing migrant strategies ‘last time’ as either symptoms of agency or exploitation, but a dynamic interaction between the two. On her initial months in Singapore, Shirley (20 months in Singapore) explains: ‘I was so lazy to go out and don’t want to spend money.’ Set against a framework of labour control and debt, precarity ensures that ‘last time’ migrant agency is, for the most
part, suppressed. This is not to say that migrants are devoid of agency and self-determination; workers are still able to exercise decision-making powers, albeit within highly restricted, temporally dynamic capability structures. A lack of self-development, then, need not be read solely as a symptom of oppression; it can also be an active, rational decision in response to structural inhibitors (Bourdieu, 1986). Far from the optimistic expectations of learning or skills training, migrants are so constrained by repayments through salary deductions and regular remittances that there is little room for the accumulation of other kinds of capital. This also explains why there are few ‘newly arrived’ migrant students at ACMI. ‘Last time’ is thus the time of the early migrant and their unequal burden of precarity. Typified by structural constraints that inhibit migrant exercising of agency, ‘last time’ is an apt description of the newly arrived, the inexperienced, the uninitiated.

Counter to ambitions to prove otherwise, it would appear that early migrant times are predominantly economically motivated, whether in terms of remittance maximization and/or debt repayment. Such an inclination should be read not as essentialist, but rather as the behavioural manifestation of structural inhibitors; self-development priorities during the initial stages of migration thus find themselves low on the pecking order. For the most part, early migrants recall a sense of apathy towards non-essential expenditures where ‘last time’ is typified by a journey in flux – of salary deductions, low initial wages and employer instability. It is also counterintuitive to discover that early migrants are the least likely to seek self-development when, temporally speaking, they have the greatest capacity to capitalize on it. Nonetheless, the absence of self-development among early migrants precludes any meaningful assessment of the welfare impacts that learning can yield. Save for Melody’s case of fee comparison between employment agencies, we know little about the implications of sociocultural capital in early migrant lifecourses. For a more nuanced investigation, we turn to the next episode of temporality: ‘already time’.

Already Time

In contrast to ‘last time’, ‘already time’ describes a time of relative stability and freedom. Economically, this entails completed repayments of personal and employment agency debts, and even increases in salary as working conditions and employer relations stabilize. Socially and culturally, the migrant may become more savvy in asserting herself, both in the private space of the employer’s home or in the public domain (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). For the fortunate, ‘already time’ might manifest
within a short space of real time if stability and certainty are achieved. Importantly, time is not linear and it is possible for migrants to return to ‘last time’ through shocks such as unemployment or employer change.

During ‘already time’, we also see diverse migrant subjectivities surfacing. Having satisfied basic needs of employment and financial stability, migrants are more capable of achieving secondary ambitions such as learning. Here, Irene (five years in Singapore) neatly situates education within migrant priorities: ‘My goal number one is to save money, and number two studying here [at ACMI] … I can learn something then when I go back then I can do business.’

Irene’s optimism is commonplace: domestic workers often assign great cultural significance to education. For ‘already time’ migrants, self-development is usually expressed in practical terms of future livelihood security: ‘As a domestic worker in Singapore, if you go back [home] with no skills then there’s nothing … for me, I want to open a business’ (Eliza, 15 years in Singapore). Both Irene and Eliza’s responses typifies the business-oriented rhetoric within imagined migrant futures where self-development is tied up with aspirations of enterprise (Asis, 2002; McKay, 2005). Ambitions are diverse, ranging from casual start-ups – ‘Maybe I will set up a small business … a small bakery’ (Cecile, three years in Singapore) – to the considered entrepreneur: ‘If you make a bakery and somebody will … follow your business. Now the money is already not sustainable; there is competition’ (Penelope, five years in Singapore).

Whether real or imagined, there is a consensus that learning enhances the capabilities of the individual to achieve self-defined ambitions (Sen, 2004). Importantly, enhancement seems tempered by, among other things, conventional lifecourse–behavioural factors. Learning is driven more by entrepreneurial ends for young and single interviewees, such as Penelope, than for older migrants with dependants; the latter, such as Cecile, are often more risk averse, and instead describe stability-oriented ambitions.

This ‘discrepancy’ in motivation may be skewed by the conflation of agency with economic capital accumulation, a remnant of ‘last time’. For some, self-development is not profit-driven, but aims to satisfy socio-cultural and psychological needs. Where Bourdieu stresses the convertibility of social and cultural capital, this need not entail a reduction of accumulation to the economic. For the migrant, learning can be a welfare good in and of itself, impinging on selfhood – ‘Learning [gives me] confidence, it’s like I know how to stand on my own’ (Cecile) – and identity: ‘As a Filipino, for me I don’t want to be a housemaid for my whole life’ (Shirley). For Shirley, learning is a means of ‘upgrading’ herself beyond the racial stereotype of the Filipino housemaid. For
others, it is about fulfilling aspirations: ‘I [wanted] to be a lawyer … It’s okay, I will drop it, just do it [work] for my mother’ (Marina, six years in Singapore).

Marina initially worked in Singapore to subsidize her brother’s education, at her mother’s behest, necessitating dropping her dreams of becoming a lawyer. In both Marina and Shirley’s experience, self-development is redress for lost time. For Shirley, her redress is forward-looking, built on the urge to abandon the temporal sink of being a ‘housemaid’, as if to graduate beyond ‘last time’ precariousness towards a stable livelihood. For Marina, studying at ACMI redresses opportunity costs of past aspirations; though she is unlikely to recoup lost ambitions, learning still represents a partial fulfilment of her ‘dropped’ dreams.

Ricoeur’s (1992) theory of narrative identity is relevant here. For Ricoeur, identity is comprised of temporally discordant experiences, actions and counterfactuals that are assembled to form one’s ‘narrative’. Applied here, both Marina and Shirley’s self-development aims to rectify, however partially, temporal discordances to allow them to seek narrative coherence. Just as education is a key milestone of conventional life-courses, self-development is an amendment to one’s identity script, critical for the maintenance of selfhood beyond passive units of labour power or market descriptives such as ‘maid’ or ‘helper’. By dropping her dreams of studying law, Marina’s narrative is incomplete or, at best, in progress. Her learning at ACMI is therefore also a symbolic act of narrative rectification, as if to fill the gaps within her narrative. Time is thus dually referential to past and present, where everyday subjectivities are informed by, and aspire to, migrant-defined ends. In this example, self-development is a means of rectification and achievement.

Conceptually, although self-development cannot be expressed solely in economic terms, rarely are the social, cultural and economic ever separate. Melody, for example, reflects on the importance of ACMI’s English classes:

Melody: Before I can’t talk, my madam [asked] me ‘Why you cannot talk?’

Interviewer: Have [English] classes improved your relationship with your employer?

Melody: Yes! If I’m talking, I want to tell … what I am doing.

For Melody, learning English transformed her workplace into a more hospitable environment and raised her self-esteem, whereas she felt isolated ‘last time’. Practically, learnt skills can also be converted to economic capital: ‘If you have experience you have to sell your..."
experience for more pay’ (Eliza). In ‘already time’, agency, relatively unencumbered by structural inhibitors, opens up spaces for migrant strategizing. By all measures, Eliza is a veteran worker. Having worked in Singapore for 15 years, she has changed employers three times to achieve higher pay. Eliza thus epitomizes Bourdieu’s ‘embodied’ cultural capital: those learnt dispositions that manifest in agency and will that she has converted into economic resources.

Nonetheless, migrant agency remains structurally qualified; though Eliza’s capitalization on her cultural capital places her wages in the upper percentiles, they are still bracketed by prevailing domestic worker market wages. What is more interesting is that, perhaps counterintuitively, migrants in ‘already time’ rarely profit maximize; interviewees show remarkable inertia towards negotiating higher wages. Bourdieu’s conception of capital conversion partially explains this. For Bourdieu, the conversion of the social or cultural into economic capital is, potentially, a zero-sum transaction; for every abstract unit of economic gain, there must also be a cost. For the migrant, this cost might be employment stability, a key theme of ‘already time’. Eliza readily accepts these costs: ‘The certificate [I earned] at ACMI, I put in the agency. They can promote at the employer … last time my salary was very low so … I increased myself [salary].’

However, for the majority of other interviewees these costs are not worth bearing; migrants are wary of demanding higher wages and rocking the boat: ‘Why you need to ask? As long as they [employers] are good … I don’t care about the money … as long as I can give money for my mother’ (Marina). Workers thus rarely profit maximize cultural capital. However this does not amount to irrationality; stable employment relationships may represent greater net welfare for the worker, so there is an inherent interest to stay put. Penelope, for example, only gets paid S$480 a month: ‘I know that salary right now is S$550–600, but I’m thinking if I change employer, I don’t know if my life is the same … if I can have the rest [day].’

For many interviewees, employment stability is a premium that should not be gambled. Unlike Eliza, Penelope’s reluctance to seek higher pay is a reluctance to risk a return to ‘last time’, where the precarity of employment agency fees and debts threatens. Consequently, to understand self-development impacts, it must first be understood that migrant welfare is not linear or one dimensional, but temporally contingent and subjective. In any case, the ‘already time’ case study has shown how self-development is just one component of a system that can enhance or inhibit individuals’ agency to pursue their own agendas.
WHEN DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Using the analogy of migrant self-development, this chapter has partially uncovered the dynamic temporalities of domestic worker agency and welfare in Singapore. Two temporalities have been identified. First, during initial adjustment, or ‘last time’, migrants are unlikely to seek out self-development opportunities due to structural inhibitors of migrant freedoms in Singapore such as employment agency debt and employment uncertainty. Second, as migrants settle during ‘already time’, they are more likely to seek self-development opportunities due to greater economic and social freedom. In terms of welfare impacts, contributions to migrant confidence, employment capabilities and agency as a result of self-development were observed. Though learning is considered culturally virtuous, self-development is also, in part, a rectification of lost opportunities and forgone life paths. Moreover, capability enhancements such as improved English and vocational skills are observed, and migrants have leveraged these enhancements for employment stability or higher wages. Counter-intuitively, the majority prefer the former, opting not to maximize cultural capital gained.

Overall, this chapter contributes to the growing body of literature on migrant temporalities that has significant policy implications (Griffiths et al., 2013). In terms of welfare, clarity on how migrant motivations, priorities and agency develop over time allows us to better target interventions at various points along the migrant lifecourse. Importantly, a key temporal frame missing in this chapter is that of future imaginaries. Respondents in ‘already time’ often appealed to narratives of return and prosperous business development. The centrality of this narrative to migrant identities warrants greater scrutiny. Future research might therefore examine the relationship between migrant aspirations of return and realities, the place of self-development in migrant planning and whether self-development has lasting impacts on migrant return.

REFERENCES


Temporality, self-development and welfare


