**Geographies of Domestic Life:**

**'Householding' in Transition in East and Southeast Asia**

**Introduction**

In recent decades, dramatic socio-economic changes have swept the East and Southeast Asian region, bringing with them profound implications for the micro-geographies of everyday life. This Special Issue brings together case studies from Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Singapore to explore the emergent vernacular landscapes of Asia’s lesser-understood country contexts. Apart from Singapore, the latter countries are all defined as of ‘low’ or ‘medium’ human development within the United Nations’ (2012) Human Development Index and have been subject to far less academic attention than their more developed counterparts (see for example the 2006 *International Development Planning Review* Special Issue on ‘householding’ oriented towards Korea, Japan and Singapore edited by Douglass). From their liberalisation and embrace of globalisation since the 1980s, these ‘transitional economies’ have each experienced heightened capital and human mobility. Against this backdrop, the household has been framed as a social unit defined by familial dislocation in multiple senses. As Rigg (2003: 199) comments,

‘As the region has developed so the household has become more fractious, fractured and fragmented. It has become increasingly spatially disembedded (leading to the creation of “shadow” households); the interests of household members have diverged leading to starker divisions between the genders and generations; and the household economy itself has become increasingly multi-stranded as pluriactivity spreads.’

Drawing on Douglass’ (2006; this issue) concept of ‘householding’, which looks to the formation and maintenance of household social reproduction in ‘Pacific Asia’, this Special Issue privileges the perspectives and experiences of those who are directly negotiating, and influencing, broader societal transformation through their domestic practices. Just as the household is theoretically recognized as a porous rather than bounded site (Moore, 1994), the contributors each show how ‘the domestic is created through the extra-domestic and vice versa’ (Blunt and Dowling, 2006: 27). Avoiding the tendency to depict ‘people as “victims” and locality as the mere stage on which the meta-processes of globalization are worked out’ (Rigg, 2007: 7), the papers explore how the interfacing between the domestic and other scale referents manifests within thematic discussions on *inter-alia*, intra-country and transnational migration, marriage, ageing and the politics of care. Emphasizing ‘the dynamic interaction between changing external dynamics affecting rural households, and internal dynamics that constantly reconfigure the field of the household’, Huijsmans’ (this issue) definition of the term ‘flux’ is thus representative of the analytical stance which the Special Issue and its contributors take.

**Dynamism and the Domestic Lifecourse**

The household in this Special Issue is shown to be a dynamic entity that like its inhabitants has its own shifting lifecourse and form. Just as the concept of lifecourse has been ‘adopted as a way of envisaging the passage of a lifetime less as the mechanical turning of a wheel and more as the unpredictable flow of river’ (Hockey and James, 2003: 5), a heterogeneity and non-linearity characterizes many of the domestic life experiences captured in this Special Issue.

The first two papers, for example, focus on marriage and its dissolution (Brickell and Locke *et al* respectively). In a rural Cambodian setting, Brickell hones in on domestic rupture and home unmaking as part of household fluidity reflected in the changing marital culture of participants’ houses. Marital breakdown can be quite literally ‘read’ through the literal separation, dismantling and movement of the entire conjugal dwelling to a different location. Yet given a combination of insecure land tenure, non-legal marriage, and a tendency towards polygamy, the marital household rarely meets a finite end and remains often in ‘flux’ as spousal return to claim land or re-kindle a relationship is habitually experienced by women. The challenge to linear lifecourse ideas are also developed in the paper by Locke *et al* who together consider the ‘disrupted marriages’ of low income men and women in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh whose households have a history of internal migration. Speaking to the marital and familial ‘challenges of householding across time and space’ in Vietnam, they illuminate how migration ‘is both *about* and in *tension* with fulfilling family roles’ (emphasis in original). Complicating scholarly links made between migration and marital breakdown, they show how conjugal togetherness or happiness are not necessarily afforded by migrating together, and that gendered norms and fear of stigmatisation equally work to ensure the resilience of physically separated couples. While marital breakdown is not an ‘inevitable consequence’ of splintered households, they do however conclude that ‘mobility plays into the continuous and iterative negotiations by men and women over the terms on which they household’.

The relationship between migration and the entering into, rather than moving out of, marriage is taken forward by Yeoh *et al* (this issue) through their study of Vietnamese women and Singaporean men who have committed to commercially arranged marriages. A growing trend across the region, Vietnamese women’s migration to Singapore is commonly spurred on by the desire to improve the standard of living in their natal families by remitting back money. At the same time, Yeoh *et al* point to the additional dynamic of Singaporean women’s reticence to marry which has again put the spotlight on the financial hub’s replacement-deficit and the absence of marriage from many women’s lifecourses. The paper by Yeoh *et al* thereby brings to light the intimate dynamics of ‘householding in transition’ which connects two Southeast Asian states through marriage. Huijsmans (this issue) in respect to the young and Liu (this issue) in respect to the old also take the broader theme of migration and lifecourse dynamics forward. Both papers in different ways speak to the growth in literature on the ‘left behind’ (see for example, Toyota *et al*, 2007). Huijsmans argues that the process of ‘householding’ is one which is ‘constantly made and remade’ by young Laotian dependents for whom ‘staying’ can be an expression of agency as much as leaving to work. Liu meanwhile considers older household members who have been ‘left behind’ as the economically active leave for the cities in China. Tapping into anxieties over the neglect of filial piety she argues that, counter to assumptions in some migration studies and ageing literature in China, ‘it would be over simplistic to suggest that migration is always detrimental to the older generation who stay behind’ who often benefit positively from remittances and collective efforts to ensure the welfare of the dispersed family through ‘webs of interdependence’. The domestic politics of ageing and care that Liu makes reference to in relation to migration are a particularly ‘live’ issue that has, akin to non-marriage, entered into the international media arena. In July 2013, for example, along with other news outlets, the UK newspaper *The Guardian* reported the passing of a new law in China to signal the importance of emotional support to the elderly by demanding that adult children visit their parents often. Gesturing towards intra-household dynamics deemed of national-level significance, we now turn to a second overarching theme which informs the Special Issue: gendered and intergenerational aspects of domestic life.

**Gender, Generation and Householding**

Intra-household relations represent a continuous process of negotiations, contracts, renegotiations and exchange within the broader political, economic and social context. Each of the papers provides in-depth insights into the changing nature of intra-household dynamics, yet persistence of norms surrounding gender and generational responsibilities and identities.

Referring back to Huijsmans’ (this issue) research in Lao, a conundrum is identified and explored: why young women are the most inclined to become a migrant *and* remain a stayer. Drawing initially on 2003 Lao Migration Survey statistics, he highlights that for 10-14 year olds ‘in the lower age cohorts, female migrants outnumber male migrants in both the total migrant population and among the cross-border migrants’. Yet it is qualitatively evidenced that gender scripts and intergenerational parental decision-making power hold many women back from becoming a young migrant in comparison to young men. Huijsmans concludes by elaborating ‘how in the process of householding in the context of above-replacement level fertility in which rural Lao households are situated young dependent women are both the ones most inclined to become a young migrant as well as most inclined to become a young stayer related to shifts in their relative position in the field of the household’.

Liu (this issue) meanwhile examines ageing and inter-generational negotiations in dealing with distance and how these often work at the expense of women’s employment and migratory opportunities. She highlights how it is remaining daughters who are central to maintaining support through their daily care and emotional support to parents. Yet at the same time, a gendered discrepancy is noted, that despite daughters’ disproportionate contribution to the wellbeing of the ‘left-behind’ family, it is sons who not only still accrue greater symbolic status and material benefits but also whose unmet needs are deemed detrimental to the health of ‘interdependent networks’. Foregrounding this inequity, Liu asserts that ‘women had played a critical role in ensuring the physical and social reproduction across generations; however, the gendered division of labour and feminised care work often left rural women’s sacrifices and resilience unduly unrecognised’.

Normative expectations of care are also emphasised by Yeoh *et al* (this issue) who note more broadly how intimate labour within domestic space both mirrors, and further engrains, ‘structural inequalities of gender, race, culture and citizenship in both national and transnational contexts’. With Vietnamese wives expected to do both housework and take of parents-in-law and relatives as an extension of filial/brotherly duties, they argue that this phenomenon is entrenching binary ideals of homemaker and breadwinner which many educated Singaporean women are unwilling to entertain when contemplating marriage. The ever-presence of ideals also weighed heavily on Cambodian women’s minds in Brickell’s (this issue) study as they perceived household negligence as a precursor to marital breakdown. Emphasising marital status as a powerful social coordinate, in situations of conjugal dissolution the re-making of domestic space was shown to be one means of regaining a sense of community respect and moral integrity. Research by Locke *et al* (this issue) in urban Vietnam on the other hand, emphasises women’s agency to leave men, despite the stigma entailed, if husbands neglect their own provider role. Speaking to men’s vulnerabilities, they argue additionally that those who have to ‘“go away for work” experience a serious undermining of their family roles and identities, conceiving of their left-behind children as “lacking fathering” and anxious about how long periods of separation may damage the “sentiments” between them and their wives’ (cf. Parreñas, 2005; Hoang and Yeoh, 2011; Vu and Agergaard, 2012). All the case studies in this Special Issue underscore gendered and generational tensions which are playing out in domestic life in globalising East and Southeast Asia. They also consistently reference the continued, if not intensifying, ideological and practical rooting of women to the household.

**Government Policy and Domestic Life**

It has been well-established that, by embodying notions of home, family, gender, masculinity, femininity and sexuality, Southeast Asian households are central sites for the cultural expression and reworking of ideas of the ‘modern’ as well as for the expression of anxieties around the costs (and benefits) of reproduction, development and modernity (Stivens and Sen, 1998). The papers in this Special Issue develop this theme further by emphasizing the dynamism of householding as a process of transition, and in doing so insist on the fluidity of household relationships that can move, not necessarily only in unidirectional terms, from altruism and reciprocity, to unequal exchange or even oppressive domination.

The uneven terrain that conditions householding-in-transition is partly shaped by prevailing government policies and discourses. The neoliberal strategies of the state in forwarding economic restructuring have in many parts of the world led to the privatisation and commercialisation of carework, where ‘women are expected to subsidise the economy with their caring work’ (Misra and Merz, 2007: 118). In the case of advanced East Asian economies such as Singapore (as well as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong), the rapid decline in fertility rates, coupled with increasing life expectancy as well as higher proportions of delayed or non-marriage, has led to looming care deficits within families which have to be plugged by global householding strategies. While middle-class families have the economic wherewithal to outsource domestic care labour, including filial piety, to paid migrant domestic workers (described by Ochiai (2010) as a form of ‘liberal familialism’), working-class households without the financial means draw on the unpaid care labour of ‘foreign brides’-turned-migrant wives (Yeoh *et al.*, this issue). In both instances, global householding strategies conform to government policies and dominant social discourses that continue to relegate the responsibility for carework to the realm of the ‘family’, and invariably, onto the shoulders of women.

Other papers in this Special Issue illustrate the increasing dissonance between, on the one hand, governmental approaches to and pronouncements on domestic life, and on the other, the messy realities on the ground. In the context of Vietnam, Locke *et al.* draw our attention to the failure of policy responses that prioritise household social reproduction on the basis of ‘official ideological norms requiring women’s dual responsibility for domestic work and for income generation’ to deal with the complex dynamics of translocal householding. Instead, they advocate the need to attend to neglected issues such as ‘emotional intimacy within marriage’ as well as men’s family roles and subjectivities in revaluing ‘the linkages between social reproduction, intimacy and masculinity’.

In a similar vein, Brickell (this issue) draws our attention to the gulf between ideal family models used in policy formulations and the dynamics of lived worlds. While the Cambodian authorities claim a ‘culture of non-violence’ and ‘harmony within households’ as a ‘national culture and tradition’, Brickell argues that the powerful realities of ‘micro-geographies of marital dissolution’ not only lead to emotional and psychological trauma for Khmer women, but take on symbolic and material dimensions as vividly demonstrated by the physical division of the marital house into two as a means of dividing assets after a divorce (or other forms of marital disruption). Not only are the rates of marital dissolution, including desertion, on the increase, polygamy is also becoming more prevalent despite the absence of legal sanction. As Kalir *et al.* (2012: 16) have argued, the widening gap between state regulations and the lived realities of social actors is not just an occasional or temporary slippage that can be corrected ‘with time and effort’, but ‘part of the ongoing social negotiations to establish social order’. The women that Brickell describes in her paper are continually embedded in struggles for legitimacy even as they cope with the stigma and shame associated with the ambiguous nature of their ‘disrupted’ or ‘dissolved’ marital status.

**Conclusion**

Collectively, the papers in this Special Issue draw on notions of ‘householding’ (including ‘global householding’ and ‘translocal householding’) in reflecting the interplay of social ideologies about ‘home’ and ‘family’, government policies and discourses and the (international) division of reproductive work characterised by multiple inequalities of gender, generation, age, class, race, ethnicity, nationality and citizenship status. They depict householding as a process-in-flux that includes both episodes of mobility and episodes of stability, where ‘migration and staying as forms of householding .... interact with each other as well as with other dimensions of householding’ (Huijsmans, this issue). In positioning Southeast Asian men and women relationally as household members – as grandparents, parents, children, husbands and wives – the papers take into account the power geometries that structure human relationships as well as the possibilities of and limits to conflict, collaboration and coexistence among people. Grounded in a range of Southeast Asian contexts – from the rural to the urban – characterised by rapid change in contemporary times, it is our hope that this special collection of papers will increase our understanding not only about ‘the centrifugal forces and processes of householding “together”’, but also ‘the centripetal forces and processes that disrupt [or dissolve] marriages [and parent-child relationships]’ (Locke *et al.*, this issue).

**References**

Blunt, A., Dowling, R., 2006. Home. Routledge, London.

Douglass, M., 2006. Global householding in Pacific Asia. International Development Planning Review 28 (4), 421-446.

Hoang, L.A., Yeoh, B.S.A. 2011. Breadwinning wives and ‘left-behind’ husbands: men and masculinities in the Vietnamese transnational family. Gender & Society, 25(6), 717-739.

Hockey, J., James, A., 2003. Social identities across the lifecourse. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Kalir, B., Sur, M., W. van Schendel. 2012. Introduction: Mobile practices and the regimes of permissiveness. In: B. Kalir and M. Sur (Eds.) Transnational Flows and Permissive Polities. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, pp.11-25.

# Misra, J., S. Merz, 2007. Neoliberalism, globalization and the international division of care. In: A.L. Cabezas, E. Reese and M. Waller (Eds.) The Wages of Empire: Neoliberal policies, Repression, and Women's Poverty. Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, pp. 113-126.

Moore, H., 1994. Is there a crisis in the family? UNRISD Occasional Paper No.3. UNRISD, Geneva.

Ochiai, E. 2010. Reconstruction of intimate and public spheres in Asian modernity: familialism and beyond. Journal of Intimate and Public Spheres, Pilot Issue, 2-22.

Parreñas, R.S. 2005. Long distance intimacy: class, gender and intergenerational relations between mothers and children in Filipino transnational families. Global Networks 5(4), 317-336.

Rigg, J., 2003. Southeast Asia: The human landscape of modernization and development. Routledge, London.

Rigg, J., 2007. An everyday geography of the global South. Routledge, London.

Stivens, M., Sen, K., 1998. Theorising gender, power and modernity in affluent Asia. Routledge, London.

The Economist, 2011. The decline of Asian marriage. Asia’s lonely Hearts. August 20th-26th. <<http://www.economist.com/node/21526350>> (accessed 15.07.13).

The Guardian, 2013. China's unfeasible plan for the 'grey tide': force people to visit their parent. 15th July 2013 by Lijia Zhang. < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jul/15/china-grey-tide-elderly-people>> (accessed 15.07.13).

Toyota, M., B.S.A. Yeoh, L. Nguyen, 2007. Editorial Introduction: Bringing the ‘left behind’ back into view in Asia: A framework for understanding the migration-left behind nexus. Population, Space and Place*,* 13 (3), 157-161.

Vu, T.T. and J. Agergaard, 2012. ‘Doing family’: Female migrants and family transition in rural Vietnam. Asian Population Studies, 8 (1), 103-119.