

Examining the political economy of heteronormativity in Southeast Asian queer migration biographies

Sexualities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Quah Ee Ling** 

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Abstract

This article examines the workings of heteronormativity in Southeast Asian queer migration biographies. By Southeast Asian queer migrants, the project refers to people self-identifying as gender and sexuality diverse from dominant gender and sexuality binary systems and people with variations in sex characteristics who have emigrated out of their home country in the Southeast Asian region. The exploratory study makes use of qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews with 15 queer migrants from Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and The Philippines and Thailand on their local and transnational familial care practices and needs. The respondents on one hand, through emigration, have attempted to veer off from discriminatory heteronormative structures in their home country and enjoyed relatively more space and opportunities in the receiving society to construct queer familial care practices. On the other hand, their queer migration biographies show how they continue to be implicated in the political economy of heteronormativity locally through their own queer familial practices and transnationally through their financial and emotional remittances to support heteronormative families of origin. The article argues that queer citizens and migrants deserve equal if not greater recognition for their unrelenting local and transnational care efforts to sustain heteronormative families in a global neoliberal economy and should not have to experience exclusion for being deemed as having deviated from heteronormative structures.

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Introduction

There has been a rich body of literature investigating the impact of heteronormativity on queer individuals and families who have been regarded as having transgressed the nationalistic heteronormative model of sexuality, sexual behaviour and family arrangement. Some of these studies focus specifically on how heteronormativity shapes and curtails queer lives in Southeast Asia, for example, lesbian mothers in Singapore (author); gay men in Indonesia (Boellstorff 2005); lesbian women in Indonesia (Blackwood 2010); Malay Muslim queer men in Malaysia (Chua 2021); queer communities in the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore (Lim 2016); and queer individuals in Cambodia (Ly et al., 2019). Joining these studies, the article examines the workings of heteronormativity on Southeast Asian queer migrants and their post-migration familial care practices. To clarify, I refer 'queer' to individuals self-identifying as gender and sexuality diverse from dominant gender and sexuality binary norms and individuals with variations in sex characteristics. This reference is in line with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualisation of queering as interrogating and reconsidering what we assume as normal, natural and appropriate (Sedgwick 1990). By Southeast Asian queer migrants, I refer to gender and sexuality diverse people and people with variations in sex characteristics who have emigrated out of a Southeast Asian country.

The heart of the institutionalisation of heterosexuality is the productive and reproductive functions of the heteronormative family enabling capital accumulation and hence the growth of a capitalist economy (Butler 1997). Judith Butler (1997) points out that 'it would be a mistake to understand such productions as "merely cultural" if they are essential to the functioning of the sexual order of political economy – that is, if they constitute a fundamental threat to its very workability' (1997: 274). Butler (1997) goes on to argue that the reproduction of heterosexuality is therefore closely linked to the economy since 'the economic [is] tied to the reproductive' (1997:274). Duc Hien Nguyen (2021) in their engagement with Judith Butler's (1997) work on political, economic and social distribution, recognition and regulation of power, resources and sexual rights clarifies for readers the interconnected relationships between heteronormativity and capitalism. Nguyen (2021) demonstrates how heteronormativity is socially reproduced through the global neoliberal, capitalist economy in the 'sexual division of labour', reproduction of 'normative heterosexual family' and 'production of a particular kind of sex-gender persons as proper subjects for capitalism' (2021: 8). He suggests that 'heteronormativity enables capital surplus accumulation while being perpetuated itself through capitalist relations of production and social reproduction' (2021: 8). The state operating based on the logic of capital unsurprisingly works to organise and regular heterosexuality as the default, celebrated and privileged form of sexuality (Berlant and Warner 1998). Berlant and Warner (1998) add that

heteronormativity is not just about the normalising of heterosexual practices but it defines as a 'sense of rightness' of a normal way of life (1998: 548). The economic thereby becomes cultural and the cultural in turn reinforces the economic. Since non-heteronormative individuals' and families' 'disruptive' and 'improper' behaviour is regarded as a threat to the workability of the capitalist economy (Butler 1997; Nguyen 2021), it is therefore no surprise that they occupy a lower position in the hierarchal heteronormative structure (Jackson, 2006; Quah, 2020a, 2020b; Tang and Quah, 2017). State-imposed family ideologies and policies that systematically privilege heteronormative families and marginalise non-heteronormative families not only bring about punitive effects in the latter's everyday lives but also subject them to broader discriminatory attitudes and treatments (for example, Blackwood, 2010; Boellstorff, 2005; Chua, 2021; Lim, 2016; Quah, 2020a, 2020b; Tang, 2018; Tang and Quah, 2017).

As context, countries in the Southeast Asian region are hardly uniformed and could not be generalised as a singular entity in any way. The diverse historical contexts, political ideologies and regimes, legal and governance frameworks, economic and wealth indexes, socio-cultural values and geographical environments make the region a complex, non-monolithic case study, though it is tied together by various regional structures and institutions. The 10 countries (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Brunei and Laos) in the region form the Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN) for economic, political and security cooperation. While there are wide variations in marriage trends across the region and within countries, heterosexual marriage is dominantly adopted in the sexual modernities of these countries as a significant milestone marking the transition to adulthood, fulfilment of familial obligations, observation of filial piety and religious teachings and the entry point of setting up a family and reproducing children (Jones et al., 2011). Heterosexual marriage is also institutionalised to serve as a traffic system where institutions and structures direct, incentivise and support heterosexual lives through access to material benefits and social recognition (Ahmed 2017). Same-sex marriage is disallowed in nine out of 10 the Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) countries; only Vietnam has lifted the ban, though discrimination against LGBTs remain persistent (Lewis 2016). Malaysia and Myanmar persist in retaining British colonial law criminalising sex between two men (Outright International 2017). In Brunei, homosexuality is punishable by death penalty based on its Sharia law (Outright International 2017). In Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Timor-Leste, there is reported evidence of varying degree of queerphobia and discrimination against, and lack of anti-discrimination legal protection of gender, sex and sexuality diverse populations (Outright International 2017).

Against this political, economic, socio-cultural and policy contextual backdrop debilitating Southeast Asian queer lives, this paper is interested to examine queer emigration patterns out of the region. There has been substantive research conducted on queer migration trends in Europe (Cragolini 2013; Jansen 2013), North and South Americas (Luibhéid 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2014; Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014),

Oceania (Yue 2008; Gorman-Murray 2009), South, East and Southeast Asia (Manalansan, 2003; Yue 2016; Adur 2017; Kam 2020; Yu 2020). The scholarship covers a wide range of topics such as legal structures and migration laws on asylum claims and visa applications; settlement trajectories; intimacies and relationships and negotiation of gender and sexual identities. This paper makes a modest contribution to this body of queer migration and specifically asks after how the workings of heteronormativity continue to affect Southeast Asian queer migration biographies. The study extends Nguyen's (2021) argument on the interrelatedness between heteronormativity and neoliberal capitalist production to highlight the post-queer migration and transnational aspects of the political economy of heteronormativity. It provides empirical evidence to echo Nguyen's claim that marriage equality rights do not necessarily diminish the force of heteronormativity. On the contrary, the project's Southeast Asian queer migrants' narratives gesture the reinforcement of heteronormativity through homonormativity. The findings sections on the migrants' formation of queer household in their host country and transnational familial obligations and practices point to their continuing implication in the political economy of heteronormativity.

The study makes use of qualitative data collected from in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 15 Southeast Asian queer migrants to understand their local and transnational familial care needs and practices. The self-identifications presented by our respondents include lesbian, lesbian-but, gay, bisexual, demisexual, pansexual, grey sexual, asexual, gender non-binary, gender queer, transgender, trans masculine and pan romantic. The sample shares a common characteristic – they are queer migrants who have displayed mobility privileges and emigrated out of their home country in the Southeast Asian region. Six migrated to Australia, four to the United States, one to Canada, one to the United Kingdom, one to New Zealand and one to Singapore. The study's findings are not meant to be representative of queer migrants from Southeast Asia but provide ethnographic insights into the multiple and diverse migration biographies of queer participants from Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand.

Importantly, the paper shows how queer migrants well-versed in discourses of LGBTIQ+ rights make decisions on their overall wellbeing and queer lives for the present and in the near future based on mobility privileges facilitated by their economic and geographical locations. All 15 Southeast Asian migrants in the study have moved 'West', which this paper refers to as a movement towards wealthy countries that they perceive to be relatively more accepting of their gender and sexual multiplicities than their home country. In line with general global queer migration trends, queer migrants move to countries deemed more progressive indexed through, for instance, the legalisation of same-sex marriage, recognition of civil unions and provision of welfare benefits to non-normative households. Twenty out of 29 countries with legal recognition of same-sex marriage are in Western Europe, North America and the Oceania regions (Human Rights Campaign, 2021). The 20 countries such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Denmark, Australia and New Zealand are also economically developed countries. They therefore make

desirable countries of destination for many queer migrants escaping from their less wealthy home country that criminalises and stigmatises non-normative relationships. Singapore is not exactly the desired destination for queer migrants since this former British colony only repealed its anti-homosexuality colonial law, Section 377A criminalising sex between consenting adult men late 2022 ([Channel News Asia 2022](#)). Alongside the repeal, Singapore's lawmakers voted to change its constitution to enshrine legal heterosexual marriage between a man and a woman ([Channel News Asia 2022](#)). Singapore therefore is not exactly a desired country of destination for queer immigrants attempting to escape queerphobia. However, in the case of the particular Malaysian-Chinese queer migrant respondent with limited class and race privileges as an ethnic minority in Malay majority Malaysian society, and inadequate educational and skill qualifications, their only feasible option was to seek work migration to the nearest neighbouring country, Singapore. The ethnic Malaysian-Chinese respondent would find themselves in a more advantageous position in Singaporean society where ethnic Chinese populations are the majority. This particular respondent reckoned that Singapore, while also inhospitable to queer people, would at least provide some wiggle space for a queer existence away from their social networks. Its close geographical proximity would at least facilitate trips home for family visits. In addition, Singapore is attractive in the sense by being a wealthier and more highly ranked country, and she offers better work opportunities enhancing the respondent's economic and geographical mobilities.

It is important to note that by explaining Southeast Asian societies' queer inhospitable contexts and 'Western' societies as a desirable destination for Southeast Asian queer migrants, the paper does not intend to reproduce a linear, progressive, problematic discourse of Southeast Asian queer migrants moving to queer utopia in the 'West' to live happily ever after with no more discrimination. The paper in fact vehemently opposes to the colonial and racist discourse that the 'West' is 'modern, progressive and liberating' and Southeast Asia or Global South is 'backward, conservative and constrictive' requiring 'Western civilisation'. While Southeast Asian and other people of colour queer migrants attempt to obtain more wiggle space for queer existence, their queer migration biographies will show that simultaneously face other settlement challenges such as racism, xenophobia, sexism and queerphobia of different forms in their predominantly white host societies ([Quah and Tang, 2022](#)). The study's empirical evidence will also point to the challenges and pressures the respondents encountered; hence, it clearly shows that their emigration and settlement experiences are exactly not a bed of roses in the 'Western' host society.

This paper seeks to present a nuanced account of the study's Southeast Asian queer migrants in the following two sections: one, Southeast Asian queer migrants' familial care practices in the host country; and two, their transnational care work for kin in the home country reflect the workings of heteronormativity. The paper discusses the tensions and entangled intimacies the Southeast Asian queer migrants in the sample experience and explores the care strategies they develop to negotiate the tug of war between competing care burdens. It shows how they remain implicated in the political economy of heteronormativity through their care practices despite having moved

away to transgress the heteronormative family model to pursue a queer existence and household. By being co-opted back into the capitalist, heteronormative system to work out their queer household and maintain transnational care work, their migration trajectories are an indictment of seemingly progressive ‘Western’ receiving society and continues to be an indictment of their home society. The very structure privileging heteronormative families and discriminating against queer individuals has in fact been maintained by these overseas queer migrants out of familial obligations and filial piety. While some readers may find that this article’s theoretical and empirical discussion are not particularly groundbreaking, it nevertheless aims to put forth a bold case of feminist intervention for recognition of overseas queer children’s contributions to transnational care remittances, both financial and emotional, to their heteronormative families of origin back in their home country. By analysing lived experiences of Southeast Asian queer migrants through a theoretical framework of political economy and heteronormativity, the article fills the gap in both migration and queer studies, addresses emerging issues affecting queer migrants in a global world and calls for societal and state recognition of their contributions.

The queer migrant household: Working out familial care practices in the host country

Queer studies have discussed extensively how queer individuals transgress heteronormativity by adapting dominant family practices and innovating new ones to work out their queer family biographies (Folger, 2008; Tang, 2018; Tang and Quah, 2017; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). Besides showing how Southeast Asian queer migrants of this study resist heteronormativity by departing from and queering heteronormative family structures and norms, this section is also interested to explore how their care practices in one or more ways get implicated in the political economy of heteronormativity.

After migrating to a relatively more queer-hospitable country, the respondents of this study enjoyed relatively more space and opportunities to form their queer household and develop queer familial care practices. One such respondent was Phoebe, a Singaporean-Chinese cisgender woman in their thirties, identified as lesbian-butch. Phoebe and their lesbian partner decided to move out their home environment that were both registered nurses, an occupation highly desired by their country of destination, Australia. They individually found nursing jobs and made use of the skilled migration pathway to emigrate out of Singapore. In Australia, they formed their queer household, established local social networks with fellow Singaporean migrants, purchased and co-owned a two-storey house and got married when marriage equality was instated on 9 December 2017 (Attorney-General’s Department 2017). Phoebe revealed that they have also started executing their plan to have a baby. They have found a sperm donor and decided that Phoebe’s partner would receive the donated sperm at a fertility clinic and if successful in conceiving, carry the baby. Phoebe explained their plan to me:

So, if you do it by the clinic way, both of our names can be on birth certs. So if you buy the sperm and do it at home, you can only put the mother's name. Yeah, so that's why we're trying to do the proper way...

Building this queer family with their same-sex partner, conceiving a child together and having both mothers' names to be registered on the birth certificate was only made possible after their emigration to a country that legalises same-sex marriage and recognises multiple forms of families and parenthood. Access to legal rights, medical facilities and government subsidies provided the impetus and imagination of starting a queer family and rearing children in their queer household. Yet, their queer parenthood aspirations involving diagnostic tests, purchase of sperms and medical checks have up to that point already cost the couple about AUD5,000. This would not have been possible if Phoebe and their partner were not in a gainfully employed, middle-class and highly educated position. Privileged by Singaporean nationality ranked highly in global hierarchy of nations and Chinese ethnic majority position, Phoebe and their partner were already set up to have relatively greater access to life chances and in their case, queer couplehood and family formation. While it appears that there has been progress in queer rights ticking off these equalising markers such as marriage and parenting, it boils down to class divisions between queer people with capital and queer people without (Nguyen 2021). Those with the 'right and proper' configuration of nationality, race and class privileges, like Phoebe and their partner, will be permitted to access some wiggle space within the border of heteronormative standards to queer their intimacy and familial practices and be incorporated into heteronormative infrastructures. This is exactly what Nguyen (2021) has put forth about the (re) production of neoliberal queer subjects in the political economy of heteronormativity. Instead of being liberated from heteronormativity, queer subjects are reproduced into 'queers with capital and queers without', 'normative queers' and 'queer elites' who have the capital to access reproductive rights, and 'deviant queers' and 'queer outlaws' who do not have the capital to display reproductive citizenship (Nguyen, 2021: 11).

It is not just the cisgender queer women in the sample who have set their baby plans in motion. Seng Huat, a Malaysian-Chinese cisgender gay man in their late twenties, also had plans to start a family with their New-Zealander-Thai gay man partner. Seng Huat was completing their postgraduate studies in New Zealand when they met their partner on an online dating application. 'He was one of the few guys with an Asian face who can understand me', explained Seng Huat, when asked how they found each other. They have since been enjoying an intimate relationship of more than 2 years. Their partner's Thai-Chinese family, also living in New Zealand, has been very accepting of their same-sex de facto union and was fully supportive of their child-rearing plans. Seng Huat's parents residing in Malaysia, on the other hand, were not as supportive of their queer self and relationship. When Seng Huat disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents 2 years ago, they were faced with hostile threats of suicide and disownment. Seng Huat has since taken on a self-preservation route by terminating direct communication with their parents despite continuing to worry about their

parents' health and wellbeing, get updates on their parents through their sibling, feel guilty about not fulfilling their filial duties and be plagued with self-doubts. At the same time, Seng Huat would not end their life-affirming queer existence and relationship in New Zealand just so to please their parents. Discovering that their parents' love for them is being conditional on their conformity to heteronormativity was crushing to Seng Huat. For now, orientating towards their baby plan distracted them sufficiently and gave them hope:

... It's definitely our top priority goal for the next few years. And because my partner is also older than me by five years, we don't want to get to the stage where it's too late to have a child ... I think his parents would prefer surrogacy ... the mom kinda say like maybe it's time for my partner to start getting a baby, so that was my first meeting with her ... because she really likes to have a grandson ...

What is noteworthy here is that Seng Huat's life goal to be a parent was fully supportive by their partner and the latter's Thai-Chinese heteronormative family. Located in a queer hospitable country, Seng Huat and their new Thai-Chinese family could now take part in, what would have been regarded as transgressive in their Southeast Asian home countries, a collaborative process of queer imagination, decision-making and planning for family formation and childrearing.

Evidently, queer parent-hopefuls like Phoebe and Seng Huat inevitably and complicitly implicate themselves in the reproduction of heteronormativity. They engage in what Lisa [Duggan \(2002\)](#) puts forth as homonormativity. [Duggan's \(2002\)](#) homonormativity critique takes aim at how gender and sexual minorities are co-opted into dominant, middle-class, heteronormative framework that promotes lifelong monogamous legal marriage, reproduction, consumption, individualisation and privatisation. The study's queer migrant respondents with parenting aspirations and class privileges join other middle-class, heterosexual prospective parents and leverage fertility infrastructures already set up and well-oiled to reproduce heteronormative families. By placing themselves in sophisticated, extensive reproductive systems of heteronormativity such as global fertility enterprises, transnational surrogacy businesses, national population polices and welfare structures and local caregiving networks, queer migrant respondents such as Phoebe and Seng Huat are embroiled in what [Duggan \(2002\)](#) has discussed about the tight web of homonormativity and neoliberal capitalism. Despite having attempted to escape punitive and discriminatory effects of heteronormativity through queer migration, queer migrants find themselves being pulled back to the heteronormative model and practices such as getting legally married, forming a family and reproducing and rearing children as they work on setting up their middle-class queer household. In doing so, they become caught up in 'queer complicities with dominant neoliberal, imperial, nationalist, racist and heterosexist logics' which 'generates acute dilemmas' ([Luibheid, 2008a: 180](#)). Having no other imagination, model and infrastructure to lean on except to rely largely on the existing heteronormative framework of marriage, family and parenthood, they unavoidably end up reproducing the very structure they seek to resist. More

significantly, as migrants, they work to display characteristics of ‘model migrant’ and productive neoliberal citizenship in their host country (Luibheid, 2008a). Their efforts to set up a queer family albeit mirroring heteronormative notions of family and parenthood and investing money and resources in the reproductive industry seek to legitimise and equalise their queer existence not only as LGBTIQ + individuals and same-sex households but as outsiders, foreigners and immigrants. Queer migrants once again become actors in the political economy of heteronormativity where they actively involve themselves in the ongoing reproduction of neoliberal queer subject that may have displayed sexual and intimacy practices outside of heterosexuality but remain firmly normative in their participation in neoliberal capitalism that in turn perpetuate heteronormativity (Nguyen 2021).

It is not just in the pursuit of parenthood that queer migrants of the study contribute to the buttressing of heteronormativity. Getting married and securing permanent residency to take roots in the country of destination is another area where queer migrants inescapably get implicated in heteronormative structures. Linh’s queer migration story came to mind. Linh, a Vietnamese cisgender woman lesbian in their twenties living in Australia, met their Vietnamese cisgender woman lesbian partner on a dating app. The latter was then residing in Vietnam. They dated long-distance for more than a year and met thrice in person before Linh’s partner emigrated out of Vietnam to be with Linh in Australia. Linh’s partner initially came on a visitor’s visa but stayed on and got married to Linh. Since then, Linh’s partner has been on a dependent’s visa. Linh was holding a graduate visa and subsequently a work visa after completing their undergraduate studies and work internship and settling into a new job. When we met on Zoom for an interview on their queer migration biographies, Linh revealed they were in the process of applying for permanent residency as a married couple and striving towards a more stable future in Australia as a middle-class, settled queer household. The dependent’s visa and permanent residency application process required Linh and their partner to make themselves intelligible and desirable to the heteronormative borders control and immigration system. Getting married, setting up a home and living together, and demonstrating productive capabilities, class position and integration potential by acquiring an acceptable level of English language proficiency, obtaining skill recognition, securing employment and achieve financial stability were some of the work queer migrants like Linh must perform to fit within the local heteronormative framework of citizenship and immigration regimes. These efforts to adhere to standards of heteronormativity to form a queer household and live out queer familial intimacies did not come cheap. Linh explained they have spent close to AUD10,000 thus far and were nowhere close to obtaining permanent residency. There are other costs too that have significant bearings on Linh’s health:

...I feel like I have to do a lot of things. I have to squeeze myself and push myself a lot in order to meet certain requirements and certain deadlines for PR purposes. So my mental health and wellbeing definitely have been affected. I do feel physically weaker ... my breathing has not

been great ... I do feel that my heart is weaker than before, my bodily, physical strength and health has been worse than before ...

It was not just Linh who was carrying all the burdens of working towards a more stable queer existence and future. Linh's partner played a weighty role too. Prior to emigration, they held a Bachelor degree in banking and finance and worked as a banker in Vietnam. After migration, they found themselves unemployed and had to obtain a certain level of English language proficiency before being able to enter the local workforce and gaining the points needed for their joint permanent residency point-based application. They have not been working and were only learning English for the past 2 years since they moved to Australia to be with Linh.

Linh's queer migration experiences were not unique. Several other respondents were in a similar situation of having to put in significant amount of effort, time and money to escape heteronormative pressures and queerphobia back home and create their queer household and familial care practices in the host country. However, in order to live out their queer family life, respondents like Linh, Seng Huat and Phoebe find themselves unescapably participating in and supporting the political economy of heteronormativity. Despite their queer adaptation and reformulation, their queer household resembles the heteronormative family in more than one way (Ritholtz and Buxton 2021). This is in part due to only having access to infrastructures already set up to support the reproduction of the heteronormative family. In the homonormative process, they unavoidably reinforce the very dominant system projecting 'coherence', 'privilege' and 'a sense of rightness' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 548) they seek to transgress (Duggan 2002; Folger, 2008; Hopkins et al., 2013; Nguyen 2021). More importantly, this study shows that mainstream celebratory discourse on queer rights often ignore how queer people are expected and co-opted to display capitalist production value and conform to heteronormativity in order for their 'queerness' to be recognised and included. Even after being allowed to be included through their capital surplus accumulation and diligent efforts to resemble a heteronormative family, the respondents' accounts reveal ongoing challenges around making their queer household and care practices intelligible and acceptable within heteronormative systems of immigration in a relatively more queer-hospitable country. In that way, they encounter more complex immigration and settlement issues as compared to their heterosexual migrant counterparts (Ritholtz and Buxton 2021).

The 'single' child burden: Care work for kin in the home country

...at that time I was 24 years old. I was working at XXX, which does not exactly pay a high salary. I was working like two part-time jobs on top of that ... when I said, why don't you ask my sister? She is 6 years older ... she was married, she didn't have a baby yet ... earned like five times more than me ... my aunt just shook her head and she was like no, no, no, your sister is saving up to buy a house ... Like, this feels very homophobic, you know ... she somehow feels like she can ask me for help, even though I earn less, even though I am

younger, like you know ... this is bullshit right? ... just because she is in the heterosexual relationship, somehow like her commitments are more real, I was like this is bullshit ...

This narrative by Queenie, a Singaporean-Chinese cisgender, bisexual woman researcher located in the United States, provides important insights into the care burdens 'single' queer adult children carry. Queer children like Queenie, especially those who have not disclosed their queer self and relationships to their parents, commonly find themselves perceived as 'single', unmarried and assumed to be more readily available to provide financial and practical support as compared to their legally married, heterosexual siblings. It is important to note that such working of heteronormativity affects unmarried heterosexual children too. Their heterosexual, unmarried counterparts, especially unmarried daughters since care work is typically gendered, face a similar predicament where they are often expected to take on more care work than heteronormative married children (Conway-Turner and Cherrin 2014; Hingorani 2019; Jee 2021).

What can be observed in this study is that queer migrants like Queenie continue to perform transnational care work for their family of origin in the home country post migration and even when their queer existence is met with disapproval and care needs rendered invisible and less important. By taking on such transnational care responsibilities, queer migrants contribute directly to the survival and sustenance of heteronormative families they are related with, hence reinforcing heteronormative structures and nation-building and social reproduction projects of their home country (Butler 1997; Nguyen 2021). Akin to Queenie's care work for her family of origin, other 'single' queer children in the sample continue to provide financial support to their family back in their home country even after emigration. Their financial remittances are significant in maintaining their heteronormative family's capital surplus accumulation. Studies have observed a common familial practice in Southeast Asian region where adult children demonstrate filial piety and reciprocity by looking after their ageing parents, specifically in the form of financial support (e.g., Frankenberg et al., 2002; Teerawichitchain et al., 2015). This is not just a cultural practice that displays specific ethnic and religious beliefs on adult children's filial duty towards elderly parents within the region. It is also a manifestation of familialism that demands family members care for one another instead of turning to the state for care (Crosby and Jakobsen 2020). Familialism, as Crosby and Jakobsen (2020) argue is 'a primary demand of liberal capitalism' (2020: 85) where neoliberal, capitalist governance sees to the privatisation of state's responsibilities to look after citizens, families and vulnerable groups, individualisation of structural problems and ultimately, relief of state's welfare expenditures for the care of its populations. The paper calls for recognition of overseas queer migrants' contribution to the reproduction of heteronormative families and their aspirations, and more broadly, the capitalist state's agendas on privatisation and familialism while being simultaneously marginalised by the exact biased governance approaches.

In this study, several Southeast Asian queer migrant respondents in this study arranged for monthly online fund transfer via internet banking to their parents. For example, Yash, a Singaporean-Indian postgraduate student identified as gender queer and asexual, gave their parents AUD200 every month during their studies in Australia. Residing in Australia

as well, Siok Ling, a Malaysian-Chinese in their forties identified as androgynous, women-attracted, had a creative way of organising the provision of monthly allowance amongst their siblings. Being the oldest of five children, Siok Ling took on the role of looking after their elderly parents and mentoring their younger siblings. They instructed their siblings to contribute 3 hours' worth of wages per week to their parents' allowance. Siok Ling explained that such an arrangement would allow each child to contribute an amount that was relative to their income. They also took care of their siblings by giving them a supplementary credit card where their siblings could use it if they need. Unpartnered, Siok Ling's unwavering goal was to bring their parents and siblings to Australia and build a large house where they could all live together. One may ask why queer migrants like Siok Ling would go to such length to provide care for their family of origin. Perhaps this is because Siok Ling was the oldest child, unmarried and has 'made it' by emigrating to a wealthier country and therefore was expected to look after their younger siblings and elderly parents? Or perhaps this display of self-imposed, internalised and compensatory familialism stemmed from guilt for having moved away to pursue their queer lives and bringing 'shame' to their family? Or perhaps it was just an uncomplicated, uncontradictory manoeuvre that Southeast Asian queer children have mastered – living out their queer existence while being a filial child and committed family member? Like Siok Ling, some Southeast Asian respondents do not find the compartmentalisation of family and personal spheres an issue. Unwelded to a 'Western' coherent narrative of self, some in fact find the separation of personal and family spheres liberating and safe from surveillance, hostility and disharmony. Southeast Asian queer studies scholars like Shawna Tang have discussed the idea of coming home as more important than coming out (Tang 2017). Even in the scenario where some respondents were encountering queerphobia from their family, they remained committed to the care of their family whether they were resentful or not. For them, letting go of their familial care duties was never an option as they are socially expected to look after their parents and siblings in spite of the lack of acceptance from them. This is not to say it is the case for all respondents in the sample. For the former, socialisation of state imposed familialism seems to be more ingrained.

In some cases, not only do queer children provide financial support to their family back home, they also give a monthly allowance to their partner's family. Linh remitted AUD300 to their mother and another AUD300 to their wife's widowed mother every month. Since Linh was the oldest child and Linh's wife was the only child, it is therefore unsurprising that both were committed in providing their mothers a regular monetary allowance. At the point of our conversation, Linh's non-English speaking Vietnamese spouse was unemployed and Linh, being the sole economic provider, took on the financial responsibility of making the monthly remittances. Even when other respondents from different Southeast Asian countries did not provide their parents a monthly allowance, they were not unfamiliar with the practice. Often, it is not the allowance amount that matters but rather, it is about displaying a commitment to their duty of care towards their parents and family of origin. What can be observed here is that state ideology and policies, and cultural expectations go hand in hand in the institutionalisation of familialism.

Besides financial support, these 'single' queer children perform other forms of care work to sustain their heteronormative family of origin. Not dissimilar with heterosexual

migrants, queer migrant respondents carry out transnational care practices of making routine phone and video calls, sending regular text messages, arranging annual trips and buying gifts to maintain intimacy with their family of origin. As observed in some respondents' narratives, keeping regular contact and maintaining familial intimacies with their family back home involves a significant amount of emotion work across the countries. Minyi, a Singaporean-Chinese in their twenties identified as gender questioning and demisexual or asexual, moved to Canada for their postgraduate studies and stayed on after finding employment upon graduation. Throughout their residence in Canada, Minyi performed significant amount of invisible emotion work, particularly in managing their mother's moods and emotional wellbeing. They explained:

[The family] has a Whatsapp group which my mother quit ... she was throwing a tantrum basically ... the reason she quit was because I didn't respond to her for more than two days and she went crazy ... so yeah ... I have a notification now on my Google calendar that tells me to text my mother every two days, so I text her every two days to say I am alive ... I provide emotional caregiving to my mother ... I try sometimes to talk to her about her issues, but it's very hard because it's so personal. I'm like... why do I have to parent my parents?

Minyi, located thousands of kilometres away, continued to carry out intense emotion work to attend to their mother's emotional needs. By taking on the bulk of this emotion work, they relieved their father and brother of the familial responsibility and kept the family intact from afar. Akin to Minyi, several other respondents performed life-sustaining and life-giving care work to preserve heteronormative families back home while departing from dominant family structures to build their queer household. Evident in the accounts of Minyi and several other Southeast Asian respondents, these 'single' queer migrants continued to provide emotional support to their parents and siblings in distress, often acted as the mediator to resolve conflicts amongst family members and even organised household affairs and errands such as grocery and meal delivery, cleaning services, transport pick-up and medical appointments whenever needed.

It goes to show that queer adult children may have left home and country to seek a queer existence and form their own queer household but still bear the multiple burdens of supporting and caring for their heteronormative family of origin. Perhaps less noticed, the financial and emotional care remittances they provide post migration across nations to sustain heteronormative families is in fact significant in strengthening nationalistic heteronormative ideologies and agendas back home. Evidently, their transnational financial and emotional remittances contribute directly to their original heteronormative family's capital surplus accumulation and home nation's social reproduction of heteronormative families, and at the same time, enable the perpetuation of heteronormativity through these transnational capitalist relations. Yet, even when their important contribution relieves state's burden in taking care of its citizens, they remain excluded from resources set aside for heteronormative families. Unbeknownst to them, they unwittingly involve themselves in the political economy of heteronormativity and further solidify heteronormative capitalism, enable queerphobia and deepen their own vulnerability (Ngyuen, 2021).

The queer migrants undoubtedly have to bear some costs of transnational care remittances. As evidenced in Queenie's experience with their family, Queenie's and other 'single' queer children's needs for acquiring financial stability, gaining homeownership, setting up a family and planning for retirement are often rendered invisible and less important compared to their heterosexual counterparts. This remains the case even when they have formed their own queer household and gotten legally married or entered a civil union in countries that permit same-sex marriage. The reasons behind this are multi-layered. To begin, queer individuals may not be able and willing to disclose their queer identity and partnership to their family for fear of disapproving and queerphobic responses. This consequently makes their care practices and needs unknown to their family of origin. Even when they openly live out their queer life and partnership, they may still be treated as not having grown-up responsibilities and adulting burdens of maintaining a family like their married siblings and peers. Since their queer identity and partnership are not considered legitimate in their home society, their care practices and needs are often not taken as seriously by their family. In some instances, unaccepting family members passive-aggressively ignore and disregard their queer relationship and associated care practices and needs as a deliberate display of disavowal of their queer existence. These are all the trickle effects of institutionalised queerphobia and criminalisation of homosexuality that could be observed in the case of Queenie. After disclosing their same-sex relationship to their parents, Queenie was met with strong opposition from their parents and was subsequently presented with the request to provide financial support to her relative. Queenie interpreted that their parents' insistence on them, instead of their elder, more financially competent heterosexual, legally married sister, providing financial assistance to their relative, their parents were attempting to limit Queenie's financial abilities and therefore, preventing them from moving out and pursuing their queer relationship. Despite feeling resentful, Queenie acceded to the request and took money out of their savings to help their relative. The entanglement of heteronormative capitalism is so profound that queer migrants who have moved away and emigrated can never quite disentangle themselves from their involvement and complicity of buttressing the political-economic structures that debilitate and capacitate them simultaneously.

Conclusion

Managing often competing care responsibilities within their own queer household post migration and their family of origin back in the home country has produced points of stress and incongruities in the Southeast Asian queer migrant respondents' trajectories. The tug of war they experienced in splitting their resources between two households is observable in their accounts on local and transnational familial care practices and work. A common source of tension and contradictions – both affective and financial – lies in juggling resource distribution in building a queer household and managing entangled care practices with family back home. Unable and unwilling to abandon their familial obligations and care work, many continue to be implicated in familialism and the political economy of heteronormativity. Though the Southeast Asian respondents have left home and emigrated, they brought with them a strong sense of familial ties and duty. This is not

to say that every respondent of this study maintained familial relations and obligations post migration after experiencing queerphobia, rejection and surveillance from their family members. However, in some cases, though respondents have experienced queerphobia from their family members, they remained committed to support their family. For them, the compartmentalisation, separation and juggling of their queerhood and kin relations have become part and parcel of their queer migrant existence. They seemed content with the physical distance separating them and their family members and lived out their queer existence while caring for their family back home from afar. Unbeknownst to them though, their transnational care efforts buttress the very nationalistic heteronormative structures that have rejected them and they work to transgress and resist. Such is the contradiction they are caught up in.

What is important here and should not be missed is these Southeast Asian queer migrants' involvement in the political economy of heteronormativity. With reference to work by [Crosby and Jakobsen \(2020\)](#) on disability, debility and caring queerly, care labour in survival economies is central yet invisible. In their work, they demonstrate how Christina's everyday survival hinges upon paid care work by domestic and nursing care workers from less wealthy countries and background and unpaid care work by family members including Christina's partner, Janet. The authors explain that an intricate and inter-related system of care labour is required for disabled and vulnerable bodies like Christina and their family to live on and be productive in the workforce ([Crosby and Jakobsen 2020](#)). As similarly observed in this study, the respondents' transnational financial and emotional remittance is crucial in maintaining and reproducing heteronormative families, and in turn, supporting the productivity of the population and overall economy of the home country. However, such instrumental care work 'single' queer children perform and the consequential debilitation in their lives is often invisible.

The cost to these queer migrants should not be overlooked. Many Southeast Asian queer migrant respondents in the sample find themselves straddled with care burdens that took away resources that could otherwise have been used for their settlement and queer household. The impact of debilitation was significant for some queer migrant respondents who were already facing ongoing settlement challenges as a queer migrant of colour in a predominantly white country of destination ([Quah and Tang, 2022](#)). Besides tracking queer migrants' contributions, it is also vital to document the financial and emotional cost to them and the extent of debilitation they suffer from to support their heteronormative family of origin. I argue that queer citizens and migrants deserve equal if not greater recognition for their persevering transnational care efforts to sustain heteronormative families while attempting to carve out their queer existence and set up a queer family. More detailed research to track and document value of Southeast Asian queer migrants' financial and emotional remittance in the region is needed to argue for due recognition of 'single' queer children's local and transnational familial care contributions and provide relevant and much needed policy review recommendations to support queer citizen and migrant children in their local and transnational familial care work.

One may wonder why this recognition of queer migrants' care efforts is important. Since heteronormative structures are deemed as promoting productivity and social reproduction and hence, crucial to a thriving capitalist economy, queer and heterosexual individuals who do not conform to the heteronormative framework are faced with punitive outcomes (Quah, 2020a; Tang and Quah, 2017). Queer citizens are usually not widely recognised as contributing, productive and procreative members of the society due to their locations outside of heteronormative frameworks. They experience exclusion from public goods and resources reserved for heteronormative families, occupy a lower social status and face stigmatisation and expulsion (Quah, 2020a; Tang and Quah, 2017). Though it could be argued that these punitive measures are not a deliberate state strategy to discipline non-conforming citizens, the undesirable outcomes that come to bear on their lives and families are significant (Quah, 2020a; Tang and Quah, 2017). By the same neoliberal governance logic many modern states adopt to endorse the (re)productivity of heteronormative family in nationalistic discourse, I argue queer individuals should be recognised for their (re)productive contribution to keep heteronormative families intact and thriving. They should not be marginalised in any way since they are no less (re)productive than their heterosexual counterparts even after migration as shown in this study. In fact, they often carry a heavier care load to make up for the care gap that their heteronormative counterparts could not fulfil because of their own nuclear family's care burdens. No doubt that I agree with Nguyen (2021) and other anti-racial capitalism feminist scholars that without changing the existing, dominant political economic structure, LGBTIQ+ individuals remain co-opted in the social reproduction of heteronormativity and cannot achieve real queer emancipation. However, in the meantime, while queer citizens and migrants remain implicated in heteronormative capitalist structures, this feminist intervention is a specific call for state recognition of their ongoing, largely invisible and significant (re)productive contributions within these structures and a more equitable policy framework in redistributing resources and rights to them and putting them on par with their heterosexual counterparts.

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