



20-21 SEPTEMBER 2018  
WASEDA UNIVERSITY  
TOKYO

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# THE QUESTION OF SKILLS IN CROSS- BORDER LABOR MOBILITY

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Sponsored by TGU-Waseda Global Asia Program





## Conference Conveners

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**Professor Gracia LIU-FARRER**  
Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies, Waseda University

**Professor Brenda YEOH**  
Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

**Doctor Michiel BAAS**  
Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

**Helena HOF**  
Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies, Waseda University

## Introductory Words

In the knowledge-based world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, human talent is seen to be the key to generating innovative, enterprising economies. Given labour shortages as a result of ageing local populations and the added complexity of low fertility rates, many countries have introduced new measures to (selectively) attract skilled migrants in the quest to augment their talent pools. While different countries have different experiences and degrees of success with attracting variously 'skilled' migrants, they also face comparative issues relating to categorizing, utilizing and integrating these migrants. This conference takes as a point of departure the notion that 'skills' and as such the idea of 'skilled migrants' are socially constructed categories shaped by immigration and labor policies, as well as public discourse. The principle question we would like to examine in this workshop is the way nation-states as well as migrants interpret and engage with the notion of skills.

With this conference we aim for the following: 1) clarify the existing knowledge in the field and identify areas that need further inquiries. In particular, we contend that rationales of government's skill categorization have yet been thoroughly investigated. How the migration policies impact on migrants' deskilling or upskilling and their mobility across the labor market deserves much more scholarly attention. Therefore, 2) we have brought together scholars who critically engage with these questions in their own grounded research. In this way, we seek to question categorical thinking of skills and move the analysis to a processual approach in terms of understanding the acquisition, loss and utilization of skills. More specifically, 3) we seek to advance the research by bridging the gap between state-level conceptualizations of skills in policy-making and the way migrants themselves perceive, valorize and act on skills as a form of migration capital.

Contributions bring together different disciplines of the social sciences and engage with questions of the three broad themes 1) policy analysis, 2) skill acquisition, 3) skills utility and transfer and 4) institutions/markets. While the focus is primarily Asia, contributions include groundbreaking research on other parts of the world and thus open up the debate to a truly encompassing theorization of the meaning of skills in global labor mobility.

This conference is the result of longstanding collaborative research of the organizing committee members of the Asian Migration Cluster at the National University of Singapore and the Migration and Citizenship Research Group of the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University. The conference was made possible by generous sponsorship from the TGU-Waseda Global Asia Program.

### Conveners

Gracia Liu-Farrer (Waseda University, Japan)

Brenda Yeoh (National University of Singapore)

Michiel Baas (National University of Singapore)

Helena Hof (Waseda University, Japan)

# THE QUESTION OF SKILLS IN CROSS-BORDER LABOR MOBILITY

20-21 September 2018 | Waseda University, Tokyo

## 20 SEPTEMBER 2018 (THU, Room 309)

09:15 – 10:00 REGISTRATION & COFFEE

10:00 – 10:10 WELCOME NOTE by Prof. Naoyuki UMEMORI, Director, TGU-Global Asia

10:10 – 10:30 Introduction by Gracia LIU-FARRER, Waseda University and Michiel BAAS, National University of Singapore

### 10:30 – 12:30 PANEL 1 QUESTIONING SKILLED MIGRATION POLICIES

*Chairperson* | Michiel BAAS (National University of Singapore)

10:30 **Making Unskilled Foreign Laborers into Skilled Returnees: The Paradox of Japanese Immigration Policy**

[Michael STRAUZ](#) | Texas Christian University, the United States

10:50 **Does ‘Skilled’ Equal ‘Desired’? Deconstructing the Meaning of Skills in Migration to Japan and Singapore**

[Helena HOF](#) | Waseda University, Japan

11:10 **Regionalization of Migration and Re-definition of “Skills” in Japan**

[Nana OISHI](#) | University of Melbourne, Australia

11:30 **Middling Migrants in Australia: The Changing Concepts of Skills in ‘a Middle Space’**

[Sylvia ANG](#) | National University of Singapore

11:50 **QUESTIONS & ANSWERS**

12:30 – 13:30 LUNCH

### 13:30 – 15:00 PANEL 2 ACQUIRING SKILLS I: NAVIGATING BOUNDARIES AND INEQUALITIES

*Chairperson* | Miloš DEBNÁR (Ryukoku University, Japan)

13:30 **Mobilizing Global Skills in Dubai: European Expats Transferring Skills, Converting Capital & Remaking Race through Cross-Border Labor Migration**

[Jaafar ALLOUL](#) | University of Leuven, Belgium & University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

13:50 **Aspirations, Constraints and Strategies: Skill Acquisition and Upward Mobility among Low-Wage Chinese Female Migrant Workers in Singapore**

[Wei YANG](#) | Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

14:10 **Skilled in English: International Students in Australia and their Quest for Global Mobility**

[Catherine GOMES](#) | RMIT University, Australia

14:30 **QUESTIONS & ANSWERS**

15:00 – 15:30 COFFEE BREAK

### 15:30 – 17:00 PANEL 3 ACQUIRING SKILLS II: THE MAKING/PRODUCTION OF SKILLS

*Chairperson* | Gracia LIU-FARRER (Waseda University, Japan)

15:30 **Learning from Migrants to Profit from Migration: The Skills Acquisition Process of Migration Entrepreneurs**

[Ruben HERNANDEZ-LEON](#) | UCLA, the United States

# THE QUESTION OF SKILLS IN CROSS-BORDER LABOR MOBILITY

20-21 September 2018 | Waseda University, Tokyo

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15:50

**Mobile Practices and the Production of Professionals on the Move: The Case of Filipino Highly Skilled Migrants in Singapore**

[Karen Anne Sun LIAO](#) | National University of Singapore

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16:10

**From Cooks to Chefs: The Construction of a Skilled Labor Category in a Transnational Culinary Field**

[James FARRER](#) | Sophia University, Japan

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16:30

**QUESTIONS & ANSWERS**

**17:00**

**END OF DAY 1**

**18:00 –**

**CONFERENCE RECEPTION (For Speakers, Chairpersons & Invited Guests)**

# THE QUESTION OF SKILLS IN CROSS-BORDER LABOR MOBILITY

20-21 September 2018 | Waseda University, Tokyo

## 21 SEPTEMBER 2018 (FRI, Room 309)

### 09:00 – 11:00 PANEL 4 SKILL UTILITY AND TRANSFER

*Chairperson* | Tina SHRESTHA (Waseda University, Japan)

09:00

#### Becoming 'Foreign Talent': Taiwanese Skilled Migrants in Japan

[Yen-Fen TSENG](#) | National Taiwan University

09:20

#### Skill Gain or Circulation? Career Development of Asian Graduates of Japanese Universities

[Yuriko SATO](#) | Tokyo Institute of Technology, Japan

09:40

#### Global Migration, Gender and Professional Credentials: Transnational Value Transfers and Losses

[Margaret WALTON-ROBERTS](#) | Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

10:00

#### Career Development of Vietnamese Returnees: A comparison Between Vietnamese Graduates of Australian, American and Japanese Universities

[Thanh PHAM](#) | Monash University, Australia

10:20

#### QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

### 11:00 – 11:30 COFFEE BREAK

### 11:30 – 13:00 PANEL 5 INSTITUTIONS/MARKETS

*Chairperson* | Glenda ROBERTS (Waseda University, Japan)

11:30

#### The Regime of Skills in Singapore's Eldercare Landscape

[Kellynn WEE](#), [Charmian GOH](#) and [Brenda YEOH](#) | National University of Singapore

11:50

#### From "Excess" to Employability: Discourses of Skill in the Labor-exporting Nation

[Yasmin ORTIGA](#) | Singapore Management University

12:10

#### Migrant Skills in the Knowledge Economy

[Karen SHIRE](#) | University Duisburg-Essen, Germany & Ochanomizu University, Japan

12:30

#### QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

### 13:00 – 14:00 LUNCH

### 14:00 – 15:30 ROUNDTABLE & CONCLUDING REMARKS

*Chairperson* | Brenda YEOH (National University of Singapore)

*Discussants* | Ruben HERNANDEZ-LEON, Karen SHIRE, Margaret WALTON-ROBERTS, Yen-Fen TSENG

15:30

### END OF CONFERENCE

#### Conference Venue

Room 309, Nishi-Waseda Building (Bldg. 19), Waseda University

1-21-1 Nishi-Waseda, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 169-0051 <https://www.waseda.jp/gsaps/en/access/>



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## Mobilizing Global Skills in Dubai: European Expats Transferring Skills, Converting Capital & Remaking Race through Cross-Border Labor Migration

**Jaafar ALLOUL**

University of Leuven,  
Belgium & University of  
Amsterdam, The  
Netherlands

Joint Ph.D. Candidate in  
Social Anthropology

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This article discusses the migratory incentives, experiences, and perceptions of tertiary-educated European citizens with a Maghrebi minority (or 'second-generation') background from France, Belgium and The Netherlands, who are today moving to the United Arab Emirates in the Persian Gulf. While studies exist on mobile 'white' Western publics that settle in GCC cities, the emerging middle-class views of European (Muslim) minorities remain much less investigated. With their 'integration' and 'national loyalty' being increasingly the subjects of public (security) concerns in Europe, today, members of this stigmatized group often experience a mismatch between their skill sets and professional aspirations, on the one hand, and a structural background of racialized discrimination in the labor market and workplace, on the other hand. Confronted by an imposed sense of skill wastage then, some feel urged to seek adequate career opportunities further afield. By moving to a global migration hub like Dubai and then drawing specifically on their European education, European citizenship and Arab-Muslim background, they are able to navigate carefully the local privilege regime and renegotiate substantially their income levels and overall social status in society. Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Dubai and a body of 80 in-depth life-narrative interviews, this study argues that 'skill' categorizations in Dubai are not only premised on the particular kafala-policy of the UAE government – taking further inspiration from Asian cities like Singapore in dealing with migration – but also that they are mediated socially by the careful planning and strategizing of these European minority publics prior to their departure, along with their subsequent style performances as a distinct group of 'Western expats' in Dubai. Applying Bourdieu's analytical tool of the 'forms of capital' first allows me to discern the ways in which these Europeans draw on, and then convert specific forms of cultural capital (like educational skills) into further economic and social capital in Dubai. It then supports me to expand his triangulation by conceptualizing the notion of 'racial capital', as a variable form which allows for the looser mobilization in Dubai of the social codes of 'Europeaness', 'Arabness' and 'Muslimness', situationally profiting from their (combined) prestige; blending efforts that would otherwise stir 'contradiction' in Europe. Accessing such arrangements of whiteness and privilege abroad thus provides them with opportunities to further their upskilling and overall social mobility. By approaching 'skill' as an embodied category of practice in a processual context of migration, enhanced analytical understanding is expounded here on the meanings that lay behind 'skill utilities', 'skill transfers' and new 'skill acquisitions'. In doing so, this paper demonstrates that building a critical theorization of the oft-applied yet ill-defined notion of 'skill' is best served by unpacking the many forms it takes in the daily lives of cross-border labor migrants.

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Jaafar Alloul holds an MA in Middle East Studies from the Belgian University of Ghent, along with a Erasmus Mundus MA of Excellence in Migration Studies, coordinated by the German University of Oldenburg. He concluded academic exchanges in the EU and Middle East (University of Barcelona, Birzeit University, Zayed University). He is currently enrolled in a joint PhD program (2015-19) in social anthropology at the Belgian University of KU Leuven and the Dutch University of Amsterdam, working on migration and minorities dynamics in/across Europe and the Middle East. He has published in e.g. Middle East Critique. His broader research interests span political sociology and urban anthropology, including themes like sectarianism, radicalization, conflict migration, state policies of population and diversity management, highly skilled migration, social mobility, race, and privilege stratification. Previously, he has been enrolled in traineeships with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNRWA.

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## Middling Migrants in Australia: the Changing Concepts of Skills in 'a Middle Space'

**Sylvia ANG**

Asia Research Institute,  
National University of  
Singapore

Doctorate

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This paper considers the case of 'middling migrants' to interrogate the concept of 'skills' as defined by Australia. Current literature on middling migrants has contributed to understanding of migrants who are 'wedged' between the 'highly skilled' and 'low skilled' migrant workers. However, such understandings are often located around migrants' mid-level skills and their middle-class status. This paper aims to extend such theorization by examining the daily experiences of migrants from the Global South. Specifically, this paper looks at the Australian immigration regime's conceptualisation of 'skills' and how temporary migrants aspire towards such definitions. I argue that their experience of 'a middle space' and their notions of skills are shaped by anxious desires; and that their imaginaries must be simultaneously located between the Global North and South. Certainly, even as the Global North displaces their original class positions, their positions are 'elevated' in the Global South. This paper aims to theorize the micro alongside the macro by situating migrants' daily experiences in the greater 'middle space' between the Global North and South. This project is in the preliminary stages of fieldwork where it aims to conduct in-depth interviews with twenty migrants from Australia. It also proposes the method of utilising life-mapping to 'track' the 'turning-points' of middling migrants' lives which provides a deeper understanding of their changing concepts of 'skills'.

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Dr Sylvia Ang is a migration scholar and recent PhD graduate from the University of Melbourne. She will commence a two-year appointment at the Asia Research Institute (NUS) as Postdoctoral Fellow in July 2018. She is passionate about migration issues and social justice. She has published in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Gender, Place and Culture, Postcolonial Studies and Cultural Studies Review. Her research interests include transnational labour migrants, cultural racism, co-ethnicity, intersectionality, post-colonialism, ethnography and digital ethnography. Her PhD dissertation investigated the politics of co-ethnicity between Chinese-Singaporeans and newly arrived Chinese migrants in Singapore. She has taught in various undergraduate and Master's courses including Global Mobility and Ethnic Relations, Development in the 21st century, Race, Ethnicity and Racism, Rethinking Rights and Development, and more. She can be contacted at [sylvia.s.ang@gmail.com](mailto:sylvia.s.ang@gmail.com).

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## From Cooks to Chefs: The Construction of a Skilled Labor Category in a Transnational Culinary Field

**James FARRER**

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Professor

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Transnational social fields are significant both for fostering cross-border career mobility and the creation of categories of skilled labor. In other words, migrants don't simply migrate within physical spaces but across and within social fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). The study takes the global culinary field – the field of fine dining restaurants – as an example of an emergent transnational social field. It shows how the globalization of a social field – in this case gastronomy – creates new positions and opportunities within it. This study is based on interviews and ethnographic field research in restaurants in Europe, North America and Asia. I argue that the emergence of a global field of fine dining is a process that not only furthers the mobility of skilled migrant labor but produces new categories of skilled labor. Cuisine constitutes a social field of tasters, things tasted, producers of tastes, and other actors with a stake in determining these tastes (Farrer 2015). This culinary field defines not only tastes but skills. We can describe these field specific skills in terms of culinary capital—the techniques, knowledge, and symbolic resources that bring status in the field. This involves not only former credentials recognized by the state and industry, but habitus particular to the field (Leschziner 2010; Naccarato and LeBesco 2013), embodied capital (race, ethnicity) (Farrer 2015), and validation from legitimating authorities in the field (reviewers, bloggers, etc). The emergence of this culinary field is a historic process that can be traced to the professionalization of the chef and the rise of the restaurant in 19th century France (Trubeck 2000). However, the culinary field has now globalized, and a global star system of chefs and starred restaurants has emerged since at least the 2000s. Transnational mobility is now essential to the careers of culinary workers at all levels, from line cooks, to head chefs, to celebrity chefs building global brands. Chefs also have emerged as important players in the creative economies of global cities (Farrer 2010), and their resumes are now framed as evidence of work in kitchens around the world. The cross-border mobility of chefs and other culinary professionals is essential to both producing this transnational field and to claiming positions within it.

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James Farrer is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Graduate Program in Global Studies at Sophia University in Tokyo. His research focuses on cities in East Asia, including ethnographic studies of sexuality, nightlife, expatriate communities, and urban food cultures. His publications include *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*, *Shanghai Nightscapes: A Nocturnal Biography of a Global City* (with Andrew Field), and *Globalization and Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Contact Zones* (editor). James Farrer has lived in Asia more than two decades, spending part of every year in Shanghai while based in Tokyo.

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## Learning from Migrants to Profit from Migration: the Skills Acquisition Process of Migration Entrepreneurs

**Ruben HERNANDEZ-LEON**

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Professor

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In this paper I analyze the learning and skill-acquisition experiences of migration entrepreneurs involved in the H-2 visa program to import temporary migrant workers from Mexico to the United States. The H-2 visa program is a U.S. government sponsored guest-worker scheme, which nowadays largely recruits Mexican workers. On the ground, this visa program is managed by an array of migration entrepreneurs, including labor contracting agencies, recruiters, document processors, transporters, and ancillary service providers. Conceptually, migration entrepreneurs can be defined as individuals who, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, provide services that cause, facilitate, and sustain international migration. The heterogeneous complex of migration entrepreneurs and their formally and informally constituted businesses are the backbone of the migration industry. Migration entrepreneurs often begin their trajectories as regular migrants earning wages for the survival of their families or as advocates fighting for the rights of migrant workers, and later transition to positions and roles that involve profiting from migration. At times, migration entrepreneurs start their careers in discreet and circumscribed roles and subsequently assume expansive tasks that increase money-making opportunities. I argue that these transitions entail learning and development of skills and competences to profit from migration. I focus on the case of H-2 visa document processors, a position often occupied by women and a job that at its basic level involves completing a visa application form. In order to do the job, document processors enter into contact with labor recruiting agencies, recruiters, consular authorities, and migrants. In this context, they learn about employer preferences, the bureaucratic requirements of the program, the dynamics of recruitment and the experiences of migrants, and develop skills that allow for a more expansive role in the migration industry that manages the H-2 program. Specifically, these document processors learn and develop competences that open up the opportunity to become recruiters, a role that promises bigger profits. In this amplified role of document processor-recruiter, these individuals also learn about opportunities to coordinate services migrants consume in their sojourn to the United States, such as transportation and lodging. In this expansive role, document processors also develop skills that help them navigate competition with other recruiters and skills that help them stay out of trouble with US consular authorities in Mexico, who can sanction agents that violate the rules of the H-2 program, such as charging migrants for a job.

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Rubén Hernández-León is Professor of Sociology at UCLA and Director of the UCLA Center for Mexican Studies. He is the author of *Metropolitan Migrants: the Migration of Urban Mexicans to the United States* (UC Press, 2008), which received the Thomas and Znaniecki best book award from the International Migration Section of the American Sociological Association in 2010. He is also coauthor of *Skills of the "Unskilled": Work and Mobility among Mexican Migrants* (UC Press, 2015) and co-editor of *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2005). His research focuses on new developments of Mexico-U.S. migration and the role of the migration industry in international migration. He is currently working on a book based on a 20-year study of a new destination of Mexican immigration in the U.S. South and a series of papers on the migration industry operating the H-2 temporary worker visa program. He recently guest edited a special issue of the journal *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* on return migration from the U.S. to Mexico with a focus on children, families and schools. His papers have been published in *Social Forces*, *Work and Occupations*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *International Migration Review*, *Mondi Migranti*, *Hommes & Migrations*, *Southern Rural Sociology*, *Revue Géographie et Cultures*, *Traces*, *Ciudades*, *Vetas*, *Estudios Sociológicos*, *Trayectorias*, and several edited volumes in Spanish, English, French, Italian, Chinese and Japanese.

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## Does 'Skilled' Equal 'Desired'? Deconstructing the Meaning of Skills in Migration to Japan and Singapore

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What do governments intend when creating "skilled migrant" categories and how can we understand the reasons for and implications of changes in skilled migration policies? This paper approaches these questions bottom-up, from the perspective of the migrants. On the ground research reveals, by demonstrating how migrants navigate, circumvent and contest skill categories, what states actually mean by the "skilled" label. Furthermore, an ethnographic research design with regular follow-ups enables us to capture how changing definitions of "skills" in migration policies in turn affect migrants' practices and strategies.

The paper focusses on skilled migration policies in Singapore and Tokyo, two of the central nodes in Asia-Pacific which have seen significant flows of businesses, goods, and people. Both Singapore and Japan, confronted with population aging and a shrinking labor force, have participated in the race for 'global talent'. The comparative perspective reveals a reverse trend in both countries. Singapore has for long welcomed 'foreign talent' but, after the ruling party's loss of votes in recent elections and social tensions on the rise, notably tightened its immigration policy. Requirements for obtaining a "skilled" visa – the Employment Pass (EP) - have been rising quickly and applications for permanent residency, which were encouraged and known to be relatively easy to secure for EP holders, have increasingly been rejected. In Japan, although officially still denying immigration to the country, the government has gradually opened its labor market for certain "skilled" visa categories. Recent changes set the course for one of the world's fastest tracks to permanent residency (PR). Eligible are those deemed "highly skilled", turning the highly skilled visa into a potentially attractive category for those seeking PR.

The paper is based on a longitudinal, ethnographic study on European migrants in the two capital cities Singapore and Tokyo. I conducted qualitative interviews with 70 migrants and, over a span of four years, mapped their geographical, social and professional mobilities with the help of follow-up interviews and emails. While the migrants all have a "skilled" visa, their young age and limited work experience upon the time of migration place them on the lower end of the spectrum of the skilled.

Findings reveal that migrants in both cities activate similar sorts of social and cultural capital upon entering the host country labor markets with the aim of being granted the skilled migrant status. The described reverse trend in both countries' immigration policies however causes migrants to adopt differing career strategies in the two cities and impacts their perceptions of career opportunities and their future in the host country. Ultimately, the "selectivity around skills" is not merely a question of skills, as Raghuram (2008:88) notes but intersects with policy makers' weighing of political and social vis-à-vis economic interests. The data strongly points to the role of other criteria such as culture, ethnicity, and social cohesion and points to the study's wider applicability for research on skilled migration policies.

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Helena Hof is a Ph.D. candidate in International Migration/Sociology at the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies (GSAPS) at Waseda University, Tokyo. Her research interests include mobility of young professionals, migration to and between global cities, meanings of career and lifestyle for the millennial generation, skilled immigrant entrepreneurship and gender and race in migration. Helena has also worked as a Research Assistant at GSAPS, Waseda University for three years and has assisted in conference planning and grant applications. Her most recent publication is "Worklife Pathways' to Singapore and Japan: Gender and Racial Dynamics in Europeans' Mobility to Asia," published in *Social Science Japan Journal* 2018, 21(1).

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## Mobile Practices and the Production of Professionals on the Move : The Case of Filipino Highly Skilled Migrants in Singapore

**Karen Anne Sun LIAO**

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Research on highly skilled and professional migrants has proliferated in recent years, given their status as talent on the move, valorised for their skills, their economic, social and cultural capital, and their role in accelerating a host country's international competitiveness, economic growth, and productivity (Cerna, 2016; Yeoh and Lai, 2008). Within existing literature, studies have explored what constitutes and produces the highly skilled migrant or talent worker, including key characteristics (educational and occupational backgrounds) and transformative experiences such as everyday lifestyles and social encounters in host societies (Beaverstock, 2011). Mobilities literature has contributed to this strand of research, emphasising how skilled migrants are also distinguished by their access to and capacity for mobility. In particular, recent works have proposed the notion of geographical mobility as a form of capital to explain career development among labour migrants and the employability of international students (Leung, 2013; Loacker and Śliwa, 2016), suggesting the role of mobility in creating the mobile professional. However, there remains a gap in terms of how such capital is translated into the practice of producing the highly skilled migrant. While recognising geographical mobility as capital (Leung, 2013), this paper forwards a conceptualisation of 'mobile practice' that foregrounds how this capital is embodied and enacted in order to produce and reproduce the highly skilled mobile subject. While mobile practices have been broadly defined as performances of mobility (Cresswell and Merriman, 2011) and 'physical, imaginative and communicative travel' (Benson, 2011), this paper interprets the concept as ways of embodying characteristics and dispositions oriented towards mobility, and enacting mobility through transnational movements. These embodied and enacted mobile practices serve as intrinsic components of the mobile professional.

Using mobile practice as concept, the paper examines qualitative interviews with 33 Filipino highly skilled and professional migrants in Singapore, a major destination country for skilled migrants. To boost economic growth and maintain its global city status, Singapore has sought to attract foreign talent through a streamlined selection process that grants incentives and privileges to skilled migrants (Yeoh, 2006). Findings illustrate how Filipino professionals such as analysts, corporate consultants and managers engage in embodied and enacted mobile practices to fulfil three critical dimensions in the construction of the mobile professional who can lay down roots and map new routes. First, Filipino highly skilled migrants pursue mobile practices as an essential ingredient in producing the mobile self through self-fashioning exceptionality (Zhang, Yeoh and Ramdas, 2017), the process by which migrants embody qualities that increase their suitability in the global labour market. Second, they actively curtail mobile practices when settling in the host country, suggesting a degree of disengagement from mobility in order to craft a rooted self. Third, they re-engage in mobile practices in mapping new routes for re-migration. Highly skilled and professional migrants are able to strategise when and how they utilise mobile practices, whether in relocation, permanent settlement or re-migration. Overall, findings show how highly skilled migrants' mobile practices translate mobility into practice, in situations of mobility, immobility or "intertwined roots and routes" (Clifford, 1997).

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Karen Anne S. Liao is a PhD student in Geography at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She is interested in academic and policy research on international labour migration in Asia, migration governance in the Philippines, forced migration and the migration-development nexus. Before joining NUS, she was a Research Associate at the Scalabrini Migration Center in Manila, where she was involved in research projects related to transnational temporary migration between Europe and Asia, brain drain and brain waste, and youth, employment and migration.

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## From “Excess” to Employability: Discourses of Skill in the Labor-exporting Nation

**Yasmin Y. ORTIGA**

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University

Assistant Professor

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Philippine labor export strategies have long been a popular subject of study, with much emphasis placed on state policies that recruit and deploy Filipino workers overseas. Less researched are the deliberate attempts to produce desirable workers for foreign employers before they actually leave the country. In this paper, I discuss how this production process has been defined by changing notions of “skill” and the role of schools must play in ensuring economic success. I base my findings on a document analysis of newspaper articles and government reports from 1965 to 2015. I supplement these findings with qualitative interviews conducted with 21 Philippine government officials and private school owners.

While the Philippine government began its move towards facilitating outmigration in the late 1960s, state institutions largely defined their labor export policies as “a systematic export of excess skill.” In aiming to provide skills for overseas work, state officials targeted out-of-school youth and low-income groups without “the means for formal schooling.” Education policies were mainly geared towards enhancing Filipinos’ skills for local industries, with universities regarded as venues for molding country’s future leaders. This paper reveals how a turning point came in the late 1980s, as global discourses promoting the knowledge-based economy intersected with the valorization of Filipino overseas workers as the country’s new national heroes. State officials argued that because overseas workers were the country’s most valuable resource, Philippine colleges and universities must also equip students with skills to obtain jobs overseas. This shift in state discourse signaled a move from simply exporting “excess” skill to ensuring overseas employability. In a paradoxical application of human capital ideology, tertiary institutions were then integrated into Philippine labor export strategies and faced growing pressure to produce productive graduates for other nations.

I argue how the shift towards employability led to problematic outcomes on the ground, as state agencies pushed aspiring migrants to take on the responsibility of making themselves “employable” global workers. I also show how such discourses of skill allowed Philippine state officials to blame both schools and individual students for local unemployment issues. Students were blamed for not choosing the right professions to pursue their migration dreams, while schools were blamed for their ineffectiveness in producing quality graduates. Yet, notions of skill remain unchallenged among aspiring migrants and their families, and continue to be reinforced in both sending and receiving nations.

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Yasmin Y. Ortiga is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Singapore Management University. She investigates how ideas about knowledge and “skill” shape migration flows, which in turn changes local institutions within both sending and receiving countries. Her previous research investigated how Philippine higher education institutions seek to produce workers for “export,” altering local curriculum and school policies in an effort to educate students for foreign employers. She recently published the book, “Emigration, Employability, and Higher Education in the Philippines” (Routledge). Her work has also been published in the *International Migration*, *Social Science & Medicine*, and the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.

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## Career Development of Vietnamese Returnees : A comparison Between Vietnamese Graduates of Australian, American and Japanese Universities

### Thanh PHAM

Monash University,  
Australia

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The number of international returnees is increasing in emerging economies. However, very little has been known about how their overseas studying experience helped them with their career development in their home countries, and how this connection differs amongst countries. Unpacking these issues is important because differences in cultural norms and professional values and expectations in the host and home countries often give returnees challenges. This study explored how Vietnamese returnees from Australian, American and Japanese universities developed their career in Vietnam. These countries were selected because they are the two most popular destinations for the Vietnamese students (MOET, 2016).

The project employed a mixed-method approach using a questionnaire with 60 graduates and in-depth interviews with 12 graduate returnees in the three countries. The findings revealed that career development of returnees was influenced by both contextual and personal factors among which hierarchy, inside-oriented economy and networking appeared as strong external influences, whereas accessing full authority and being adaptive emerged as strong affordances. The study also reported that returnees of American universities found their overseas studying experience more helpful for their career advancements, whereas returnees of Australian and Japanese universities reported various challenges in establishing their feet in the local market. This was mainly because local industries and employers showed their favour towards American standards and values. Importantly, for all three cohorts, it was found that there was not a simple answer to whether their overseas studying outcomes were useful and applicable in Vietnam or not because the usefulness and application were largely determined by the extent to which the returnees could be able to use their overseas skills and knowledge.

The findings were significant for both home and host countries in terms of developing policies to support international students during their studies and during the transition from higher education to the labour market. For Vietnam, the study informs the government and industries how to support returnees better so that they can use their overseas study outcomes to contribute to the society and economic development. For the host countries, the study provides implications about better developing curricula and pedagogies so that international students can use their knowledge and skills in further their career in other contexts rather than only in the host countries.

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Dr. Thanh Pham has been working in higher education for more than 10 years. Her main research areas are intercultural education, globalisation, internationalisation. She has been conducting substantial research on internationalisation of the curriculum and higher education in Vietnam and other Asian countries in response to globalisation. Her main research interest is to bring various cultural and intellectual resources together to develop so-called 'global effective pedagogies'. Pham's current research focuses on employability of international students. She's conducting research on studying and working experiences of students in Australia, Vietnam and Japan with a focus on exploring new ways of thinking about strategies to enable international students to manage their employability. This approach differs the current approaches to graduate employability which have tended to view the predominance of the skills and competency development as the focal point of graduate employability.

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## Regionalization of Migration and Re-definition of “Skills” in Japan

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The definitions of “skills” have been dramatically changing in Japan in recent years. The first major change in its policies was made through the newly introduced points system in 2012, and its successive scheme revisions significantly narrowed the definition of “highly skilled migrants” compared with that in the pre-2012 period. The second major change began to take place in 2015 when the National Strategic Special Zone Law was passed to enable the local governments to accept migrants who possess the “skills” that can meet the specific demand in certain geographical areas, whether a city, a prefecture, or a region. The further revisions of this law in 2017, in particular, radically expanded the definition of “skilled workers” (*senmon jinzai*) by including a wider range of migrants, such as cartoonists, trainee chefs, and agricultural workers who had long been labelled as “semi-skilled” or “unskilled” by the Japanese government for the last three decades. This paper will analyse these new policy developments and changes in Japan by focusing on the ways in which “skilled migrants” have been changed over time in policy documents and legislations and how they are now defined in each National Strategic Special Zone. By examining the economic and socio-political factors behind these shifts, it will argue that this “regionalization of migration” and the locally-driven changes in skill definitions will fundamentally transform Japanese migration policies. By contextualizing this case study in broader global debates and consensus on the definition of “skilled migrants” among international organizations, this paper will address this seismic change in Japanese migration policies as an anomaly of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and the global “policy convergence” (Hollifield 2014). It will also assess the potential impacts of these policy changes on labour markets and “multicultural coexistence” (Ministry of International Affairs and Communication 2005) in local communities.

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## Skill Gain or Circulation? Career Development of Asian Graduates of Japanese Universities

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As a country with the need for global talent to add values to their export and to promote overseas business, Japan has faced difficulty in attracting and retaining the highly skilled. In eleven months after its start of the point based system for the highly skilled in 2012, there were only 434 applicants while more than 2,000 applicants were expected; among the actual applicants, only 17 applied from overseas while the remaining 417 were living in Japan. Language barrier, seniority system which hampers speedy promotion of young able staff in Japanese companies, and insufficient support for the foreign residents are counted as causes of unattractiveness of the Japanese labor market. In such a situation, international students have been regarded as an important source of skilled workforce in Japan.

International student policy in Japan has undergone a major change in 2008, when the plan to accept 300,000 international students was announced by the then-Prime Minister Fukuda: the plan declared a linkage with the recruitment of the highly skilled whereas the policy had been conducted as a part of ODA and promoted the return of students after graduation until that time. Various programs have been launched since then to support the job hunting and employment of international students in Japanese companies. The number of international students who changed to skilled work visa in Japan increased from 8,272 in 2006 to 19,435 in 2016.

Though the number of international students who got employment in Japan has increased, the retention rate is not very high. According to the survey by Ernst & Young ShinNihon LLC entrusted by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 40% of former international students working in Japanese companies plan to leave the workplace within five years. This is partly because of their dissatisfaction with working environment and partly because of their life planning to seek for better jobs after building up their career at the Japanese companies.

This is a bad thing for the Japanese companies who spend considerable resources for the training of their staff. However, those who quit Japanese companies and returned to their home countries often find their employment at Japanese affiliated companies, utilizing their Japanese language ability and connection with the Japanese people.

In this research, the author analyze the perception of career development and working environment of students/graduates from four Asian countries, based on the questionnaire and interview surveys. Four countries are China, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand, which were picked up considering the number of students and the zest of Japanese companies for their recruitment. Through this comparison, the reason for the difference of their career development patterns and adaptation in Japanese workplaces will be discussed from economic, cultural and political point of views.

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Yuriko Sato is an associate professor of Dept. of Transdisciplinary Science and Engineering, School of Environment and Society of Tokyo Institute of Technology. She received her Ph.D. in Educational Engineering from Tokyo Institute of Technology. She was a visiting scholar at University of Melbourne and University of Adelaide. Her recent research interest is the Asian student mobility and the factors which influence their decision making on study destination and workplace. She is currently the representative of research project on "Empirical Study on the Brain Circulation of International Students with Science and Engineering Majors" supported by Grant-in-Aid for Research of Japan.

Her recent publication: "International student policy as de facto entry point of immigration and refugee policy in Japan: Merits and problems of versatility of the policy" *Migration Policy Review*, 10: 29-43.

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## Migrant Skills in the Knowledge Economy

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National employment systems are the outcome of historical negotiations between employers, labor representatives and the state, which link education and employment institutions, balance the resources of labor and employers in the competitive exchange and use of labor power, and structure careers. Economic sociological approaches to employment systems distinguish between national arrangements where skill formation takes place mainly within educational institutions (general skills in human capital theory), or through vocational education (occupational skills) or within enterprises (firm-specific skills). Skills formed outside these national institutions are largely regarded as incompatible, and thus misrecognized, while underemployed migrants eventually challenge the misrecognition of their status. Yet the forms of migration and the types of workplaces that characterized migration to the advanced industrial economies has changed fundamentally over the past two decades, both with the shift to more knowledge-intensive economic activities, and with rising educational levels and skills of persons willing to migrate outside their own countries. It is characteristic of these new movements that migration already begins at the “skilling” stage, in the form of student migration and exchange. This paper proposes to explore explanations for the contradictory status of skilled migrants in destinations and for patterns of return migration in the context of the changing division and transnationalization of labor in knowledge-based economies. In doing so, the paper also explores path dependencies in the job and employment status of migrants entering destinations with different types of skill formation systems (general, occupational, firm-specific). The main aim of the paper is theoretical, but the arguments will be illustrated drawing on the authors’ comparative research of employment change and migration in Germany (a vocational employment system) and Japan (a firm-based employment system) with some reference also to the United States (a general education-employment system).

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Karen Shire is professor of Comparative Sociology and Japanese Society at the University Duisburg-Essen, Germany and Specially Appointed Professor at the Institute of Global Leadership, Ochanomizu University, Tokyo. She is the co-editor of *Transnationalisierung der Arbeit* (with S. Quack, I. Schütz-Schaeffer and A. Weiss, 2017 Springer VS), and has published on employment and social institutional change in the journals *Social Politics*, the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, the *Berliner Journal of Sociology*, *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, among others. She is a member of the international editorial board of *Work, Employment and Society*, and *Contemporary Japan*. Currently, she is fellow at the Bielefeld University Center of Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) where she contributes to the study group *In Search of Global Labour* with research on the role of private labour intermediaries in the development of cross-border labour markets in the EU and East/Southeast Asia.

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## Making Unskilled Foreign Laborers into Skilled Returnees: the Paradox of Japanese Immigration Policy

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Japan is faced with severe labor shortages, particularly for “unskilled” jobs like convenience store clerk and agricultural worker. However, Japan has proven extremely reluctant to admit unskilled laborers for the sole purpose of filling those jobs. Instead, unskilled workers are often admitted with other justifications, such as through the trainee and technical internship program or as foreign students. Ironically, programs to admit foreign students and trainees and technical interns give unskilled workers a set of skills, but then generally encourage (if not require) them to return to their countries of origin. This is surprising because migration of skilled foreign laborers is much less controversial in Japan (and elsewhere) than is migration of unskilled foreign laborers. Why then, does Japan encourage these newly skilled foreign laborers to leave? Conversely, why doesn’t Japan do everything that it can to keep these newly skilled foreigners who, having lived in Japan for several years, have familiarity with Japanese language and culture (factors which are often cited as desirable in migrants in Japan and elsewhere)?

To answer these questions, I draw on archival research and interviews with business people, activists, interest group representatives, academics, politicians, and bureaucrats during 22 months of field research in Japan in 2005, 2006, and 2016. Ultimately, I argue that the failure to encourage former foreign students as well as former trainees and technical interns to remain in Japan after their programs are complete is rooted in the political and economic conditions under which foreign student programs and the trainee and technical internship program were created and modified in the 1980s and 1990s. In short, these programs reflect the contradictory impulses of Japan’s immigration policymakers. Bureaucrats and politicians making immigration policy in Japan have sought to address labor shortages while avoiding what they saw as the social problems caused by large immigration to European states. These twin impulses have led Japan to create programs which, contrary to the stated preferences of many policymakers, make unskilled temporary migrants into skilled returnees.

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Michael Strausz is an Associate Professor of Political Science and the Director of Asian Studies at Texas Christian University. His forthcoming book, *Help (Not) Wanted: Immigration Politics in Japan* (SUNY Press, 2019), examines the causes of Japan’s persistently strict immigration control policy. He has published peer reviewed articles and book chapters on Japanese immigration policy as well as Japan’s responses to international norms (especially the norm against whaling), and he has been awarded grants from the Fulbright Foundation and the Japan Foundation. He earned a PhD in political science from the University of Washington in 2007.

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## Becoming 'Foreign Talent': Taiwanese Skilled Migrants in Japan

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According to an OECD report, Taiwan has been one of the largest sending countries of skilled migrants. At the same time, according to Oxford Report on Global Talent, employers in Taiwan were reported to experience most serious skill shortage, among developed countries. While many skilled migrations went to North America, in the last decade, a significant number of Taiwanese educated migrants have embarked for cross-border migration within Asia, with several Asian countries offering migration channel for foreign talent. Among them, Japan's immigration policy is most inclusive to welcome fresh college graduates. To those Taiwanese college graduates with no work experiences, Japan becomes very attractive as migration destination.

Based on a study of 40 in-depth interviews with Taiwanese skilled migrants working in Tokyo during 2017-18, this paper analyses how these migrants experienced the notions of 'skill' in both sending and host society. Many of Taiwanese migrants whom I interviewed, experienced being under-valued or even de-valued at home country simply because they are fresh graduates and did not major in business, engineering, or information science. On the contrary, employers in Japan tend to be open for tertiary-educated migrants of all majors and it is common for them to prefer candidates with no prior formal work experiences. As a result, to these migrants, coming to work in Japan is a journey of becoming 'foreign talent', defined not only by employers but also by government immigration policy, since their working visas are issued within highly-skilled immigration scheme.

The case of Taiwanese migrating to become foreign talent shows how skill is socially constructed. When skilled workers relocate to other countries, they experience different notions of skill that depend on the type of 'training regime', as coined by Kethleen Thelen (2008), when referring to divergent systems of skill formation in different countries. What Taiwanese experienced is moving between two training regimes. While Taiwanese employers value formal education and training in school, companies in Japan value firm-specific skills through on-job-training.

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Yen-Fen Tseng(曾熾芬) is Professor of Sociology at National Taiwan University. Her research focuses on migration in and out of Taiwan. Recent publications include "Escalator or Merry-Go-Round? Taiwanese Skilled Migration to China," ( in Taiwan and the "China Impact", edited by Gunter Schubert, Routledge), "Governing Migrant Workers at a Distance: Managing the Temporary Status of Guest workers in Taiwan,"(International Migration), and "Reconfiguring Citizenship and Nationality: Dual Citizenship of Taiwanese Migrants in China," (Citizenship Studies). She is a corresponding editor to International Journal of Urban and Regional Research.

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## Global Migration, Gender and Professional Credentials : Transnational Value Transfers and Losses

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Immigration policy in many OECD nations now places a premium on migrants with specific skills that are seen as vital to national development, innovation and competitiveness. This is particularly evident in health care systems, which have long relied on internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs) to meet structural shortages. As health care has become increasingly globalized, IEHPs move substantial distances to provide care for patients. Increasingly, candidates in lower and middle income nations choose health careers because of the migration prospects they offer. IEHP migration is characterized by economic hierarchies, as migration routes are typically from relatively poor Asian, African and Small Island states to the Global North. As such, IEHPs represent an important case that encapsulates the transnational landscape of skilled migrant value transfer and loss. The gender implications of this issue are particularly significant, since women account for an increasing proportion of all migrants, reaching almost half of today's 191 million international migrants. Female migrants are overrepresented in health and personal care sectors of the global economy, which are often undervalued in terms of income security and status. While the specific policy context of IEHPs' integration into different national labour markets varies, there is a structural trajectory of convergence of IEHPs being incorporated into national health systems facing restructured or diminished state spending. Nurses represent the largest and most internationalized and feminized section of the health professions, and demographic and health care delivery transformations are creating global markets for nursing and other care workers. Linked to this, the global migration of IEHPs and the related pressures exacted on professional standards and qualifications are important dimensions of the ongoing globalization of health care and the restructuring of labour process hierarchies. This paper will assess the globally networked form of value transfer occurring with IEHPs drawing on the authors' research completed in India, Canada and Singapore over the last ten years.

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Margaret Walton-Roberts is a professor in Geography at Wilfrid Laurier University, and affiliated to the Balsillie School of International Affairs, Canada. Her research is in gender and migration, transnational networks in the Indian diaspora, and Canadian immigration policy. For the last 10 years she has focused on the international migration of health care professionals. She has been awarded external grants for her research, and has published 3 co-edited books, 25 book chapters, and 37 journal articles. From 2008- 2012 she was the inaugural Director of the International Migration Research Centre (IMRC); a research centre related to international migration and mobility.

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## The Regime of Skills in Singapore's Eldercare Landscape

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As Asia prepares for a demographic shift towards an ageing population, questions of skilled care labour have become increasingly urgent. In Singapore, home-based care for elderly persons is a popular option; the privatisation of care has meant that the bulk of everyday caregiving work is often undertaken by female migrant domestic workers. However, there has been increasing public concern about the "skill" of migrant domestic workers to adequately care for the elderly persons under their charge, and the consequences that this arrangement has for both the caregiver and the recipient of care. As a result, a flurry of new eldercare courses purported to endow domestic workers with the necessary "skills" to carry out their work is now on offer.

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Feminist scholars have long argued for an expansion of the ways in which care labour is perceived and valued. This paper pulls away from assuming that "skill" is an objectified, material, pre-existing resource and turns to a focus on the "regime of skills" in Singapore, where what is considered to be "skill" is influenced by an interplay of social, cultural, and economic relations. We argue that the regime of skills in Singapore maps on to a regime of value. Contestations over the value of what constitutes "skilled care" are abstracted and contested in the materiality of credentials, visas, contracts, clothes, and certificates as signs of exchange and commensuration. Under the guise of determining what the constitution of "skill" means in the realm of care, different regimes of value are conjured and complicated in the same social space.

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Based on 47 qualitative in-depth interviews with migration agents, multiple focus group discussions with domestic workers, and an analysis of policy texts, we adopt three different but overlapping lenses to examine the ways in which these regimes of value encounter one another. The first is at the level of the state, which categorises and stratifies migrant care labour through the creation and curation of the short-term labour visa system. In order to sustain the "informality" of domestic work, the state fortifies the prevailing discourse that care work is immeasurable, unquantifiable, and indeterminate. Simultaneously, however, a hierarchy of caregiving skills is reified through the production of multiple categories of home-based "eldercare-trained" domestic workers and institution-based "professionalised" nurses, with little to no opportunity for migrant subjects to cross from one category to another. The tension between these countervailing desires speaks to how competing regimes of value are inscribed into visa categories that attempt to fashion unambiguous subjects.

The second lens focuses at the level of the private employment agencies in Singapore which recruit and place migrant domestic workers with local families. Employment agents abstract and objectify "value" by endowing domestic workers with certifications of having undergone "specialised" training programmes to "up-skill" workers and turn them into "premium" caregivers. These practices co-occur with state-sponsored programmes, leading to a burgeoning skills training market intent on producing a skills-differentiated class of "skilled supermaids" who are able to undertake eldercare. Simultaneously, however, the value of "skill" inheres in the ethnic characteristics of racialised migrant subjects through a process of interpellation, where some countries are seen to produce better eldercarers than others by dint of "naturally" occurring characteristics associated with particular nationalities. Both sets of practices reveal how credentialism is part of the production of "skill".

Third, we approach the construction of a regime of skills through the lens adopted by the domestic worker herself. We show how domestic workers seeking to “up-skill” themselves run up against a hierarchized “regime of visas”. Caregivers and nursing aides with a technical degree—which often denotes a high level of skills in their home contexts—enter Singapore on “low-skilled” migrant domestic work visas in order to fulfil a specific labour niche of extensive, home-based, specialised care. Steeped in contradictory signifiers of value, these migrant women have to constantly (re-)map their positioning in the regime of value through the performance of “skill” in embodied and material ways: the donning of nurse outfits, the adept usage of technology, and an enactment of a specific “register” of interaction that indexes them as “skilled” caregivers rather than “unskilled” maids.

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Kellynn Wee is a Research Associate at the Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore). Her research interests are focused on the migration industry, the gender dynamics of labour migration, and civil society and social movements.

Charmian Goh is an independent scholar with a Masters of Social Sciences (Sociology) from the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include the migration infrastructure, transnational care and domestic work, and migration governance.

Brenda S.A. Yeoh is Raffles Professor of Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Research Leader of the Asian Migration Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, NUS. Her research interests include the politics of space in colonial and postcolonial cities, and she also has considerable experience working on a wide range of migration research in Asia, including key themes such as cosmopolitanism and highly skilled talent migration; gender, social reproduction and care migration; migration, national identity and citizenship issues; globalizing universities and international student mobilities; and cultural politics, family dynamics and international marriage migrants. She has published widely on these topics and her recent books include *Transnational Labour Migration, Remittances and the Changing Family in Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, with Lan Anh Hoang) and *Contested Memoryscapes: The Politics of Second World War Commemoration in Singapore* (Routledge, 2016, with Hamzah Muzaini), *Asian Migrants and Religious Experience: From Missionary Journeys to Labor Mobility* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018 with Bernardo Brown) and *Handbook of Asian Migrations* (Routledge, 2018 with Gracia Liu-Farrer).

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## Aspirations, Constraints and Strategies: Skill Acquisition and Upward Mobility among Low-Wage Chinese Female Migrant Workers in Singapore

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This paper forms part of my ongoing PhD research project which is focused on the experiences of low-wage female migrant workers from China to Singapore. In Singapore, low-wage Chinese female migrant workers are mainly concentrated in manufacturing and service sectors. Like many other foreign worker groups, they are subject to strict government regulations that prevent their settlement and integration into Singapore society. Despite such institutional constraints, many of Chinese migrant women workers have successfully achieved career advancement and upward mobility (and even, in some cases, permanent residency) through skill acquisition both inside and outside the workplace. In this paper, I explore the following questions: How do they negotiate the constraints imposed on “unskilled” migrants and gain significant skills for upward mobility inside and outside the workplace? How do institutional factors (e.g. temporary migration regime) interact with gender to facilitate or impede their skill acquisition and upward mobility? What factors or characteristics can explain why certain Chinese female workers are more likely than others to gain access to the skills necessary for career progression and social mobility?

This paper is based on my fieldwork conducted in Singapore between September 2016 and February 2018. Until now, more than 65 in-depth interviews have been conducted with low-wage Chinese female migrant workers in manufacturing and service sectors in Singapore, and 30 in-depth interviews with their male counterparts. Interviews have also been conducted with their supervisors and employers, as well as return migrant women.

The preliminary findings suggest that although they are categorized as unskilled temporary labor, these migrant women workers demonstrate the capacity to negotiate such rigid categorization and create certain pathways to career progression, which poses a challenge to the bifurcated foreign labor policies. Also, among these migrant women themselves, their educational attainment, marital status and the types of work they are engaged in are important factors in influencing their motivations for and opportunities of skill acquisition and upward mobility. Last but not least, it is hard to measure the skills migrant women workers gained through migration and overseas employment by using a single criterion (e.g. educational qualification) or within a single context (e.g. the receiving country). Some of these female migrant workers become socially mobile in the receiving country by developing new skills, whereas others transfer their acquired skills to adapt to the rapidly-changing circumstances of their sending society after they return.

By exploring the experiences of low-wage Chinese female migrant workers in Singapore, this paper aims to extend the existing literature and contribute to the discussion of the question of skills in cross-border mobility.

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Yang Wei is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at Nanyang Technological University. Her current research focuses on labor migration from China to Singapore, with a special focus on gender. Her research interests include transnational labor migration, gender and family, women’s empowerment, and the impact of return migration on rural development. Before pursuing her PhD, she worked as a researcher in a Beijing-based think tank - the Centre for China and Globalization, where she conducted and coordinated policy relevant research on highly-skilled migration from/to China. She received her master’s degree in Cultural Studies from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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Dr. Baas is currently a Research Fellow in the Asian Migration Cluster at ARI, National University of Singapore. Previously, Dr. Baas was a coordinator with the International Institute for Asian Studies (Leiden, the Netherlands), as well as lecturer with the anthropology-sociology department of the University of Amsterdam, coordinator with the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research and coordinator with the Eutopia Institute (Amsterdam). He received both his PhD and MA in Anthropology/Sociology from the University of Amsterdam and BA in International Management from the Higher School of Economic Studies.

Dr Baas recently completed a project on the topic of mid-level skilled migration from India to Singapore for which he conducted fieldwork in Singapore as well as India. A side-project looked at the migration industry as this is concentrated in the greater Chennai region. These projects build upon and expand earlier research which looked at Indian student-migrant flows to Australia. Meanwhile he is also working on a parallel project focusing on so-called new middle class professionals in urban India (e.g. coffee baristas, fitness trainers and those employed in high-end shopping malls). Dr Baas is currently working on a book project that takes this research as a point of departure to discuss Indian middle class formation(s) and related inter-middle class diversity from a mobilities angle.

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Glenda Roberts obtained her PhD in Anthropology from Cornell University in 1986. After holding research and academic positions in Honolulu from 1988, she has lived and worked in Japan since 1996, first at the University of Tokyo Institute of Social Sciences, and then, from 1998 to the present, at the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies of Waseda University, where she is Professor. Her major areas of research are on gender, work, family, and migration policy in contemporary Japan. In the migration field, she has co-edited two books: Gabriele Vogt and Glenda S. Roberts, eds., *Migration and Integration—Japan in Comparative Perspective*. Munich: Iudicium, 2011, and, with Mike Douglass, *Japan and Global Migration: Foreign Workers and the Advent of a Multicultural Society*. London and New York: Routledge 2001). Her most recent work in the migration field is “An Immigration Policy by any Other Name: Semantics of Immigration to Japan,” (SSJJ21(1)2018). She is currently serving on the 7th Deliberative Committee for Immigration Control Policy, Ministry of Justice of Japan. She spent 2017-18 as a Visiting Scholar at EHESS in Paris, and the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of Hawaii and the East-West Center, in Honolulu. She is the President of the Society for East Asian Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association.

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