

Borders in our mind: border control at a cognitive level¹

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1. Introduction- Cognitive Borders

The notion of border controls deployed by previous studies reveals how border control has been studied in a certain framework.² Firstly, it takes place in geographic border areas. Secondly, border control is done by the hands of the state (e.g. preventing migrants from invading the state borders), for the sake of keeping the state territory only for nationals. In other words, the engagement of society itself to maintain the borders has not been quite explored.

The Singapore case of border control seems to release the notion of border control from this familiar framework. Firstly, Singapore's geographical status as a city-state does not afford it geographical buffer zones far from its urban centre. In such a place, border control takes place in "the very heart of national territory," as Tessa Morris-Suzuki points out that it can.³ This brings foreign migrant workers to the heart of national territory, and makes them mix visibly with Singaporeans in their everyday life. Secondly, the border control in the Singapore case is not only done by the state, but also done by the society. The border must

1. This paper was presented to the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 June-2 July 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who(s) retain(s) copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

2. Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (eds.), *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

3. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Unauthorized Arrivals: Rethinking Border Controls in East Asia*, in *Japanese history*, forthcoming.

be presented constantly and mundanely in the minds of Singaporeans, in order to keep the distance between Singaporeans and foreign workers while they mingle together in their everyday life. The border control in the present story is a constant cognitive construction both through discourses and through other disciplinary techniques in everyday life, in order to mark the Other and maintain Us.

The first part of this paper will show how the border between Singaporean and Indonesian domestic workers is created by discourse of Singaporeans in general. Since the Singapore economy is highly developed in the Southeast Asian region, the flow of unskilled migration workers has become an unavoidable issue. It is now very common in Singapore to see domestic workers (in local terms, people often call them “maids”) from Indonesia or the Philippines looking after Singapore children. Out of these foreign workers, Indonesian domestic workers particularly have become a striking phenomenon in Singapore over the past couple of years. Abuse of Indonesian domestic workers by Singaporean employers is frequently reported by the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*. And some of these cases have already been brought to the court.

The second part of this paper will feature a volunteer activity organized by Singaporean Malays for Indonesian domestic workers. This organization is called *An-nissa* (meaning “respected woman” in Arabic). It mainly provides a Sunday school in the mosque for the Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore once every two weeks. In this volunteer activity, English conversation, Koran reading, and handicraft skills are taught by Singaporean Malay volunteers. News of *An-nissa*’s volunteer activities was taken up by the national newspaper, *Straits Times*, in September 2002.⁴ News of *An-nissa* was striking because it even appeared to prove a virtuous side of Singapore society, in contrast to numerous reports about brutal abuses of Indonesian domestic workers.

This sincere support can be ascribed to the ethnic tie between Singaporean Malays and Indonesian domestic workers, with their shared language and religion. In this study, the ostensibly sincere support of Singaporean Malays for Indonesian domestic workers will be investigated from a different viewpoint. Instead of reducing the causal connection to their religious-lingual-cultural ties as ethnicity, it will examine the picture more sensitively in order to reveal how the border between Singaporean Malays and Indonesian domestic workers is created through the Sunday school.

4. *The Straits Times*, 16 September, 2002.

2. Where Indonesian domestic workers are located

The border between Singaporean employers and foreign domestic workers is firstly marked by a charging system by the government. For instance, every Singaporean wishing to have a foreign domestic worker is required to pay a levy to the government.

The levy system is interpreted as a process of materializing foreign domestic workers into products by Singaporean. This levy became equivalent to a price of Indonesian domestic workers, and subsequently, they are considered as a purchased product. Hence, it is reasonable to say, “We paid for her. What is wrong if we treat her as we want, ah?”⁵

This materialization is also constantly performed by maid agencies. For instance, Maid agencies display a video tape of Indonesian domestic workers. On this video, they start stating name, age, communicable languages, previous working experience, and so forth.⁶ These video tapes are constantly run in the waiting room of maid agencies to catch the attention of potential customers. Or some agencies display photos of domestic workers with a brief description.⁷ Either on photos or video tapes, they take the same pose: bringing their hands together in front of their chest. In short, foreign domestic workers are displayed in a ‘showcase’ at the maid agencies. More vividly, some maid agencies display live maids wearing a costume calculated to create certain images.⁸ For instance, some of them wear a simple shirt and skirt while reading a book in order to appear intelligent. They are processed by maids agencies to meet the market demand.

Those who can speak English (mainly Filipinos) are more expensive than those who do not. Those who are educated (mainly Filipinos) are more expensive than those who are not. The price of Indonesian domestic workers is lower since they are presumed neither to be educated nor to speak English.⁹ This presumption does not reflect the reality. However, an image of non-English speaking, less-educated Indonesian domestic workers is established and colours the actual price. When a Singaporean told me “Indonesian ones are cheaper lah,”¹⁰ the location of ‘cheapest available product’ is inscribed on the maids.

5. Interview with a Singaporean employer of Indonesian domestic worker, 26 May 2002.

6. This style of displaying pooled foreign domestic workers is taken in the maid agency on the Arab street.

7. This is one of the common style taken by various maid agencies in Singapore such as *Clementi*.

8. This style is taken by agencies in *Bukit Timah* shopping complex.

9. According to the maid agencies I inquired, In general, Indonesian domestic workers are 200 dollars cheaper than Filipino domestic workers.

10. A casual chat with a Singaporean employer of Filipino maids. She proudly explained that her affluence enable her to afford a more expensive maid. Interview with a Singaporean employer, 9 August 2002.

In such a situation, how do Singaporean employers narrate abuse of Indonesian domestic workers? They tend to justify abuse by pointing out how insufficient Indonesian domestic workers are. Some Singaporean say “These maids are terrible lah. Terrible village people. Because they do not know how to use washing machine and vacuum cleaner.”¹¹ Or other stated, “Since they are not trained and educated, they do not know how to look after my children. In addition, they have no sense of hygiene.”¹² The pattern here is this: Singaporean/Indonesian; employer/domestic worker; educated/less educated; urbanized/rural; advanced/backward; hygienic/unhygienic. Another informant explained that Indonesian domestic workers can be untrustworthy people because “These people are not quite educated and have no commonsense. They sometimes do tricky things, such as making expensive overseas call.”¹³ These discourses in the end connected with personality: sensible Singaporeans versus untrustworthy Indonesian domestic workers. This lets Singaporeans say that Indonesian domestic workers are “half-persons.”¹⁴

Their discourse narrates about Indonesian domestic workers to reproduce a clear line between Singaporeans and Indonesians with a hierarchy between a person and a “half” person. “A person” never lets “a half person” talk back. This is where Indonesian domestic workers are.

3. Where is the Gaze of Singaporean Malay at Indonesian Domestic Workers

An organization, *An-nisaa* tries to provide support for Indonesian domestic workers by conducting Sunday school. Why do they want to help Indonesian domestic workers?

One of the head members of this volunteer activity regards them as problematic, due to their misbehavior as Muslims. Firstly their dress code is inappropriate as Muslims: some walk around town with a short sleeved shirt and short pants while showing their skin to the public. Secondly, some of them are known to have sexual relations with Pakistani Muslims. He stated “Since Singaporean Muslims are well ‘educated,’ we know how to behave as Muslims. But Indonesian maids just do not know how to behave in Singapore.”¹⁵

Why is the misbehavior of Indonesian domestic workers regarded as problematic by Singaporean Malay Muslims? It is because of the impact of Indonesian domestic workers

11. A casual chat with a Singaporean employer, 2 September 2002.

12. A casual chat with a Singaporean employer, 9 September 2002.

13. A casual chat with a Singaporean employer, 8 September 2002.

14. I came across this striking term when I was talking to a university student, 27 No 2002.

15. An interview with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, 23 June 2002.

on the Singapore Malay Muslim community. Their misbehavior as Muslims can degrade and damage the reputation of the Malay Muslims in Singapore as fellow Muslims. He said “Malays are a minority. It is always important for us to be credible in the eyes of other communities. Our effort to be good Muslims will be spoiled by their misbehavior. Then people can say, “Muslims say women have to cover themselves with clothes. But, what about Indonesian maids?”¹⁶

He does not employ the geographic demarcation between “Singapore” and “Indonesia.” Instead, the line between the two is set based on the different way of practicing Islam and behaving as a Muslim, that is, educated Singaporean Muslims versus non-educated Indonesian Muslims. Now these good Singaporean Muslims are in danger. Something has to be done to crack down on “misbehavior” of Indonesian domestic workers. This is the Sunday school, *An-nisaa*.

The place for this Sunday school is provided by the chairperson of The Sultan Mosque. He found the misbehavior of Indonesian domestic workers quite inappropriate for Muslim women and also shared the same anxiety about the impact of misbehavior of Indonesian domestic workers.¹⁷

Six female Malay Muslims were recruited to be volunteers for the Sunday school. These members consider themselves as relatively well educated in both a secular sense and Islamic sense.¹⁸ So, of course, misbehaving Indonesian domestic workers was raised as the issue among them and became their concern, too. When they mention about Indonesian domestic workers, they also use the phrase, “they just do not know how to behave in Singapore.”

Here is a border between Singaporean Malay and Indonesian domestic workers. Educated Singaporean Malays gaze from ‘up here’ at less educated Indonesian domestic workers ‘down there.’ On the one hand they claim they want to help Indonesian domestic workers, on the other hand, they set Indonesian as the targets to be ‘cracked down on.’ This makes *An-nisaa*, the Sunday school, possible.

16. An interview with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, 23 June 2002.

17. An interview with Farhan bin Haslam, 19h April 2002.

18. Although their education levels in general does not seem to be high in the modern context of Singapore, it needs to be understood in the context of 1960s and 1970s Singapore. They consider themselves well educated in their self perception.

4. The scheme of *An-nisaa*

The name of this organization, *An-nisaa* literally means “woman” in Arabic. Members of *An-nisaa* translate it as “respected” woman,¹⁹ by saying that “we want Indonesian maids to be respected by the society.”²⁰ This means to mark the position of Indonesian domestic workers as disrespected first and then set the goal for them to be respected. In short, it is constant border marking, which is practiced through all courses in the Sunday school.

The first course is English learning. In *An-nisaa* analysis, a communication gap was identified as a main factor of abuse of Indonesian domestic workers,²¹ even between Singaporean Malay employers and Indonesian maids, although the Malay and Indonesian language are mutually intelligible. Why? This is another differentiation. Firstly in Singapore, educated Malays also tend to speak English rather than Malay language these days. Secondly, even regarding Malay language, educated Malays cannot understand village-version Indonesian language.²² Hence, it is not communicable.

In order to reduce their communication problems with Singaporean employers, basic English communication skills are crucial.²³ In this English course, the key is how Indonesian domestic workers can use English not to displease their employers. They are taught to use “Could I” or “May I” when they want permission to do something, and must not forget, “please.” If they want their employer to do something, the appropriate beginning is “Could you”. Any time they need to address their employer, they should say, “Sir”. If Indonesian domestic workers are asked to bring fruits or sweets for their employer, they must not forget to reply “Yes, Sir.” Not only English but also manners commonly used in Singapore everyday life are also explained.²⁴ The emphasis here is on courtesy and sophistication, since “Nowadays, people in Singapore are not (*kasar*) impolite.”²⁵

The second course is *Al-Quran* (Koran) reading. By the definition of Singaporean Malay Muslims, Indonesian domestic workers are not quite Muslim. *An-nisaa* members stated, “We Singaporeans try to follow real Islamic practices through Islamic teaching, not mix them up with local customs.” Here, the relation between various versions of Islamic practice is located not merely differently but in a hierarchical relationship:

19. Interview with Omayah Hassam, 12 May 2002.

20 Interview with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, 9 June 2002.

21. Interview with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, 9 June 2002.

22. My conversation with Omayah Hassam, 26 May 2002.

23. An interview with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, 9 June 2002.

24. *Ibid.*

25. An interview with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, 9 June 2002.

authentic/educated/Singapore Islam and impure/less-educated/Indonesian Islam. Therefore, Singaporean Malay Muslims have to teach them. The idea of being “real” Muslim is practiced through the dress code in Sunday school. When Indonesian domestic workers wish to attend any courses, they are expected to wear long sleeves, pants, and a head cover (*tudong*). As most of them in fact do not have a head scarf, *An-nnissa* lends the headscarf to them.²⁶ This provides a chance for them to learn the Singapore Muslim dress code.

The last course is a handicraft course. In this course, Indonesian domestic workers can learn skills for making accessories, flower arrangements, and bead works. In this course, what they are advised is “why don’t you give your craftwork to your employer?” to improve their relation with their employer.²⁷

5- Conclusion

Although *An-nisaa* wants to help Indonesian domestic workers, Sunday school in fact confirms the border between Singaporean and Indonesian domestic workers after all. The border is constructed based on how Singaporeans perceive Indonesian domestic workers in the social context of Singapore. This perception is realized through a torrent of words, which sets Singaporean as superior and Indonesian as inferior, by both the Singaporean Chinese and Singaporean Malays. It is not only the state which creates the border but also the society itself.

To be sensitive to how our perception creates the borders through discourses and practices may help us to realize our complicity in the situation. To nail down the cognitive borders in our everyday life in our minds is one such enterprise.

26. Fieldwork observation in the Sultan Mosque, 12 May and 26 May 2002.

27. An interview with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, 26 May 2002.