

## UCL Migration Research Unit

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## UCL Migration Research Unit Working Papers

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### Actors and Networks:

Unravelling Foreign Domestic Labour  
Migration

Alex K.S. Ma



Actors and Networks:

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Unravelling Foreign Domestic Labour Migration

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Supervised by Dr Ben Page

## Abstract

This paper is based on survey and interview data collected with 147 and 15 migrant domestic workers, respectively, at the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI), in Singapore. ACMI is a church-based organisation that provides educational and skills training classes for foreign domestic workers and is also engaged in advising and lobbying the Singaporean government regarding foreign worker issues.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the degree to which foreign domestic workers in Singapore actively look for self-development opportunities during their migratory journey. Here, self-development is conceived of as the process of acquiring new skills that can be used to improve their welfare. As a result, this paper is also interested in the ways in which self-development can impact upon migrant welfare. Moreover, this paper situates its investigation of self-development and welfare in a temporal frame by looking at how these processes interact and develop over time.

By interviewing migrants who have stayed in Singapore for varying periods of time, this paper finds that there is a strong temporal dimension to migrants seeking self-development. This is largely due to structural factors that inhibit migrant freedoms during initial stages of migration, such as employment agency debt repayments, as well as a general attitudinal indifference to the concept of 'development'. Over time, as migrants settle in and are in a general state of financial and employment stability, migrants are far more likely to seek self-development opportunities. In terms of welfare impacts, contributions to migrant confidence, employment capabilities, and agency are observed. Finally, the paper ends on a meditation of how self-development can augment welfare throughout the migrant lifecourse and offers recommendations for future research and policy considerations.

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## Introduction

A third of Singapore's 5.4 million-strong population is non-resident (MOM, 2015a). Here, 222,500 foreign domestic workers undertake the social reproductive roles that has been so central to the city-state's development in the last three decades. Impeccably managed, domestic workers are drawn from regional labour exporters such as the Philippines and Indonesia as well as the emerging markets of Myanmar (MOM, 2015b). Restrictive immigration and employment policies ensure transience precariousness. Two-year rolling contracts, gender and age limitations, kafala-like visa sponsorship systems, state-sanctioned deportation mechanisms, industry-specific employment restrictions serve to create an architecture of docile labour on a use-and-dispose basis (Yeoh, 2006; O'Connell Davidson, 2013).

The results of these policies have led to well-documented incidences of abuse and exploitation at the hands of unscrupulous employers and recruitment agencies that has since garnered international attention (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Though Singapore has taken steps to improve domestic worker welfare, progress has been slow; it was not until 2011 that Singapore had ratified the International Labour Organisation's Convention 189 (ILO, 2013), securing basic employment rights for domestic workers and it wasn't until 2013 that domestic workers were granted weekly 'day-offs' (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Nonetheless, as welfare, in general, seems to have improved and cases of serious abuse subdued, so too has research into foreign labour migration diversified. From investigations of abuse and exploitation towards studies recognising the minute coping strategies domestic workers adopt to negotiate unbalanced power relations, domestic labour migration scholarship of late seem preoccupied with 'agency' and 'empowerment' en vogue.

Though such developments are welcome, it seems that the analytical referent often remains stubbornly attached to her disadvantage; agency is recognised only insofar as it is remedial to her immediate position of subservience. We are thus ill equipped to understand how migrant agency develop over time (Griffiths et al., 2012). In other words, the developmental capacity of the migrant has been overlooked owing to theoretical conservatism and temporal short-sightedness. Greater understandings of how migrant aspirations, subjectivities, priorities and agency develop temporally can yield great policy insights and augment intervention impacts, yet research is lacking.

This paper therefore addresses this lacuna by investigating migrant agency within a temporal framework. Specifically, this paper will look at how self-development can allow foreign domestic

workers to achieve better welfare across what I term the 'migrant lifecourse'. First, 'self-development' is understood as the accumulation of ways that migrants acquire new skills to negotiate their welfare over time; this owes a clear theoretical debt to Sen's (2004) theory of capabilities that understands empowerment not in terms of predefined ends, but the creation of the necessary preconditions and opportunities for the individual to achieve welfare on her own terms. Self-development is thus taken as on-going migrant subjectivities rather than static end goals. Second, the migrant lifecourse is primarily concerned with the phases and transitions that are specific to domestic workers in Singapore. Though conventional lifecourse categories, such as adolescence, marriage and childbearing, are useful temporal indicators, this paper wants to hone in on migrant-specific experiences across time.

To this end, this paper bases its research with domestic workers who attend educational classes at Singapore's Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI). Established in 1998 by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Singapore, ACMI is a church-based organisation that offers migrant workers educational training classes amongst other services such as legal aid and public outreach. Held every Sunday, classes include English, baking, hairdressing, dressmaking, computer literacy, wellness and beauty, and business management. By engaging domestic workers who have proactively sought out educational classes in Singapore, we may begin to investigate the degree to which some migrants actively seek out non-economic resources, such as education, when migrating and how this contributes towards their wellbeing over time. This paper will use self-development and non-economic resource accumulation interchangeably.

This focus is important for a very significant reason. Domestic workers are often conceived of as altruistic economic migrants (Brickell and Chant, 2010). Although agency is recognised within the capitalist process of wage accumulation and remittance, little research has been conducted regarding how the accumulation of non-economic resources translates into welfare impacts over time. Skills training and education is just one example of an economic resource; though this paper's research is exclusively based on ACMI students, it also recognises the diversity of activities and sources of 'self-development' for migrants and so does not preclude self-development only within the realms of ACMI classes.

Moreover, this paper's conception of 'capitals' is premised upon Bourdieu's (1986) theory of economic, social, and cultural capital. Though this paper is concerned with non-economic capitals, it is clear that the trio of resources can never really exist in isolation of one another; insofar as the

migrant can accumulate social capital (personal networks, relationships, group membership) and cultural capital (knowledge, education, skills), so too are these 'convertible' to economic capital (ibid). The title of this report draws on the Latourian concept of an actor-network and, where migrant wellbeing is concerned, seeks to trace through time the associations and processes that enable or inhibit migrant welfare and self-development (Latour, 2005). To do this, this report will investigate three interrelated research questions:

- 1) To what extent do domestic workers in Singapore actively seek self-development opportunities during their migratory journey?
- 2) What are the barriers or catalysts for foreign domestic workers to pursue self-development? 3) To what degree does self-development lead to an increase in migrant welfare?

The report is structured as follows. Section two offers a concise review of the existing literature pertaining to domestic worker migration, issues around agency, non-economic capital, and temporality. Section three discusses the methods used in this study as well as processes of data analysis, and offers reflections on some of the project's methodological limitations. Section 4 looks at the relevant findings and discusses within a migrant temporality framework.

## Literature Review

The literature on foreign domestic labour migration enjoys rich, interdisciplinary inputs. Thinking in terms of domestic labour migrants and their pursuance of self-development over time, this section reviews some of the prevailing literature on issues regarding agency and temporality, and draws heavily on concepts from anthropology, sociology, and development studies.

Early domestic labour migration research often cited the financial motivations underpinning internal and, to a greater extent, international domestic labour migration. In the context of Southeast Asia, rich ethnographic data revealing the altruistic notions of mobility as compelled by family poverty and hardship constraint have, by now, become familiar (Yeoh and Huang, 1999; Momsen, 1999; Parreñas, 2001, Rahman et al., 2005). At every step of the migratory journey, from the dire straits of household poverty to the flows of remittances that underwrite the lived realities of domestic workers and their dependants, migrant agency and economic capital accumulation were concepts used interchangeably (Constable, 2007). This is not to invalidate such a focus; though two decades have elapsed since foreign domestic labour migration was brought in vogue, financial support remains the

dominant motivation for domestic labour migration; migrant households are often highly dependent on remittances to sustain basic household expenditures, educational expenses for children, as well as durable investments and assets (Kho et al., 2014).

To this end, contributions from development sociology invites us to understand migration as a household strategy. Here, Douglass (2012), describes the concept of 'householding' as the 'the ways in which the processes of forming and maintaining households through time are globalizing in all key dimensions of the life of households: marriage/partnership, bearing, raising and educating children, managing daily life, earning income and caring for elders and non-working members' (pp. 4). Migration, for Douglass, is the reflexive-altruistic means of sustaining household reproduction where the household has undergone fundamental shifts vis-à-vis structural adjustment, state support retrenchments, and social policy reform (see Woolfson & Likic-Brboric, 2008). Moreover, the concept of 'householding' resonates strongly with early migration-development literature that understood mobilities as compelled by the need to diversify household 'incomes portfolio' (Stark & Levhari, 1982: pp. 192). For development economists, household risk – in the form of poverty – is mitigated through the meditated diversification of income over geographical distance to reduce wage differential co-linearity with local wages (Zimmer et al., 2008).

Although the notion of agency seems to be implied within the migration and development literature, it is recognised insofar as it chimes with the concept of the rational economic migrant. Even where skills training, education and vocational training is concerned, migrant agency is extracted only in economic terms as surplus value transferred to employers (Barber & Bryan, 2012). Outside the realm of household and development economics, research on migrant agency and capitals accumulation left much to be desired. In Bourdiesian terms, the unrelenting focus on economic capital accumulation obscures the potential for migrant cultural and social capital development. In a field preoccupied with material indicators and objectified states of capitals as income, assets, and investments, the embodied state – of disposition, of knowledge, of habitus – of capitals that enables agency has been swept under the rug (Bourdieu, 1986)

This was particularly true of early South-North domestic labour migration research; on one extreme of the continuum, studies on migrant abuse and exploitation paid scant attention to coping strategies or means of power subversion. In Momsen's (1999) *Maids on the Move: Victim or Victor?*, the 'victim' narrative seemed to prevail and captured nicely the academic zeitgeist of the time. On the other end,

the migrant domestic worker was upheld as a folk hero whose remittances are the cornerstones of national economic development and poverty alleviation (Silvey, 2004). In either camp the migrant was co-opted into external narratives that dilutes any meaningful dialogue with her agency on her own terms.

Nonetheless, later studies witnessed the blurring between the two extremes and began to reconcile the multiple subjectivities of the domestic labour migrant, at once structurally disadvantaged but also capable of resistance and subversion (Anderson, 2000). Investigations into domestic worker welfare thus shied away from notions of the 'helpless' or 'exploited' migrant and have looked to uncover the subtle strategies and innovative channels through which agency manifests.

Ueno (2009), for example, notes how, despite Singapore's repressive labour policy and working environment, Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers employ strategic methods to 'restore their dignity as individuals' as well as to negotiate minor perks with employers through acts of flattery and self-deprecation (pp. 513). By shifting away from the passive victim narrative, the transformative effect of agency was brought to the fore (see also Lyons, 2007; Platt et al., 2014).

Furthermore, in Hong Kong, Smales (2011) discovers the use of ICTs by domestic workers to resist employer abuse by creating informal unions and educating workers on their rights and suitable courses of action, should they encounter abuse. Though something as mundane as a telephone may seem uninspiring, Smales' study reveals two developing themes within migration research. First, migrant agency extends well beyond the economic model; that domestic workers have taken the initiative to unionise, however informally, highlights the real welfare impacts of cultural capital accumulation – in the form of knowledge and disposition to act – that has yet to be fully fleshed out in current research. Second, there is a gradual abandonment of the tendency to caricaturise the migrant as passive and altruistic, instead recognising her potential to act on self-interest (Tacoli, 1999; Silvey, 2004, Brickell and Chant, 2010).

Where previous case studies of agency outside the economic migrant narrative recognised the subtle ways in which workers coped with exploitation and abuse, their expression of agency is largely presented as auxiliary to their subservience. By presenting ICTs as a tool exploited by domestic workers to not only resist abuse, but to unionise and excel the rigid employment systems that enable such abuse, they are afforded – theoretically at least – the capacity to leverage their own

empowerment (Mosedale, 2005). Though studies of what one might term 'self-interested migration' – especially those relating to skills training, education, and domestic work – is scant, it is in the interface between agency and self-interest that this paper might find a fitting theoretical basis for our understanding of 'self-development'.

Early examples might include Elmhirst's (1999) study of rural Indonesian women who migrate for domestic work in Java. Here, Elmhirst explains how domestic work is deeply rooted in Indonesian patron-client customs that enables a social hierarchy that is at once demeaning, but also symbolic of modernism in one's quest towards the urban metropolis. Such notions are corroborated elsewhere, especially within the Asian context (see Breman, 2010). McKay (2003), for example, notes the prevalence of Filipino domestic workers who leverage their employment status to secure relationships, marriage, and citizenship internationally, which is also compelled by 'a particular form of Americanised modernity and imaginary of romantic love' (pp. 30). Paul (2011) also reveals a hierarchy of destination desirability for migrants; at the bottom of the hierarchy are regions of known precariousness in terms of worker rights and freedoms, such as the Middle East, but at the top are countries perceived to offer superior benefits and salaries; North America is a frequent example. Furthermore, McKay's (2007) study of migrant remittances – a stronghold of altruism within the migration literature – shows how remittances may also be deployed to 'selfish' ends, such as the strategic maintenance of group memberships. Vanwey (2004) thus explains how altruistic behaviour, such as remitting wages, is also intersectional on factors such as household income, rather than a pre-given; in her study of migrant remittances, women and migrants from poorer households tend to remit on more altruistic bases those from better-off backgrounds. All of these studies highlight the importance of non-economic resources in migrant welfare. As if the black matter within the domestic labour actor-network, it is slowly being discovered.

In this vein, we may also dispel, if uncomfortably, the myth that (female) migrants are truly the altruistic pillars of the household, who may in fact harbour self-interests or aspirations of their own (Brickell and Chant, 2010). Only by recognising the capacity for migrants to act with self-interest might we begin to understand how pursuing self-development goals – through the accumulation of social and cultural capital – enables greater degrees of welfare on the migrant's own terms. To this end, this paper also owes a clear theoretical debt to Sen's (1999) *Development as Freedom*, and borrows from it ideas around freedoms of opportunity, association, and economic wellbeing. Following Sen, 'self-development' is not only concerned with tangible measures or indicators – such as wages, important

though they may be – but a more comprehensive improvement in the wellbeing of the individual in terms of self-esteem, confidence, and agency that has benefits beyond the economic or material. Moreover, Sen (2004) deploys this in practical terms of being able to increase individual ‘capabilities’. This necessarily requires us to foreground agency of the individual; where increased capabilities allows migrants to achieve higher levels of welfare, they must first be able or willing to do so. In this vein, Gong et al. (2011) finds a positive correlation between migrant agency in aspects of self-determination and mental health.

Finally, a second theoretical handicap of domestic labour research that this paper hopes to address is the apparent lack of resolution afforded on migration and its temporalities. Griffith et al. (2012) notes that, despite progress in problematizing the migratory journey, migrant temporalities are still poorly understood especially where future-oriented imaginaries are concerned.

To this end, Adam (2010) laments how social science’s ‘logic of inquiry... encompasses completed processes that have ossified into empirically accessible phenomena which can be located in a temporal frame of clock and calendar time’ (pp. 362). Indeed, the epistemological draw to the present or completed negates a meaningful understanding of how non-economic capitals accumulations impact welfare, both real and imaginary. In a migrant demographic where the future-oriented ‘do it for the family’ narrative is so prevalent (Parreñas, 2001), mere interrogation of the present without due analysis of the future is inadequate. Here, Sheller and Urry (2006) reminds us ‘time spent traveling is not dead time that people always seek to minimise’ (pp. 213). For the migrant domestic worker, her time in Singapore, however limited, is not reducible merely to the monthly remittances that she generates. We should thus conceive of the labour migrant not a rationalised unit of labour power, but the product between the abstract power of agency and the opportunities for capitals accumulation, in all its guises. In other words, by interrogating migrant self-development in a flexible migrant lifecourse framework, we might understand how their stay, however forcibly temporary, might be productive and not just in economic terms.

Though temporal analyses are generally lacking in the domestic labour migration literature, there are notable exceptions. McKay’s (2005) research into the Filipina ‘success stories’ of migrant domestic workers, for example, details the painstaking process of economic capital accumulation that gave rise to sprawling real estate investments and whole villages of migrant-funded projects. Moreover, Parreñas’ (2000, 2001, 2005) impressive corpus of migrant domestic worker ethnographies into

changing household structures, gender roles, and transnational practices also illuminate the temporality of migrant emotional labour. Outside the regional monopolies of Filipino and Indonesian domestic labour, we begin to see a trickling of lifecourse theory being co-opted into migration research. Guo et al. (2011), for instance, note the ‘bipendular flow’ of domestic workers in Beijing between the city and their rural villages that is tempered across major lifecourse events such as marriage, childbearing, and childrearing (pp. 63). Relevant insights can be also found elsewhere in the general migration literature. In her analysis of internal and international German migration, Kley (2011) finds perceived opportunity differentials to be a strong predictor of migration, however this is strongest in younger adults without children; moreover, migration is more likely to occur during lifecourse transition phases, such as from early adulthood to family formation.

Drawing from these studies, this paper will build a migrant lifecourse theory of self-development and welfare. Moreover, this paper aims to synthesise knowledge on how to maximise migrant welfare over time but makes no pretence in claiming representativeness. Given the scale and scope of this project, findings are primarily concerned with what Hart (2001: pp. 650) calls ‘‘little ‘d’ development’ – the small steps of progress in realising positive change – as opposed to ‘‘big D’ Development’ that is concerned with large-scale interventions.

## Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted from June to August 2015 at ACMI’s training centre in Hougang, Singapore. This took place between periods of volunteering to maximise researcher exposure to ACMI, its students, and the general social and learning environment.

This study uses two methods of data collection. First, short two-page surveys (n=147) were used to produce descriptive statistics regarding basic demographic data and domestic worker migration motivations. A joint exercise between this project and ACMI, some questions were not directly relevant to this study. Further questions related to the main motivations for students to attend classes at ACMI, their choice of classes, how they fund their classes at ACMI, and their main motivations for working in Singapore. Closed questions predominated and were distributed in print to maximise response rates, accessibility, and ensure respondents understood the survey’s contents (Denscombe, 2007). Possible response categories – for migration motivations and important class aspects, for example – were derived from prevailing migrant motivation as identified in the literature, as well as from general ACMI student feedback. Surveys were available in English and Bahasa Indonesia (see

annex. 1 and 2). Responses were predominantly used to inform the form and content of the second method of research: interviews.

Semi-structured interviews (n=15) were carried out after surveys and took place at ACMI's training centre. Interviews averaged 45 minutes in length and were recorded. Semi-structured interviews were chosen in order to allow respondents to discuss freely their experiences without being inhibited by a rigid interview schedule or interviewer direction; by placing the onus on respondent participation, knowledge can be discovered and theory built organically (Longhurst, 2010). Interviewees were recruited through survey responses, which included an opt-in question, as well as through general word-of-mouth; this proved to be a powerful method of interviewee recruitment where domestic workers may be reluctant to speak with strangers about their intimate migratory experiences. Interviews were purposively sampled to ensure that established migrants or any particular nationality did not dominate the sample. This is important given the report's temporal focus on migrant aspirations. Moreover, though the project does not identify nationality as a factor of migrant self-development, it is interesting nonetheless to see if there are discernible differences in how workers of different nationalities develop different aspirations.

In addition to ACMI student interviews, two interviews were also held with ACMI's executive staff – Executive Director, Timothy Karl, and Erica Low, ACMI's Training Centre Coordinator and Executive Officer – to understand how migrant behaviours have changed over time. Though ACMI enjoys a small core of loyal students and volunteers, the transience and attrition rate of students prevents us from fully understanding the changes in student demands. Interviews with ACMI's team can thus provide an overview of how the domestic worker community has changed over the years and provide insights into the operational and policy challenges that present themselves as a result.

## Data Analysis

This project subscribes to the grounded theory model of qualitative data analysis and 'bottom-up' approach to theory building (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

Survey data was digitised and compiled using Google Forms. Once compiled, basic descriptive statistics were computed and used to inform the content and structure of interview schedules (annex. 3). It should be noted that the bulk of this project's theoretical analysis is informed by interviews; surveys, in this sense, serve mainly as a contextual data source and interview discussion topic.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were processed using Atlas.ti and were subject to 'open-' and 'in vivo-' coding to 'lump' quotes by common expressions or ideas; coding was done line-by-line to maximise the resolution of data and to reduce the possibility of biased researcher inputs (Saldaña, 2013). Codes were then collated into Atlas.ti's 'network view' in order to create 'families' between codes; this allows the user to reassemble the digested data back into specific themes and concepts. In doing so, one gains a privileged perspective on the overarching themes in the data and can then analyse how those themes interact with one another. In this context, the purpose of Atlas.ti is to aid in breaking down a large textual repository of data and reassemble it into a meaningful grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

### *Ethics*

This project has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 5471/002). Throughout the research phase, participants were explicitly informed of the project purpose and aim and were free to withdraw at any time. The identities of the domestic workers interviewed have been protected by using aliases and all contact information will be deleted upon the completion of this project. Confidentiality and anonymity of interviewees and their responses have been maintained throughout the study. Surveys and interviews were conducted at the ACMI training centre on Sundays to minimise the impact of the project on workers' schedules. For the ACMI staff interviewed, they have given explicit consent to being identifiable.

### *Evaluation*

Cultural and linguistic barriers were amongst some of the major methodological issues encountered in this study. This was particularly pronounced with Burmese domestic workers: a growing population in ACMI and Singapore more generally. In practice, Burmese respondents often had different interpretations of survey questions. Burmese respondents, for example, are disproportionately more likely to say they use the skills they've acquired at ACMI for 'business'. However, upon scrutiny, it transpires that, for many Burmese workers, any profit-making activity (regardless of sustainability or duration) is understood as a 'business'. A lack of resources meant that surveys could not be translated into Burmese and workers' poor spoken English rendered interviews unviable. Though this project is not explicitly concerned with nationality, insights into how migrant aspirations intersect with nationality would be extremely valuable, especially when comparing 'established' migrant groups with the less-established. Moreover, it is also difficult to accurately predict the extent to which skills are

actively used for productive purposes as the 'self-improvement' or 'upgrading oneself' narrative seems so strong amongst the domestic worker population that responses may be subject to a social desirability bias. Finally, interviews are used as a proxy to gain, through testimony and conversation, a reconstructed longitudinal study into migrant lives by assembling together experiences at common stages of temporality. Where time constraints render a real longitudinal ethnography unviable, this paper will be mindful of the generalizability of data gained from proxy time.

## Findings and Discussion

Structured by stages of the migrant lifecourse, this section will present through testimony and recollection how self-development interacts over time to produce welfare impacts. Importantly, this paper presents three phases of 'migrant times' not in Gregorian terms but by common transitions through the migrant journey. This includes the initial adjustment for the uninitiated migrant, changing priorities of the experienced migrant, and the planned, imagined, rhetorical migrant. It is within this assemblage of migrant times that constitutes the 'migrant lifecourse'. Though these transitions are not linear, they afford a more sophisticated understanding of the migrant story on their own terms; where conventional lifecourse frameworks produces preconceived categories that may not capture the diversity of migrant experiences, 'migrant times' or the 'migrant lifecourse' is premised on finding a common denominator of migrant experiences as if to standardise time. Such a structure would allow us to interrogate the research questions within each timeframe.

After successive interviews, common linguistic and narrative patterns began to emerge. Two phrases are commonly repeated – if not as temporal indicators, then as semantically powerful conceptions of time that has since been embedded within the domestic worker vernacular – 'last time' and 'already'. The former often pronounced with a dismissive tonal inflection as if exasperated to uncover an unwanted temporal episode, and the latter usually in an energetic exclamation, 'last time' and 'already' is revealing of the temporalities of the migrant story.

For the interviewees, 'last time', it seems, is used to describe past events that have been deliberately archived and left behind; 'last time' is no longer relevant, but an episode (often negative) in migrant time that has been relegated to history. Here, it serves a dual meaning: 'last time' as temporal indicator, and the 'last time', it is hoped, for something to occur. We will use 'last time' to describe the initial adjustment period for the uninitiated, early migrant.

'Already' time, on the other hand, describes the established, experienced migrant and seems to carry with it a certain sense of accomplishment, relief, or optimism.

On filial care responsibilities: *'Yes we share already [responsibilities], it's not myself responsible for my parents but we share together'* (Interview #003-Josie), On the potential welfare benefits of skills training at ACMI: *'Because if I go back home, then I can do my own shop, because in Philippines if you know how to do all this [haircutting], I have income already'* (Interview #012-Irene). On her duration of stay in Singapore: *'Maybe until 2 years more, then I go already. I take small business maybe in Philippines'* (Interview #013-Cecile).

'Already' is often used to describe a fulfilled goal and is temporally sequenced after something that occurred 'last time'. Moreover, 'already' can also describe the future in terms of aspirations and goals. It's almost as if by uttering the adverb that the goal is half accomplished, already. The following sections presents within each of the migrant times: of 'last time', 'already' time, and 'imagined' time.

### *Last Time*

In order to understand the degree to which migrants seek self-development, it is important to first situate their migration within initial motivational contexts 'last time'.

To break the ice, interviews usually start with general small talk about migrants' family back home, their time in Singapore, and their previous employment. The familiar story of the economic migrant is corroborated here. Within survey data, 61.7% and 66.9% of respondents cite earning money and family support as their main reasons for working in Singapore respectively. Often accompanying such reasoning is the lack of 'choice'; interviewees predominantly worked in service industries as salesladies as well as in agricultural production which produced subpar wages. Only three of the fifteen interviewees worked in 'semi-skilled' professions such as an office clerk or quality control inspector in an electronics factory and even then incomes were unsatisfactory. Of those with dependants, monies are usually remitted to members of the immediate family though there are also financial drains from relatives of increasingly tenuous relation.

Interestingly, upon their initial arrival, interviewees were either single, or married/separated with children suggesting a lifecourse-migration interaction; few married women left their respective countries without first bearing a child. According to survey data, 51% of current students are single.

Though two workers reveal that they had returned home 'permanently' for the purpose of marriage, the birth children quickly necessitated a return to Singapore to generate household income. Interviewees often express their migratory calculus in terms of wage differentials. On her decision to stay or leave Indonesia, Eliza, 47, describes her ultimatum for working in Singapore: *'You must choose. If I work in Indonesia also the salary is not enough... cannot make money... then I decided myself I must go'* (Interview #001-Eliza).

Put more bluntly, Maria, 31, explains her motivation for working as a domestic worker, initially in Brunei: *'Because of poverty. I got three sisters, my father is only a farmer, and my mother is only a housewife'* (Interview #011-Maria)

Although there is an age range of over two decades between the interviewees, the vast majority are united under a common narrative: that of economic compulsion. This is particularly true for those from an agricultural background as well as those with financial dependants. Another theme uniting migrants 'last time' is the experience of the employment agency. Save for three workers who travelled to Singapore on tourist visas and exploited legal loopholes to secure employment, everyone was 'processed' through the sprawling monopoly of the transnational employment agency industry. Indeed, even for the three illegal workers, they too were reliant on agencies at some point or another to facilitate their entrance into legal employment.

Nonetheless, there are important distinctions to be made between workers despite their unity with this temporal narrative. This can be illustrated even during the stages of pre-migration, where the utility of (prospective) migrant capitals seem particularly powerful. For the social capital-rich, friends and family networks are a commons of valuable employer contacts and referrals (see Thompson, 2009). For the more cultural capital-endowed, even simple skills and knowledge can yield tremendous benefits down the line. Melody, a 37-year old Indonesian worker, for example, has been in Singapore for three and a half years. When she first came, she searched online with her sister for reliable employment agencies with the lowest fees:

*'I searching which is better, who is better. Then I asking, asking like that until I meet an agency, that 4 months only deduction, some is 7 months like that. And then I telling this one, 4 months, I choose this one... I compare also the other agency because free lodging, but I buy my own food, the other one not free lodging but free food, like that'*

(Interview #015-Melody)

**Fig. 1. Internet Employment Search**

Though domestic workers enjoy relative benefits to their migration in that their cost of travel and visa processing is initially borne of the agency, this entails several months of salary deductions once the migrant has arrived and secured employment in order to recoup the employment agency's costs plus profit. Where new migrants often command a lower initial salary, their deductions often reduce their monthly income to a minimal 'allowance' level of just tens of dollars (see TWC2, 2006). It is during this period that migrants are usually most economically vulnerable and least free to pursue capital accumulation and self-development. In a period where even minor practical considerations, such as the cost of public transport, becomes an insurmountable ordeal, this precludes a large part of basic migrant freedoms. This narrative – of entrance into Singapore, securing employment, and salary deduction – is universal across interviewed workers.

Nonetheless, through comparing agencies online, Melody managed to secure what is, by domestic labour migration standards, a very agreeable agency fee. To put Melody's advantage into perspective, the modal salary deduction period in the interview sample is six months, the upper range eight months, and 'allowances' ranged between \$10-\$50SGD a month (£5-25). With current salaries within the \$500-600SGD range, even a two-month reduction in fees represents a massive saving. In a household strategy where dependants are disproportionately reliant on migrant remittances, this has profound welfare impacts for both the migrant and her dependants (Platt et al., 2013). Time, literally, is money.

Temporally, the urgency of migration also secures Singapore as an anomaly in domestic worker destination. Where studies have looked at domestic workers' geographical 'step-migration' towards Europe and North America, which is seen as more desirable in terms of employment conditions, remuneration and potential citizenship rights (Paul, 2011), ACMI survey results show a remarkable population of domestic workers who have actually returned from other destinations, predominantly from the Middle East and Asia. Indeed, when prompted, interviewees express being drawn to Hong Kong and Taiwan, the latter is believed to offer the highest wages regionally. When asked why

Singapore was chosen instead, migratory choice behaviours are expressed temporally: *'Because Singapore is easy to find new job for the helper, because in Taiwan you have to wait also for 6 months because they do some medical. So it's really... strict, Singapore you just come'* (Interview #006-Joan)

Whilst there doesn't appear to be concrete evidence to suggest Taiwan is more difficult to enter, the general consensus is that Singapore is more accessible and therefore saves on migration time, training, and opportunity costs of foregone remittances. The active minimisation of migration time in order to maximise earnings is reminiscent of what Creswell (2006), terms 'principle of least net effort... the basic assumption that things (including people) don't move if they can help it' (pp. 29).

In this vein, we might understand migrant agency as temporally contingent along her journey; 'last time', she is free to sell her labour power on the global market with the capacity to shop around for potential destinations. Post-migration, her agency is transferred into state labour control policies in the form of deportation mechanisms, employment laws (or lack thereof), and employer bonds and levies that ensure a devolved surveillance of the 'other'. In this respect, Singapore excels par excellence and the newly-arrived migrant sees her freedoms severely curtailed.

Unsurprisingly, it is owing to these structures of what we might term 'direct precarity' – in that they directly engineer the conditions that give rise to precarious migrant times – that there is a demonstrable decline in migrant agency upon arrival. In building a proxy lifecourse by assembling migrants by age and experience, it is difficult to assess in retrospect the degree to which migrants seek self-development, but it is fair to assume that the accessibility of self-development resources is heavily impeded. For Massey (1994), this is evident of the profoundly unequal 'power geometries' that underwrite mobilities; of the migrant's relation to the flows of exchange, 'some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it' (pp. 149). Needless to say, migrants 'last time' exhibit more of the characteristics of the latter.

A lack of cultural capital – in the form of local knowledge, experience in conducting domestic chores, or information regarding employment rights – and social capital for emotional support and release further compounds migrant agency suppression. Moreover, the lack of social capital further increases isolation during a period when homesickness takes a high emotional toll. This translates into an

inability, or unwillingness, to negotiate on basic rights: *'First employer I only have 2 times a month [rest day], then the current employer they give us every Sunday off because when I get the interview I said I want every Sunday off'* (Interview #008-Lilian).

In Lilian's case, her first contract only allowed her two days off a month; in a very practical manner, this prevented her from engaging in significant degrees of self-development, despite expressing a desire to attend a cooking class. For Lilian, her only respite from on-call domestic labour was a weekly church service. This unfreedom, to paraphrase Sen (1999), is further compounded by salary deductions that render virtually all expenditures outside the employer's home impossible. In a very comprehensive manner, her social, cultural, and economic arenas of capital accumulation have been radically contracted and her capabilities quelled.

Nonetheless, it is important to note the two competing axes of migrant agency 'last time'. On the one hand, structural factors of migrant agency, whilst powerful, are themselves temporally in flux. In the case of Lilian, she came to Singapore in 2010 during a period when weekly rest days for domestic workers was not legally mandated. However, one must also understand Lilian's lack of rest days to be intersected with her own agency, or lack thereof, in pursuing a weekly day off: even when rest days were not legislated, it seemed that rest days were seen as employment perks that some workers actively bid for. Moreover, even after the weekly day off policy had been mandated, research shows that 59% of domestic workers still do not receive a weekly day off (TWC2, 2015). As a result, it is difficult to attribute causality between agency and welfare outcome, at least where 'last time' temporalities are concerned.

On the other hand, initial unwillingness to negotiate should not necessarily be read as feeble self-censorship, but also as a survival strategy. Workers 'last time' have a vested interest to acquiesce with employer demands as the sanctions against non-compliance can be severe; the threat of deportation, for example, is very real and can be deployed to devastating effect: *'I work for Korean family 3 months, then they say pack all your things and go back home lah, then I come back 2011. I go back there and apply another agency until now'* (Interview #014-Juliet).

For Juliet, her deportation back to the Philippines over miscommunications with her Korean employer meant that her previous work pass had been void; in order to re-enter Singapore, she must start from scratch and enter into a new employment contract that entails another protracted period of salary

deductions. In a similar story, Mila, a college-educated worker with a strong employment background in administrative jobs found herself hopping to and fro contracts during her initial period in Singapore. Luckily, her employers gave her the ‘release papers’ that are necessary for her to legally transfer to another employer, but the experience was tumultuous nonetheless: *‘I’ve had three employers, 1st June 15 2011 - mid July 2011. The locals not good for trusting. Very difficult for me, then adjustment is not so good’* (Interview #009-Mila)

Amalgamated within an elaborate architecture of labour control, direct precarity ensures that early – ‘last time’ – migrant agency is, for the most part, suppressed. Indeed, systems of employment agency debt repayment exhibit remarkably similar traits to debt-bonded unfree labour in the grey economy (Bales, 1999). Predictably, migrants expressed mild interest in self-development at best. Far from the wishful thinking of learning or skills training, migrants are too distracted by the notion of rapid repayment of salary deductions, savings accrual and remittance regularity that there is little room for the accumulation of other kinds of capital. This also explains why there are virtually no ‘new’ migrant (those who have arrived for less than a year) students at ACMI.

Though a point can be made for the rationalist ideal behind shying away from non-economic capital accumulation during early stages of migration, this can manifest in coping strategies that may resemble abuse. Shirley, who has only been in Singapore for a year and a half expresses: *‘Before I was so lazy to go out and don’t want to spend money, save money first. Because if you go out food, so on, and you buy something rubbish’* (Interview #004-Shirley)

Importantly, ACMI Executive Director, Timothy Karl reminds us that, for many domestic workers, simply ‘staying at home’ might be an active – and smart – decision, rather than a symptom of oppression or exploitation:

*‘Well for one thing, employers today know that the government has already legislated that the workers must have their Sunday off. So, how it plays out in the homes is sometimes the domestic workers themselves do not want to come out because they still have debts to pay and they would prefer to stay in the home and work and be compensated so that they can clear off their loans quickly’*

(Interview #016-Timothy)

**Fig. 2 Motivations for Staying at Home**

'Last time' is thus the time of the early migrant and her 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.

Relating back to the research questions, it would appear that the rationalists have won. Early migrants, it would seem, are predominantly economically motivated, if not in terms of remittance maximisation then certainly by salary deduction period minimisation. As a result, self-development priorities during initial stages of migration are low on the pecking order. For the most part, early – 'last time' – migrants recall a sense of apathy and desperation, both engendered by restrictions on physical and financial freedom that represents high barriers to self-development. To this end, 'last time' migrants are typified by a journey in flux, of salary deductions, low initial wages, and employer instability. For the few examples of welfare impacts, Melody's shopping for employment agencies is an impressive show of the real potentials of cultural capital, but which is nonetheless situated within the same system of repressive salary deduction; the degree to which she has actuated real welfare gains is therefore questionable (Mosedale, 2005).

More importantly, the 'do it for the family' sentiments tend to override more self-interested pursuits. A steep learning curve could be envisaged, especially for first-time domestic workers who attempt to maximise financial gain by rationing what little allowances they have during salary deductions, and by maximising remittances post-deduction. To an extent 'last time' is perhaps the more rationalist of the three times presented in this paper, but also counterintuitive to discover that migrants at the earliest stages of migration are also the least likely to seek self-development where, temporally speaking, they have the greatest capacity to capitalise on them.

Here, we might consider migrant agency and self-development in Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice. As an interaction between capitals, habitus, and fields, habitus, which bears resemblance to cultural capital, entails an individual's learned dispositions, mind-set, and behaviour, whereas fields describes that arena in which habitus plays out and capitals is distributed (ibid). Within this framework of practice, self-development (or at least its pursuance) is unlikely where the migrant has insufficient capital, learned subservience, and a hostile field in which direct precarities threaten during 'last time'. In other words, the conditions necessarily for self-development are simply absent. Since agency, structures and capitals develop over time, perhaps we might find more luck in the other migrant times. The next section will explore the 'already' time of established migrants.

## 'Already' Times

'Already' time is signified by fundamental changes in migrant agency as opposed to 'last time'. Here, 'already' time describes a time of relative stability, freedom, and capacity for migrant agency post-adjustment. In this time, migrant agency is capable of reaching beyond the economic because the burden of direct precarity has lessened, though never removed. As with all three proposed 'migrant times', 'already' time is not a status obtainable by the mere passing of real time. Rather, 'already' is enabled by the favourable constellations of associations within the migrant welfare actor-network. In economic terms, this might manifest as the completion of employment agency fee payments as well as her general outstanding debts, and salary increases once the migrant has established a stable and amicable working relationship with her employer. In social and cultural terms, the migrant may be more savvy in asserting herself, whether in the private space of the employer's home, or in public domains (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Whether in terms of salary deductions, their employment situation, or their general freedom and financial wellbeing, the migrant is freer than 'last time' and so is capable of entering into a new episode of self-development, all ready. Here, the practice of agency takes place largely unimpeded by field or habitus constraints.

As compared to migrant testaments of experiences 'last time', 'already' narratives are also more humanised. Where 'last time' the migrant was conceived of predominantly as a unit of labour power, for the established migrant we begin to see the diverse personalities surfacing, already. Temporally, 'already' time might manifest, for the lucky migrant, within a short space of real time whereas the less fortunate might not ever reach this phase. To varying extents, all interviewees are all 'already' in that, despite past instances of hardship, their current welfare is one that is relatively satisfactory. In a basic pecking order of needs, it thus seems intuitive to argue that migrants who are satisfied of their basic needs have a greater capacity to exert their agency on attaining higher goals and objectives. On her motivations for coming to Singapore, Josie nicely sums up this theory: *'The first thing is of course about the money, [but] if I have a chance, a little bit, so I can learn'* (Interview #003-Josie)

31-year old Irene also expresses her priorities clearly; the stabilisation of the present allows for her aspirational planning of the future. Here, self-development is tied up with ideas around future security and strategy:

*'My goal is number one is to save money, and number two studying here, learn something new here at ACMI. I looked for this very long time already! A school where I can learn something then when I go back then I can do business, things like that because before I do business I don't have knowledge at all, now yeah'*

(Interview #012-Irene)

**Fig. 3 Migrant Priorities**

Whether Irene and Josie's enthusiasm is shared amongst the rest of the domestic worker community is beyond the scope of this project. However, there seems to be a high cultural significance assigned to learning and education both in terms of perceived benefits as well as in abstract terms. Moreover, an underlying narrative of adventure and new experiences as the primary motivator for working in Singapore is also disproportionately attributable to migrants in her 'already' phase. Within survey data, 'new experiences/adventure' is expressed by a third of respondents. Lacking a longitudinal methodology, it would be interesting to investigate how much of those responses were due to social desirability bias, a retroactive claim on economic migration, or an earnest desire for 'adventure'. Understood within the migrant lifecourse, adventure and new experiences might be the luxuries afforded to those who have achieved sufficient migratory stability to allow her to pursue comfortably more self-interested endeavours. Nonetheless, for the 'already' migrants, the importance of self-development is usually expressed in terms of future income security or 'opening one's mind': *'As a domestic worker in Singapore, if you go back [home] with no skills then there's nothing... for me, it's really like I want to open my mind and I want to open a business... If you have money, you don't know how to do, how to use, also for nothing'* (Interview #001-Eliza)

Eliza's response is by no means unique; there is a strong business-oriented rhetoric within the self-development narrative that is also tied up with savings and future stability. Similarly, all interviewees expressed an interest in setting up a business upon their return. Some seem more motivated and well prepared than others; attitudes range from the casual business start-up: *'Maybe to set up a small business. Maybe a small bakery, because I like to bake'* (Interview #013-Cecile), to the serious entrepreneur: *'Making a bakery... if you make a bakery and somebody will make again, follow your business. I saw a lot of things like that already, even if you got a small stall in your house, the next time your neighbour will follow you, now the money is already not sustainable. There's a competition already'* (Interview #011-Maria).

Though business development appears to be the prevailing rhetoric of interviewees and survey respondents, it is difficult to gauge the welfare impacts of something yet to be; this will be further investigated in 'imagined' times. Nonetheless it is important to recognise the differences in agency even within the established migrants. One reason for these discrepancies is that there are significant sources of self-development outside of ACMI; migrants find sources of self-development throughout the migrant (and conventional) lifecourse whether by chance or by will. The most obvious would be formal education, but also through previous employment experiences, the urban milieu, and their social interactions in Singapore. Though many interviewees express adoration of Singapore and its 'disciplined' population, Rita seems most inspired by her experiences so far. On her business plans, Rita muses about her inspiration and the importance of marketing for a restaurant she hopes to

*Rita: here there's a lot of shop stores and sometimes they promo things, like for.. let's say GongCha [tea shop], you know they collect free stickers so people will come more, free toppings. Just simple things but people will come to you.*

*Interviewer: So learning doesn't have to be in a classroom?*

*Rita: You have to learn everywhere!*

*Interviewer: What was your reaction when you first came to Singapore?*

*Rita: I was like wow, this is a big city! Yes I was like okay, a lot of people, high buildings. In the village I was like, tiny houses like that.*

(Interview #002-Rita)

**Fig. 4 Singaporean Inspiration**

develop:

Although Rita seems highly attuned to the consumer landscape of Singapore, perhaps her greatest influence in Singapore is her employer:

*'My boss is engineer... He doesn't talk much but he always talk to me like... this is what I want to do, and he open my mind. Even he start from... mind-set. How you treat yourself, how you treat people around you. So that's what will bring you to your success. So don't think about something big. Think about little steps. How you put things properly, how you talk to people properly. Just simple things, simple acts you do, like how you hang your towels, how you do things, how you arrange things like chairs, is it straight is it not?'*

(Interview #002-Rita)

**Fig. 5 Employer Inspiration**

Of all interviewees, Rita is likely the most driven. Keen to make use of her time away from her village with ‘tiny houses’, Rita’s pursuance of self-development is highly motivated. Where ‘last time’ migrant temporalities might conceive of employers as a potential risk, Rita’s example also shows how that can be a productive risk. Here, there is a point to be made about the differences in migrant agency across the conventional lifecourse during ‘already’ time. Though the previous section showed how ‘last time’ migrants are, on the whole, unwilling or unable to pursue self-development, there is an observable pattern amongst migrant drive and agency once (if) they reach ‘already’ time. For Rita, 28 and single, her ambition and drive for self-development tends to excel that of older ‘already’ time migrants. During the ‘last time’ frame, migrant agency is, more or less, quashed across the sample. However, once allowed to blossom beyond initial structural confines, agency becomes more intersectional on factors such as experience, inspiration, age, and household obligations.

To this end, another source of discrepancy for migrant agency in pursuing what we might know as directly ‘productive’ capitals – such as business skills – might be due to an inherent methodological fault for assuming that migrants remain economically motivated: a remnant of the ‘last times’. For some migrants, their time at ACMI is not compelled solely by the desire to learn, but rather to satisfy basic human needs such as socialising. On this, Timothy remarks:

*‘They’re [domestic workers] not really here to improve themselves to very high standards. They’re here in the STC to find some basic skills, and to make friends, and to build a community. And that’s what we’re going to focus on. So it’s not really making it content-heavy, it’s just allowing them to improve their capabilities... After all, they’re the ones who are going to spend their two precious Sundays in a month at our schools so we should give them what they are asking for, rather than what we think they need’*

(Interview #016-Timothy)

**Fig. 6 ACMI’s offer**

Though this paper looks at self-development as the acquisition of skills that allows migrants to negotiate their welfare across time and space, it is clear that educational ‘skills’ represent just one dimension of welfare. 88.5% of survey respondents cite ‘learning new skills’ to be their motivator for joining ACMI, accompanied by 30.2% who cite ‘making new friends’ as an important aspect. Where Bourdiesian capitals see an inevitability for social and cultural capital to be converted or reducible to economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), this represents a methodological impasse; for the migrant worker, her social pursuits at ACMI can be a welfare good, in and of itself.

Moreover, insofar as this paper investigates the welfare impact of non-economic capitals accumulation, welfare outcomes are expressed mainly in terms of the material, in objectified

economic resources such as wages or savings (Bourdieu, 1986). However, in practice, it is difficult to fully separate the accumulation of cultural and social capital in migrant self-development much less express such accumulation in absolute economic terms; they are at once mutually constitutive and mediated through one another. This manifests in the word-of-mouth marketing and recruitment of ACMI students as well as the bricolage of favours and exchanges that result from migrant learning; it is not uncommon for students to offer to do someone's makeup in return for getting a haircut, for example. In this vein, self-development is not understood nor expressed exclusively in economic terms; welfare thus extends beyond the material.

Cecile, for example, recalls how her initial time in Singapore was marked by timidity and low self-esteem. Here, self-development can yield real impacts on one's psychological welfare of belonging and selfhood: *'Yeah, learning is confident to myself, it's like I know how to stand on my own'* (Interview #013-Cecile). To that end, Shirley concedes the importance of learning for one's identity: *'Yes it's very important for me. As a Filipino, for me I don't want to be a housemaid for my whole life. I want to grow up also'* (Interview #004-Shirley).

Shirley's conflation of learning and 'growing up' is interesting and concurs with the tendency for domestic workers to self-deprecate, especially on racial and employment grounds. Moreover, the desire to grow up 'also' should be understood within a context of highly gendered household strategies that tend to prioritise the development of male offspring:

*Interviewer: You said you dropped your dreams for your brother, what was your dream?*

*Marina: I wanted also, I want to be a lawyer, it's so sad. It's okay. So now it's okay, because it's almost 5 years also, I will accept it, every time I confront my brother, my mother will get upset about it. My relationship with my brother is okay, I will drop it, just do it for my mother.*

(Interview #010-Marina)

**Fig. 7 Dropping Dreams**

For Marina, she had worked in Manila as a domestic worker for almost 10 years before she came to Singapore in order to subsidise her brother's college education. In her household strategy, the development of her brother was prioritised over hers and this entailed her 'dropping' her dreams. Despite this, her brother got married soon after he finished college and quickly had a family of his own, thus failing to produce the household income that Marina's family had hoped for.

In both Marina and Shirley's testimonies, skills training at ACMI seems to be an attempt not only to 'upgrade' oneself, but also to make up for lost time. The desire to grow up 'also' is referential to the sacrifice of their own development for the sake of their dependants before, during, and probably long after their migratory journeys. This is not to pander to the altruism rhetoric; in fact, there is an active undertone that they are deserving of an education, especially when so much of their own development is diverted temporally and economically for the development of others; it's high time they had a share of what it means to 'grow up'. Ricoeur's (1992) theory of narrative identity is relevant here. For Ricoeur, identity is managed through the calculated assemblage of discordant experiences, stories, actions and counterfactuals that express one's selfhood across a given temporality. Applied here, both Marina and Shirley's time at ACMI therefore aims to rectify, however partially, past opportunity costs and to allow them to 'grow up' just as education is understood as a major transition period within a conventional lifecourse model. By 'dropping' her dreams, and thus her education, Marina's lifecourse narrative is incomplete or, at the very best, in progress. Her learning at ACMI is therefore also a symbolic act of narrative rectification, as if to fill in the missing gaps within her own narrative identity.

In more practical terms, skills accumulation has also enabled dramatic improvements in migrants' working relationships with their employers. This is particularly pronounced when it comes to basic conversational English skills. Recalling her inability to converse with her employer 'last time', Melody talks about the importance of ACMI's English class for her:

*Melody: It's important... before I can't talk, my madam telling to me 'why you cannot talk'? ... Then asking me what? What you want to tell? Like that...*

*Interviewer: Has that improved your relationship with your employer?*

*Melody: Yes! If I'm talking, I want to telling... what are you doing? She telling to me like that, I talking talking also*

(Interview #015-Melody)

**Fig. 8 Importance of Language**

For Melody, breaking the impasse of being able to hold a simple conversation has not only transformed her workplace into a more hospitable environment, but also raised her self-esteem, where she felt 'ashamed' before. Though it has been argued that non-economic capitals can be goods in and of themselves without the need for economic abstraction, Eliza has nonetheless taken the initiative to capitalise on her cultural capital: *'If you have experience you have to sell your experience for more pay, higher salary. If you just work one employer, they will increase your salary*

*until how many years so you don't want to move... my boss pay me is \$450.. for second employer, she started \$450, then after 1 year increase me \$25 every one year, become like \$550.. then \$550 I increase myself'* (Interview #001-Eliza)

In 'already' time, the structures that once stifled migrant agency and welfare are more pliable, able to be manipulated to produce spaces of negotiation and empowerment. Just as Rita chanced upon her employer who has proven to be a source of inspiration for her, so the productive risk of the migrant actor-network constellations can be mobilised for gain. By all measures, Eliza is a veteran domestic worker. Having been in Singapore for 15 years, Eliza has changed employers three times, predominantly on the basis of getting higher pay. In this vein Eliza is the perfect example of Bourdieu's (1986) 'embodied' cultural capital: those internalised and lasting dispositions that manifest in confidence and will, in agency and self-determination that translates to tangible economic welfare.

That such a strategy has not been corroborated elsewhere in the interview sample, or indeed in the literature, it would seem, points to two lessons of migrant welfare. First, as Barber and Bryan (2012) points out, the degree to which the domestic labour market has been commodified negates the economic potential for return on investment into skills or qualifications. Thus, for all intents and purposes, Eliza is an anomaly both in her agency and her ability to extract surplus value from her cultural capital, rather than transfer it as value-added resources to labour buyers. Second, although the economic aspect of migration remains a strong priority for workers throughout migrant times, it is clear that migrants in 'already' time are not profit maximisers; interviewees show remarkable inertia towards the prospect of negotiating higher wages.

Bourdieu's (1986) conception of capitals conversion partially explains this. For Bourdieu, the conversion of social or cultural capital into economic capital is, at its heart, a zero-sum transaction; for every abstract unit of economic gain, there must also be a cost. For the migrant, this cost might be the amicable relationship they have with their employers. Eliza seems readily accepting of these costs: *'Last time I from the certificate at ACMI I put in the agency there can also promotion at the employer so the girl is very nice, good record. Actually last time my salary was very low so I interviewed this my employer, I increased myself [salary]'* (Interview #001-Eliza)

Nonetheless for majority of other interviewees, these costs are not worth bearing. A major theme within 'already' time is that of employment stability, there seems to be a consensus that, by bringing up the issue of money or salaries, the migrant is needlessly rocking the boat: *'Why you need to ask?*

*As long as they [employers] are good, they don't scold me, they don't ask me what I do, nagging me, I don't care about the money as long as.. for me as long as I can give money for my mother, okay fine...*' (Interview #010-Marina).

This is understandable, within the stabilised 'already' time, there appears to be strong relationships between the workers and their employers: *'The Canadians [employers] are very good to me, actually I love them... They treat me like I'm family, I eat with them, especially the dinner. They don't like to eat it if I didn't eat with them. We sit on the table, the chair, like the family you know?'* (Interview #007-Agatha).

In the same way one might be reluctant to talk money with close friends or family, so too are domestic workers, for the most part, unwilling to profit maximise on their cultural capitals for fear of harming the relationship with their employers. Indeed, the love and intimacy that some workers share with their employers in the case of the Juliet overrides her compulsion to return to her own family in the Philippines: *'I don't want to leave Singapore, I don't want to leave mam [employer] because she's the only one home, so I will take care lah!'* (Interview #014-Juliet)

Here, migrant welfare extends beyond the accumulation of skills and knowledge but, rather by accident, workers develop close bonds with their employers such that it overrides the profit motive, at least in the realms of employment. To this end, it must also be understood that sustained and stable relationships might produce higher overall net welfare for the migrant and so there is an inherent interest to stay put. Maria, for example, gets paid \$480SGD a month, but knows this to be below average: *'I know that salary right now is \$550-600, but I'm thinking if I change employer, I don't know if my life is the same, if I can use the phone, if I can sleep better, if I can have the rest'* (Interview #011-Maria).

For many domestic workers like Maria, or those with poor experiences of employment in Singapore, employment stability is a premium that should not be sacrificed hastily. Unlike Eliza who seems more fearless in her pursuit of salary maximisation, Maria's reluctant to seek higher pay must not be understood as meekness but a reluctance to return to a state of precarity like 'last time'. By flirting with the migrant welfare actor-network, the migrant is gambling that the risk will pay off; most find this risk unnecessary and undesirable. Indeed, it wouldn't be wholly accurate to say that migrants disregard economic capital altogether; where Maria seems laissez-faire concerning her below-average salary, she also takes extreme measures to reduce her expenditures in Singapore. As a result, to

understand the degree to which self-development leads to welfare, it must first be understood that the two are not linear or inevitable, nor is welfare a one dimensional good.

### *'Imagined' Times*

Where the last two chapters explored 'last time' and 'already' time in terms of migrants' pursuit of self-development and welfare, 'imagined', future times will look predominantly at the latter. Since we are seeking to understand the yet-to-be, analyses of welfare are necessarily seated within an aspirational narrative. This section will thus meditate upon how migration aspirations are imagined, the inherent issues that underlie these imaginations, and the role that self-development plays in realising these aspirations.

Unlike during 'already' times where migrant welfare seems a multidimensional pursuit, imagined times see a rhetorical return to 'last time's' economic migrant narrative of migration-utility maximisation. However, unlike 'last time' where utility maximisation inhibited self-development, it is within 'already' and 'imagined' times that demand for self-development peaks as if preparing for the future. There are two possible reasons for this.

First, workers are aware of their enforced temporariness as workers in Singapore; that return is an inevitability, there is a strong desire not to return home 'empty handed'; this is particularly pronounced in reference to migrant dependants. On her motivation to accrue savings, Agatha explains: *'I am a single mother so I need to save for money for them, especially for their future, for our future'* (Interview #007-Agatha). Here, the fate of the migrant and her dependants are entwined; Agatha's relative risk as a single mother with constrained household strategy is thrown into sharp temporal relief, further necessitating careful, strategic planning. These sentiments are corroborated with near universality within interviews; vast majority of interviewees cite the need for something 'to go back to'. To give context to these claims, Douglass (2012) reminds us that the gradual privatisation of household risk through reconfigured systems of household reproduction and retrenchment of state welfare means that, upon return, migrants without savings, durable assets, or passive income-generating investments will likely find themselves in a state of increased precarity.

Second, 'last time' and 'imagined time' are not only the temporal extremes of the migrant lifecourse but also the extremes of welfare, both real and imagined. Since 'last time' is the temporal episode most associated with hardship and repression, it is held in diametric opposition to the 'imagined' where futures are often painted vividly, if not over-optimistically. As Adam (2010) explains, 'contemporary daily life... is conducted in the temporal domain of open and fluid pasts and futures,

mindful of the lived past and projectively oriented towards the 'not yet' (pp. 361-362). In fear of returning to conditions of 'last time', the appeal to the economic rhetoric is symbolic of migrants' desire for 'progress' and a reluctance to return to precarity. This often entails long-term economic strategies such as saving to prepare for: *'the future, [if] I have no money and I don't want to come back here and work as a maid forever'* (Interview #02-Rita).

Though one may progress beyond 'last time', its threat is omnipresent within the migrant imaginary; we might therefore consider 'last time' to be simply the time of maximum precarity. Moreover, for the migrant, her return to the economic is an appeal for progress beyond her 'temporal domain' (ibid: pp. 362): *'I want to be rich because I grow up, and my children struggle like me, I don't want that to happen to my children'* (Interview #002-Rita). Here, the threat of 'last time' extends beyond the immediate temporality of the migrant; barring the development of a rugged post-migration income strategy, Douglass' (2012) notion of 'householding' may necessitate similar migratory journeys and experiences for the next generation. This is something that interviewees want to avoid at all costs.

In terms of how the economic model manifests in 'imagined' times, interviewees predictably cite business development as a future income generation strategy, as well as investments into more durable goods such as a house or land. Though there are strong, rational reasons for a return to the migration model, so too is 'imagined' time tied to the present. This paper has thus far separated the migrant lifecourse into 'last time', 'already', and 'imagined' times; Adam's (2010) contention that temporalities are fluid such that the future, is in part, constituted by the 'lived past' (pp. 362) reminds us that those temporal domains, although idiosyncratic of migrant welfare in phases of experiential time, are ultimately constitutive of one migrant lifecourse. Where 'last time' migrants experienced direct precarity through relatively visible structural disadvantage and control, migrants of 'imagined' times face another kind of precarity: one of complacency.

In practice, despite the return to the economic narrative when discussing 'imagined' times, interviewees seem to wilfully pave over the risks inherent in their 'imagined' times either out of ignorance or social desirability. Take two examples: Marina and Melody. For Marina, the death of her father in 2008 has meant that the vast majority of her wages since have been remitted to her mother out of her desire to 'spoil' her. As a result, Marina is only capable of saving \$50SGD every two months, this in spite of her self-declared aspiration to accrue sufficient savings to allow her to obtain a teaching qualification. For Melody, about a third of her \$550SGD salary is saved for the eventual purchase of a house, although she often saves more if household demands back in Indonesia are less taxing.

Here, both workers have pursued self-development activities in Singapore and both do regularly save money, albeit in different amounts. For Melody, her 'imagined' time of purchasing a house is grounded in her conventional lifecourse of providing for her daughters and to have a durable asset; she plans to leave Singapore within five years. For Marina, her 'imagined' time of accruing savings

in order to study for a teaching qualification fits with the 'return to the economic' narrative as compelled by the need for the generation of future incomes; she plans to leave Singapore in two years. Here, social desirability may play a part in crafting narratives that do not seem wholly sustainable, at least in Marina's case where negligible levels of savings negates any meaningful engagement with her own aspiration. This seemed to be a common theme within interviews; when asked about aspirations, savings, and the planned duration of their stay in Singapore, there appears to be a brutal mismatch between expectations, or aspirations, and their economic reality.

Thus far, self-development has been upheld as a means of improving migrant welfare; self-development does not entail welfare as an inevitable end, but also self-development can also be a good in and of itself in the forms of embodied cultural capital. Throughout the paper, evidence for the welfare impact of self-development has been presented. However, if, for the sake of 'imagined' times, we return to the economic model, then it also entails a return to the matter of agency, as with 'last time'. The great variations in migrant agency in pursuing their aspirations, superficially uniform as they may seem, precludes any concrete causality between migrant self-development and agency. Here, we return to Sen's (2004) notion of capabilities. For Sen, capabilities represent the attainable opportunities available to a person; if we consider cultural capital accumulation to be a way of 'opening doors', then self-development might produce greater opportunities for the migrant. However, that there are more doors does not make the migrant any more likely to walk through them. Whilst there are examples of success stories in the making within the interview sample – predictably Rita is one of them, as well as Maria – these stories seem to be anomalies rather than the norm. For both Rita and Maria, their success is premised on continued diligence and commitment to their migratory cause that cannot simply be reduced to agency alone. Rather, their 'success' is the temporal manifestation of agency, capitals, the social milieu, and luck. Throughout the proposed migrant lifecourse framework – 'last time', 'already' time, and 'imagined' time – there appears to be a slow divergence in migrant capabilities. From the unifying experience of structural constraints on agency during 'last time', to the differential exercise of sociocultural capitals gained from 'already' times, and finally the aspiration, yet to be affirmed 'imagined' time, the propensity for welfare slowly departs from one of assuredness to one that is increasingly contingent and uncertain.

## Conclusion

Findings revealed a very strong temporal dimension to both migrant pursuance of self-development and welfare; early migrants were primarily occupied with the accumulation of economic capital (or more accurately, the minimisation of economic expenditure). This proved counterintuitive; data shows that there is considerable scope for capitals conversion between the cultural and economic. Where migrants are concerned with economic utility, one would expect more interest in self-development, though this must also be understood within the stifling structures of agency inhibition during early stages of migration. Moreover, as migrants progress from periods of uncertainty and precariousness to ones of stability, migrants seem less concerned with economic utility. As results show, some migrants actively choose not to profit maximise through the negotiation of wages even if their capitals allow them to do, instead opting for 'safer' options such as staying with employers who pay sub-average wages; this is a testament to the comfort of safety.

In a way, this project's findings are an amalgam of existing literature on foreign domestic workers who are at once structurally disempowered (Anderson, 2000), but also capable of accruing welfare and capitals to better their position, whether socially or economically (Constable, 2007). Nonetheless, where existing literature tends to conceptualise the migrant as either/or, in zero-sums of agency, this project has illustrated how migrant subjectivities are profoundly temporal constructs. The empowered and agential are not anomalies, they are the same people, just at different stages of migrant time. To this end, this paper has not exactly unravelled domestic labour migration as it has problematized it further.

Overall, this paper contributes to a small, but growing, body of literature on migrant temporalities that has significant policy implications (Griffiths et al., 2012). Specifically concerned with migrant welfare, a more nuanced understanding of how migrant motivations, priorities, and factors of inhibition develop over time, we are better equipped with temporally-targeted policies. In the case of self-development at ACMI, for example, services and classes can be targeted effectively at newly-arrived or inexperienced group as a means of streamlining the adjustment process during 'last time' – the migrant time period most associated with hardship and agency inhibition. From an immigration perspective, relevant authorities should be lobbied to ease the terms of repayment for employment agency debt. Such issues have been raised elsewhere (TWC2, 2006), and this report contributes to the debate by demonstrating the strong relationship between debt repayment and migrant welfare. Premised on Sen's (2004) capability framework, this paper does not make the case that self-

development, or indeed the suggested policies, guarantees welfare, but rather it allows for the maximisation of migrant capabilities to achieve welfare on their own terms.

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## Annexes

### Annex 1. Sample Survey (English)

This survey is intended to gather the opinions of ACMI's members about their experiences with ACMI's classes. We would like to understand more about what students like or dislike about ACMI's classes, and how they use the skills they have learnt. This survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. All information will be kept safe. Responses will be anonymous and confidential.

#### About you

1) Name:

\_\_\_\_\_

2) Age:

\_\_\_\_\_

3) Nationality:

- |                  |                          |                 |                          |
|------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| a) Philippines   | <input type="checkbox"/> | e) Sri Lanka    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) Indonesia     | <input type="checkbox"/> | f) Cambodia     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) Burma/Myanmar | <input type="checkbox"/> | g) Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d) India         | <input type="checkbox"/> |                 |                          |

4) How long have you been working as a domestic worker?

\_\_\_\_\_

5) How long have you been working in Singapore?

\_\_\_\_\_

6) Have you ever worked as a domestic worker in another country? If yes, where?

- |                  |                          |                 |                          |
|------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| a) Europe        | <input type="checkbox"/> | d) Middle East  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) North America | <input type="checkbox"/> | e) Asia         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) South America | <input type="checkbox"/> | f) Other: _____ |                          |

7) What is your relationship status?

- |             |                          |                      |                          |
|-------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| a) Single   | <input type="checkbox"/> | d) Widowed           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) Married  | <input type="checkbox"/> | e) Prefer not to say | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) Divorced | <input type="checkbox"/> |                      |                          |

#### About ACMI

8) What classes do you take at ACMI? Tick all that apply.

- |                        |                          |                 |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| a) Baking              | <input type="checkbox"/> | f) Dressmaking  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) Wellness and Beauty | <input type="checkbox"/> | g) English      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) Caregiving          | <input type="checkbox"/> | h) Hairdressing | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d) Computer            | <input type="checkbox"/> | i) Business     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e) Culinary            | <input type="checkbox"/> | j) Other: _____ |                          |

9) How long have you been taking classes at ACMI?

- |              |                          |              |                          |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| a) 0-1 year  | <input type="checkbox"/> | c) 2-3 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) 1-2 years | <input type="checkbox"/> | d) 3+ years  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

10) Do you take education classes outside of ACMI? If yes, where?

- |       |                          |                               |  |
|-------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| a) No | <input type="checkbox"/> | b) Yes, please specify: _____ |  |
|-------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|--|

## Annex 2. Sample Survey (Bahasa Indonesia)

Survei ini dilakukan untuk mengetahui pendapat anggota ACMI tentang pengalaman selama mengikuti kelas ACMI. Kami ingin memahami lebih jauh apa yang disukai dan kurang disukai para peserta kelas ACM dan bagaimana para peserta menggunakan ketrampilan yang telah dipelajari. Diperlukan kurang dari 10 menit untuk melengkapi survei ini. Seluruh informasi yang diberikan akan dijaga sebaik-baiknya. Jawaban akan disampaikan tanpa nama dan dijaga kerahasiaannya

### Tentang Anda

1) Nama:

\_\_\_\_\_

2) Usia:

\_\_\_\_\_

3) Kewarganegaraan :

- |                  |                          |                 |                          |
|------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| a) Filipina      | <input type="checkbox"/> | e) Sri Lanka    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) Indonesia     | <input type="checkbox"/> | f) Kamboja      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) Burma/Myanmar | <input type="checkbox"/> | g) Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d) India         | <input type="checkbox"/> |                 |                          |

4) Berapa lama Anda telah bekerja sebagai asisten rumah tangga?

\_\_\_\_\_

5) Berapa lama Anda telah bekerja di Singapura?

\_\_\_\_\_

6) Apakah Anda pernah bekerja sebagai asisten rumah tangga di negara lain? Jika Ya, dimana

- |                    |                          |                   |                          |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| a) Eropa           | <input type="checkbox"/> | d) Timur Tengah   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) Amerika Utara   | <input type="checkbox"/> | e) Asia           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) Amerika Selatan | <input type="checkbox"/> | f) Lainnya: _____ |                          |

7) Apakah status pernikahan Anda?

- |                  |                          |                         |                          |
|------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| a) Belum menikah | <input type="checkbox"/> | d) Janda                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) Menikah       | <input type="checkbox"/> | e) Tidak ingin menjawab | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) Cerai         | <input type="checkbox"/> |                         |                          |

8) Kelas apa saja yang Anda ikuti di ACMI? Jawaban boleh lebih dari satu.

- |                                   |                          |                   |                          |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| a) Membuat roti                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | f) Menjahit       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) Perawatan tubuh dan Kecantikan | <input type="checkbox"/> | g) Bahasa Inggris | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) Pengasuhan                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | h) Tata rambut    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d) Komputer                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | i) Bisnis         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e) Kuliner                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | j) Lainnya: _____ |                          |

9) Berapa lama Anda telah mengikuti kelas di ACMI?

- |              |                          |                       |                          |
|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| a) 0-1 tahun | <input type="checkbox"/> | c) 2-3 tahun          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) 1-2 tahun | <input type="checkbox"/> | d) lebih dari 3 tahun | <input type="checkbox"/> |

10) Apakah Anda mengikuti kelas pelatihan lain di luar ACMI? Jika Ya, dimana?

- |          |                          |                        |  |
|----------|--------------------------|------------------------|--|
| a) Tidak | <input type="checkbox"/> | b) Ya, sebutkan: _____ |  |
|----------|--------------------------|------------------------|--|

11) Kelas apa yang paling Anda sukai?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *Annex 3. Sample Interview Schedule*

#### **FDW interview schedule**

Tell me about your family background

- Where do you live?
- What does your family do?
- How did you come to Singapore? Why did you come?
- Do you support anyone back home?
- Do you have siblings?
- How is the responsibility shared between you?
- What is your current relationship status?

What was your previous employment and educational history?

How important is ACMI to you?

- Who pays for you to attend?
- How did you hear about ACMI?
- What classes do you take at ACMI?
- How do you use your skills that you have learnt at ACMI?
- Has that had an impact on your time in Singapore?

#### **Extra notes:**

How important is it to workers that their migration has value-added components such as qualifications or skills?

To what extent do migrants actively seek out value-added components?

Particular to educational classes, is there a measurable impact on migrant welfare? E.g. do financial education classes lead to greater levels of migrant economic stability?