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# Care and Control in Asian Migrations<sup>1</sup>

Mark Johnson and Johan Lindquist

## Abstract:

This article takes the relationship between care and control as a starting point for ethnographically approaching the dynamics of Asian migrations. The pairing of care and control offers an entry-point for describing how migration takes shape through the historical development of entangled relationships—ranging from the supportive to the coercive—rather than strictly through dyadic relationships, social networks, structural forces, or as an effect of push-pull factors. Asian migration is thus approached as a socio-political field that is shaped through emerging forms of care and control. As such, the article approaches care “as an expansion” through “the pursuit of connections” (Yates-Doerr 2014), which is shaped and constrained, for instance, by the state, market, social relations, brokers, and fellow travellers.

Keywords: migration, Asia, care, control

## Introduction

The aim of this special issue is to bring ethnographic theorizing to bear on the relationship between care and control in the context of Asian migrations. The pairing of care and control offers an entry-point for describing how migration takes shape through the historical development of entangled relationships—ranging from the supportive to the coercive—rather than strictly through dyadic relationships, social networks, structural forces, or as an effect of push-pull factors. Asian migration is thus approached as a socio-political field that is shaped through emerging forms of care and control. As such, the special issue aims to approach care “as an expansion” through “the pursuit of connections” (Yates-Doerr 2014). This pursuit is an

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essential part of the migration process, but shaped and constrained, for instance, by the state, market, social relations, brokers, and fellow travellers.

Asia has historically been characterized by long-distance migration centered on the expansion of markets, from extensive networks of precolonial trade to the rise of Chinese overseas sojourners. Most notably, at the height of the colonial era and with the advent of industrial capitalism in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the growing demand for natural resource extraction led to the intensifying circulation of coolie labor and a “mobility revolution” across Asia. While migration slowed during the middle part of the twentieth century with the Great Depression, World War II, decolonialization, and the rise of the new nation-states, during the past few decades a second mobility revolution has followed in the wake of the Asian Tiger economies, the Middle Eastern oil boom, widespread urbanization, neoliberalization, and, most recently, the ascendance of China and India (Amrith 2011).

In line with these broad historical transformations and the focus of this special issue, more specific themes such as the recent feminization of migration (e.g. Parreñas 2001), the enduring importance of brokerage (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012; McKeown 2012), and the rise of new communication and surveillance technologies are of particular importance. The widely-discussed rise of migration for domestic work and international “care chains” has drawn attention to the commodification and contradictions of care as women have left their own families behind to work for others (Hochschild 2000, Parreñas 2001). More generally, from the colonial coolie trade to contemporary international migration, migrants have been escorted across and beyond the region, either as a means of economic profit, through social networks, or a combination of both. Travelling alone has often been considered strange and even dangerous across Asia, thus creating a demand for escort and brokerage (cf. Lindquist 2018). Finally, the rise of new digital technologies, ranging from smartphones, to cameras and biometrics, has not only allowed for the potential of more intensive communication and care between individuals geographically divided, but also expansive forms of surveillance by states, employees, and family members left behind (Madianou and Miller 2012, McKay 2017, Lee, Johnson & McCahill 2018), developing in tandem with the proliferation of borders within nation-states (cf. Balibar 1998). Together, the centrality of escort and brokerage, the rise of a

feminized international market of domestic labor, and the proliferation of new technologies, illustrate the entangled relationships between care and control in Asian migrations.

### **Engaging with Care and Control**

In recent decades, care has developed as a major theme in fields such as psychology (Gilligan 1982) and political theory (Tronto 1993) across the humanities and social sciences (see Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) for a review). Within anthropology and sociology this has been evident, for instance, in studies of emotional and intimate labor (Hochschild 1983, Constable 2009, Boris and Parreñas 2010) and of occupations such as nursing—as care and cure, nurses and physicians, came to be contrasted in the context of clinical hierarchies (Chambliss 1996). In this process, and with the rise of feminist theorizing and science and technology studies, care has come to be valorized as a gendered and situated form of labor and knowledge (Haraway 1988, Mol et al. 2010). More recently, care has become an entry-point for approaching the reformulation of social relations in a neoliberal era characterized by the crisis of the welfare state and associated forms of dispossession (Garcia 2010, Han 2011, Muehlbach 2012), but in practical terms at times a means of reinforcing inequality in the name of the alleviation suffering, as in the case of *sans papier* in France (Ticktin 2011). The centrality of care has also evolved through Foucault’s notions of pastoral power and the care of the self, which in different ways highlight the links between power, knowledge, and subjectivity as well as care and control (Foucault 1983, 1987). As Burovoy and Zhang (2017: 2) have put it more generally, “theories of governmentality have shed light on the fine line between care or nurturance and control, repression, and manipulation.”

Care can thus clearly be approached from a wide range of perspectives and at its most expansive may be defined as, “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Fisher and Tronto 1990: 40). In her recent book, *Matters of Care*, Puig de la Bellacasa highlights three dimensions: labor/work, affect/affections, and ethics/politics, which are not neatly integrated and that are often in tension with one another, thus illuminating the “ambivalent terrains of care” (2017: 5). In relation to the focus of this special issue, Puig de la Bellacasa’s perspective is

particularly instructive with regard to the iconic discussions surrounding the dramatic rise of domestic worker migration in Asia in the 1980s, which came to open up a transnational space of inquiry.

Initially, influential research came to highlight the commodification and political economy of women's care work in the context of global inequality through the focus on global care chains and deficits (Hochschild 2000, Parreñas 2000). Work in that area has increasingly attended to the ways that care regimes are shaped both by increasing demand for care and domestic workers and by different systems that seek to promote, regulate and control the movement of people who provide that care (Rodriguez 2010, Michel and Peng 2017). Scholars have also attempted to nuance this perspective both by attending to shifting gender dynamics that include men and masculinity (Pingol 2001, Johnson 2017, Locke 2017) and by moving beyond the dyadic focus on chains and labor, for instance highlighting the "circulation" and "asymmetrical reciprocal exchange" of care within transnational families that have developed with increasing migration flows (Baldassar and Merla 2014: 6, see also Minh, Zavoretti, and Tronto 2017). There has thus been a growing recognition that migrants, women and men, are both providers and recipients of care across a complex transnational landscape.

In other words, rather than focusing on either care chains or the circulation of care, the articles in this special issue attempt to retain the ambivalent terrains of care and control through an ethnographic approach that does not take these concepts for granted. The specific ethnographic approach put forward here draws together three methodological strands, as follows: First, it follows feminist theorising that challenges presumed universal definitions and instead posits an ethics of care as arising within, rather than preceding, the particularities of people's everyday practices and relations (Walker 2007). This is akin to a shift of attention that Borneman has identified, away from reified categories such as gender and kinship "to a concern for the actual situations in which people experience the need to care and be cared for and to the political economies of their distribution" (2001: 43).

Secondly, the articles in this issue critically extend our understanding of care and control through the development of ethnographic theory that not only investigates the "conceptual disjuncture"

between their categorical separation and their lived proximity but also treats them as, and puts them into conversation with, other “stranger-concepts” (Graeber and da Col 2011: vii). Thus, the articles not only attend to people’s everyday practices and the wider political economies of care, but also build on a broad body of anthropological research across Asia that addresses themes such as brokerage, patronage and power (e.g. Anderson 1990; Geertz 1980; Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012; Shah 2013; Piliavsky 2014). For instance, Benedict Anderson’s (1990) classic study of Javanese power is centered on the regulation of the body and emotions rather than on the control of territory or modes of governance. This body of work suggests that care and control, or vulnerability and power, are mutually intertwined in a variety of culturally inflected ways that point beyond the historical sociology of institutions and organizations. This is not to suggest that there exists an unchanging set of ideas that shape people’s understandings across the region. Rather it is that anthropological concepts distilled out of specific ethnographic encounters create opportunities for unravelling preconceptions, in this case about care and control, through juxtaposition with other ethnographic categories and more or less recognizable images, positions and practices in order to offer both fresh vantage points and disclose new and different sorts of relations.

Finally, by recognizing that care and control are in practice constantly intertwined and in tension we allow our ethnographic articles to generate a more complex understanding of the ethics of mobility. The papers in the volume disclose a variety of subjectivities and ethical relationships. These are forms of being and relatedness that are especially on the move in the contemporary moment and that engender questions about emergent practices of care of self and others (Rudnyckyj 2009) amid parallel concerns and queries about new forms of socio-economic abandonment (Povinelli 2011). More generally, dislocating care and control allows us to disconcert the a priori ethical divide that characterize contemporary academic and public discussions and debates concerning migration, which traffic in polarised categories of more and less controlling states and more and less caring people.

With these discussions in mind, the articles in this special issue ask how care is reshaped and, indeed, comes to reshape migration and mobility in processes of border-crossing and cultural translation, thus aligning ourselves with the well-known critique of the sedentarist bias of the

social sciences (Sheller and Urry 2006). The mobilities paradigm emerged out of the concerns to understand new social worlds from the 1990s onwards, as mobile peoples around the world compelled the dislocation of social scientific imaginaries regarding social worlds, not least that which has been termed “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). In this process, social networks were increasingly conceived as on the move, characterised by movement of peoples and alterations of social and familial institutions and relationships. Yet it is also salient that many of the migratory stories featured in the special issue recount viewpoints of stasis—from people whose migratory journey is characterised by being stuck, or who experience curtailments to their freedom of movement or life choices (Carling 2002).

Mobility disconcerts and reveals naturalised assumptions about the appropriate place, forms and organisation of care. In the broad range of ethnographic studies in this special issue care and control are intertwined and entangled in the infrastructures and institutions that make, shape and constrain people’s movements, thus highlighting our expansive understanding of care (Yates-Doerr 2014). Through an ethnographic engagement with different forms of migration we attempt to describe the modalities of care that emerge in this process. We especially consider people’s everyday practices, relations and encounters en route—in and across places of origin and settlement, as well as digital worlds they inhabit and engage with. Together, the papers disclose varied networks and material assemblages amidst a range of affective, embodied and cultural practices that constitute and enable diverse forms and registers of care and control in different situations of im/mobility.

### **Investigating Care and Control**

The special issue begins with two articles that consider how care and control features in situations of relative *immobility*: Tomas Cole’s study of disabled Karen refugees on the Thai-Burmese border and Catherine Allerton’s account of migrants from Flores in Indonesia who find themselves “stuck” in Sabah, Malaysia. In doing so these papers show how the ethical and moral dilemmas of care are conditioned not only by political and economic constraint, including forms of care and control exercised by states and humanitarian organisations, but also by conflicting

ideals and embodied sensibilities in the particular forms of spatial and temporal liminality that these people experience.

Disabled Karen refugees' reliance on, and perceived obligations to receive different sorts of bodily and spiritual ministrations—from donors, care workers, administrators and fellow refugees as well as visiting anthropologists—are acutely felt as “power-hurt.” The people Cole encountered used this affectively laden concept to talk about what might be described as relations of “complex dependency” (Simplican 2015) where people who are in a dependent position, “exercise power amid vulnerability” (ibid: 224). In the situation Cole describes, people's power and vulnerability are structured not just in terms of differential dis/abilities but also by their positioning within and between social relations that, following Edmund Leach (1954), are characterized both by egalitarian impulses and hierarchical imperatives and possibilities.

In a different manner, Florenese migrants in Malaysia, Allerton suggests, find themselves stuck within and negotiating between two systems of care and control. On the one hand, is a state-enforced system of migrant labour that produces social immobility by denying people access to citizenship and public services. On the other hand, non-migrant kin exert control through forms of watching and reporting that are a corollary of ongoing transnational connections with people in places of origin (cf. McKay, this issue) on the forms of “ambient surveillance” that are the other side of diasporas increasingly mediated connections). In that situation people's focus on and devotion to the enduring immediacy of “short term” care in a precarious economic and political environment is both continuously troubled by, but also a response to, the affective pull of their own and others' expectations about the long-term requirements to care for and invest in a “long term” future elsewhere.

The second set of articles focus in different ways on situations that are most recognizable in terms of feminist literatures on the commodification of care and reproductive labour in the age of migration: the first on rural urban migrant service workers in India, the second on migrant nurses in Singapore, and the third on migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. This trio of papers,



however, foregrounds ethnographic surprises that extends our understanding of the complex dynamics of care and control in these seemingly familiar situations.

Dolly Kikon and Beppe Karlsson's article focuses on indigenous youth from Nagaland in Northeast India, who are trained by recruitment companies for employment as service personnel in workplaces such as luxury hotels in southern India. The evident advantages of the perceived fair skin of young people from Nagaland, might be read as evidence that, as Twine and Gallagher (2008:10) contend, "Whiteness as a form of privilege and power 'travels' from western countries to colonies throughout the world". As Kikon and Karlsson demonstrate, however, it is not sufficient to be phenotypically marked as light-skinned since it is also a visible marker of one's indigenous status and may in fact make people targets of ethnic violence in parts of urban India. In order to convert the phenotypical affordances of lighter pigmentation into a form of fair-skinned capital that is likely to be read not as "whiteness," but as East Asian, e.g. Japanese or Chinese, people undergo training at recruitment companies that attempt to control perceived unruly manners and unkempt appearance and inculcate the appropriate forms of dress and bodily comportment, or *habitus*, that make them "metropolitan" and hence employable. The "double bind" that the authors describe is not just between competing aspirations and obligations to care for themselves and their family back home, as well as the differing forms of control those entail, that defines the experience of many people who travel to live and work elsewhere (see e.g. Allerton, this issue). Rather it also about the way that they must navigate between being "strangers"—light-skinned but indigenous villagers—in the city and fair-skinned cosmopolitans who despite their affective attachments to ancestral homelands feel themselves corporeally estranged from kinfolk and co-ethnics in the village.

Megha Amrith's article explores the relationship between care and control within and between healthcare practices and professionals, including Filipino migrants, in Singapore. More specifically, she draws attention to the way in which caring professions and in particular the professionalization of care are increasingly important to the symbolic, material and political production and circulation through which Southeast Asia as a region is made and imagined (cf. Johnson, Herdt and Jackson 2001). Control of health care delivery, for example, is increasingly a focus of regional, rather than simply national or international governance that seeks both to

standardize professional qualifications and facilitate mobility between skilled health care workers within and beyond ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). In Singapore, mobile care workers from across Asia encounter a specific set of rationalized and self-monitoring caring practices deemed vital to the delivery of state and corporate care. As Amrith describes, however, the subjectivities produced do not always neatly conform to a singularly sterile “Singapore standard,” that is routinely presented as the gold standard of and for health care practices and professionals across the region, if not the world. Rather, a variety of caring subjects emerge through overt and subtle forms of alternative practices carried with and acquired by mobile care workers in the course of intimate encounters in that place. Those discrepant caring practices are accompanied by a range of sometimes contradictory social classifications and cosmopolitan imaginings that may be used to challenge the perceived racial hierarchies of the “Singapore” system while affirming alternative more authentic “Asian” models of care.

Johnson, Lee, McCahill and Mesina’s article focuses on Filipino migrant domestic workers’ experiences of digital and other forms of surveillance in the home and reveals the gendered ironies of care and control. On the one hand, the use of digital cameras to enable employees to monitor and make care “visible,” they suggest, may in fact reduce the quality of care delivered because they become more concerned about appearances than on what they are doing in practice. On the other hand, domestic workers may also use the camera as a device not just to challenge and resist forms of monitoring and control but also to intervene in the relationship with their employers to solicit social recognition and trust as a condition for their own ethical caregiving practices. In that way, the gendered boundaries between care and control are reconfigured since it is through their tactical and direct challenges to a disembodied gaze that domestic workers exert some control over relations in which they are otherwise positioned as subordinate.

The final articles open up the discussion to reveal complexities and surprises in practices of care and control in two seemingly disparate situations: the first focuses on brokers in private humanitarian aid projects in Cambodia and the second on the relation between Filipino migrants and community organizations and political alliances in the Philippines.

Anne-Meike Fechter's ethnography of private aid workers, who broker relationships between private citizens abroad with local small-scale charitable organisations and development projects in Cambodia, seeks to nuance critical accounts of cultures of humanitarianism (see e.g. Fassin 2012, Tester 2010). Brokers exert control over aid networks established outside of formal development organisations. Beyond the humanitarian impulse that partially motivates and underpins their social legitimacy is the way that the brokers manage contact and exchange between potential donors and recipients of aid. In the process, brokers nurture and care for, what Fechter describes as the "anthropological imperative" and aspirations of ordinary people to establish more direct connection and relations with people that are the recipients of aid. Taking seriously the work that brokers do in bringing diverse sets of people together illuminates the interdependency between givers and recipients of aid. Although these particular transactions may never fundamentally challenge the "inequality of lives" they do point to a much greater dynamic in the process beyond that of those who, "testify to the misfortunes of the world" and "those who can exist only as objects (the unfortunate whose suffering is testified to in front of the world)." (Fassin 2007: 519)

While Fechter's ethnography shows that transnational humanitarian care may indeed be about making connections, McKay's article discusses the entwining of care and control that is intrinsic to what Werbner (2005) elsewhere refers to as the "chaorder" of diasporas; that is the way that diasporic communities are able to come together collectively around particular issues at a certain moment without any central organizing government. What McKay hones in on in particular are the implicit but sometimes overtly contested reciprocal demands made by political groups and parties in the Philippines in exchange for assistance provided by their affiliated migrant advocacy and mutual aid organizations in the diaspora. This contested relation between delivery of transnational care and presumed claims to, if not control over, political allegiance and affiliation is enabled by forms of "ambient surveillance"—the simultaneously "peripheral and intense awareness" of digital monitoring of people's social media presence by a collective but unspecified "they" who are perceived to be watching. In a way that echoes and extends the ironies of care identified by Johnson, et. al. (this issue), the forms of ambient surveillance McKay describes do not guarantee political commitment in practice but rather produce tactics for

managing and negotiating the appearance of those political commitments in ways that skirt around, if never entirely evade, control through care.

### **Reconceptualizing Care and Control**

In her insightful afterword, Nicole Constable reminds us while much recent writing on care has been prompted by migration, especially female domestic workers, so too has much recent theorising about social control. This has led to the coming together of anthropological and criminological research and analysis in relation to regulation of mobility, the policing and proliferation of borders, conditions of deportability, productions of “illegality” and securitization (in anthropology see, for example, Fassin 2011, de Genova 2013, Maguire, Foris and Zurawski 2014, Mutsaers 2014, Johnson 2015, Low and Maguire, forthcoming 2019).

In particular, Balibar’s claim that borders are being “multiplied and reduced in their localisation, ... thinned out and doubled, ... no longer the shores of politics but ... the space of the political itself” (Balibar 1998: 220, quoted in Vaughan-Williams 2009: 129), highlights how mobility has become an object of control and surveillance not only between, but increasingly within nation-states. As our contributors’ articles disclose, however, and as Guild and Mant (2016) contend, there remain significant differences within and across different systems of national, regional and international forms of governance, about the imagining, appearance and extent of control over people’s mobility, the state and non-state actors involved in these processes, the manner and intensity by which those controls are exercised, and the differential impacts on and response to control by particular groups of people.

Thus, for example, one might compare and contrast the intensive forms of surveillance used by employers in Hong Kong to control the care delivered by migrant domestic workers, with the “gentler” forms of bureaucratic and professional monitoring in government hospitals in Singapore and forms of self-care inculcated in private hospitality training programmes in India. The forms of control exercised and enabled at these different borders are linked to processes of differential inclusion and deportability (Andrijasevic 2009, de Genova 2013). For indigenous young people in Nagaland, the training center not only marks a threshold for connection with

“the global” but also—for better or for worse—of becoming recognisable Indian citizens. For nurses in Singapore, the hospital is daily encountered as a border-crossing process that holds the possibility of longer residence and citizenship. For foreign domestic workers, the home is always a border zone fraught with the possibility and threat of deportation where the disembodied gaze of the camera may be seen as analogous to the disembodied and increasingly biometric documents that both are a condition of and constrain their entry and mobility. Those differences, in turn, produce different tactics of resistance, if not always strategies of collective action: in the case of domestic workers it is in foot-dragging or face-to-face challenge with employers, while in the case of nurses it is in subtle forms of discursive resistance and affective practice.

However, it is not just forms of border control and conditions of entry and participation associated with or enabled by states or corporate governance that are always most significant, but the persistence, transformation and spatial expansion of different sorts of “village-level” processes of social control that anthropologists have described (see e.g. Black 1984). The latter—forms of face-to-face watching and moral pressure exerted in neighbourhood settings—is evident in the forms of ambient surveillance practiced, and dodged, by Filipino diasporans. From a different perspective, face-to-face encounters of people negotiating “power-hurt” in the ambiguous state of the refugee camp along the Thai-Burma border and the brokering of care in Cambodian expat cafés come to produce new sorts of “global villages” built on layers of control mobilized around the delivery of care.

As Constable usefully reminds us, however, care and control, while often related, are not simply the opposite sides of the same coin. In line with this and by way of summary we put forward two key points emerging out of the articles in this volume that may help generate a more dynamic understanding of the entanglements of care and control. First, care and control involve a range of emergent, mobile and contested meanings, practices and relations. As Constable recounts, what one person might perceive as controlling, another might regard as evidence of care. It is also the case that different experiences of mobilities and encounters in more and less familiar situations may unsettle people’s understanding of appropriate times, places and practices of care and more or less acceptable forms of control. This is perhaps most clearly seen in Florenese diasporans’ altered perceptions about the relative importance of, and anxieties experienced in negotiating the

tensions between, long and short-term care: tensions and anxieties produced by two quite different but entangled systems of control exercised by state and kin respectively. Second, and relatedly, the entanglements between care and control are stratified and differentially distributed. That is not to say that systems of privilege and relative disadvantage can be mapped out neatly in terms of more care for (and less control over) some and more control over (and less care for) others, though there are certainly elements of truth to that. Rather it is to acknowledge that the way care is organised, practiced, understood and imagined shapes and is shaped by conditions of im/mobilities, processes of stratified citizenship and forms of differential inclusion in complex, and often contradictory, ways.

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