Affective Entanglements at the Ends of the Market: The Intersection of Poetry and Carework for Migrant Worker Women in Taiwan

JENNIFER MARIE NUNES*

As we chatted back and forth on Facebook Messenger about her experience as a caretaker in Taiwan, Erin Cipta, whose work I had recently read in an anthology of migrant worker writing, told me:

> My experience working in Taiwan is good. My employer is very kind, they full fill my right (salary and my basic need), appreciate my religion, I got a lot of bonuses, and they treat me as family. Just if I have to work again in Taiwan, I am willing to work in the same house. Until now, 7 years [ago] I left Taiwan we are still get contact. Me and Ama regularly sending messages each other, greetings each other in every occasion. Recently, we greet for mid autumn festival last Saturday Ama give me a picture of mooncake. (Cipta 2023)

While many women certainly do not have a good experience as in-home caretakers, being "treated like family" or an intimacy with the person or people they care for that gives rise to family-like feelings appears frequently in poetry written by migrant worker women. Umirah, another writer I spoke to over Facebook Messenger in 2023 told me: "I got a job as a caretaker for an elderly person. and that's according to the job I got. but indeed the boss treats me like their own family. I too, take care of her just like I take care of my grandmother. working in Taiwan as a caretaker, made me a person who is more patient and cares more about others" (Ramata 2023).[1] Both of these women speak to the complexity of the careworker position. It is a job, and it is an intimate relationship rife with emotional bonds that shift, stretch, blossom, and warp around proximity and distance as these women care physically for members of Taiwanese families in order to care financially for their own family back home.

*JENNIFER MARIE NUNES is a writer, translator, and scholar finishing up her PhD in Chinese Literature at OSU. Author of three books of poetry and translator of the forthcoming English edition of Taiwanese poet Yen Ai-lin's visceral collection *Bone Skin Flesh* 《骨皮肉》(Balestier Press 2025), Nunes' is the recipient of numerous awards, grants, and fellowships for her work. Her current research, partly supported by a Fulbright-Hays, focuses on the poetry of migrant worker women in Taiwan and China and considers how their poetry does something through the circulation of affect and the formation of community.

[1] These interviews were both conducted in English, which is not Erin or Umirah's native tongue, but is the only written language we share.

Taiwan Lit and the Global Sinosphere
Fall 2025 | Volume 6, Issue 2
DOI: 10.61774/XPUL5196

The beginning of "Love Between a Grandmother and Grandchild" Tình Bà Cháu 阿嬤情 by a Vietnamese poet writing under the name Zhou Shijin 周氏進 is a poignant example of the intimacy and connection migrant women can feel in the position of caretaker:

Love Between a Grandmother and Grandchild	Tình Bà Cháu	阿嬤情
It's been seven years since I arrived to take care of you Every day I clean and help you cook When it's cold, I'm between mattress and blanket But it can't compare to the warmth of your heart Ama! I thank you You love me like your own grandchild I will take up this duty Take care of you like your own child Overcome the difficulties Every day I give you two injections in your feet I feel so bad when your feet hurt And bring water to wash them Looking at you, my heart aches If I could take on your pain, I would Ama, it's been seven years You're like a parent to me We are joined like a shadow Your heart so kind and full of love…[2]	Bảy năm cháu đến chăm bà Ngày ngày quét dọn giúp bà nấu ăn Rét thì dưới đệm trên chăn Ấm sao sánh nổi tấm chăn lòng bà Bà ơi! Cháu cảm ơn bà Bà thương yêu cháu như là cháu con Nhiệm vụ cháu sẽ làm tròn Chăm bà chu đáo như con của bà Khó khăn cháu cũng vượt qua Mỗi ngày hai lượt giúp bà tiêm chân Thương bà những lúc đau chân Cháu bưng nước lại lau chân cho bà Nhìn bà lòng cháu xót xa Nếu đau thay được cháu đau thay bà Bà ơi! Đã bảy năm qua Cháu coi bà giống mẹ cha của mình Bà cháu như bóng với hình Lòng bà nhân hậu nghĩa tình bao la … (2014: 100–101)	我幫您已七年 每日打掃幫您煮飯 天冷下墊上被 您心像冬天的太陽 阿嬤我感謝您 您疼愛我如您子孫 盡責完成工作 顧您周到如您子女 困難我已越過 每天兩次注射您腳 憐您有時腳痛 我捧水來替您擦腳 看您我心哀傷 如能代痛我願替您 阿嬤七年已過 視您如親生父母般 您我如影隨形 您心仁厚情義深長 … (2014: 98–99)

Just as Erin and Umirah have suggested, the speaker in Zhou's poem feels the love that might exist between a grandmother and her grandchild. This bond is stronger than mere affection; it takes on the depth of filial duty. The speaker promises to care for this woman like she would her own mother,

[2] All English translations of poetry are my own. I am currently using the Chinese translation, in conjunction with an understanding of the migrant worker domestic caretaker experience gained from my fieldwork and interviews, and Google translate to translate these poems. In the future, I plan to increase my own language abilities and recruit experts in the language as well as more migrant worker women writers and poets to assist in my process.

going on to demonstrate her empathy, attentiveness, and kindness. This is not a relationship with boundaries cleanly defined by an economic contract.

As live-in caretakers who take on very intimate forms of labor, migrant worker women in Taiwan are positioned both affectively and spatially as (surrogate) family members, and it is not surprising that they develop "feelings of affection and responsibility" alongside the "actions" they take to "provide responsively for …personal needs or well-being" (Cancian and Oliker 2000: 2). As the mayor of Taipei, Hau Lung-pin 郝龍斌, puts it in his foreword to the 2013 edition of *Taipei, Please Listen to Me Again!* 臺北請再聽我說！: "They have lived with us night and day. They have shared their feelings with us. Taiwan is like their home from home" 過朝夕與我們相處，情感交流，臺灣可說是他們的第二個家鄉 (Hau 2013: 11, 7–8).[3] But is Taiwan like a home away from home? Or, how is it *like* a home away from home?

Looking at poetry by migrant worker women that has been selected for publication through a contest run by the Taipei government alongside the paratextual material written by Taipei officials in the published anthologies of prize-winning writers reveals the way migrant worker writing both colludes with and intervenes in state discourses about home, family, and care. On the one hand, the way poetry written by these women voices family-like affective bonds between caregiver and care receiver strengthens the affective grounds long used to devalue carework and props up Taiwan's image as a progressive, cosmopolitan nation. On the other hand, the way their poetry constellates a range of affective experiences around carework illuminates the complexity and profound value of this work, suggesting the need for increased compensation, while also throwing into question the very logic of a capitalist system seeking to quantify and monetize care within a resource extraction model. Ultimately, the poetry of migrant worker women both describes and puts into practice an ethic of care that is oriented toward messy dependency and community.

Carework, Affect, and Poetry

When I use the term carework, I generally refer to a domestic, live-in position where one is hired to care for the elderly, the sick and/or disabled, and/or children. The poems I take up all refer to either the speaker's experience living with and caring for an elderly Ama (grandma) or Agong (grandpa), who generally has severe health issues resulting in disability, or their experience caring for children in the family home. Due to an aging population, inadequate state-sponsored services, and economic and social shifts that have encouraged, supported, and pushed women to leave the home and enter the workforce, the need for elderly care is the biggest cause of Taiwan's push to welcome migrant workers as caretakers. Live-in domestic care workers make it possible to locate elder care in the home by hiring a sort of "surrogate family member to help adult children fulfill" their filial duty (Lan 2022: 5). The notion of "surrogate family member" hints at the positioning of migrant workers and the kinds of labor they perform, anything from cooking, cleaning, and

[3] The forewords to these anthologies are all translated into multiple languages, including English, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Thai. I have chosen to use the English translation from the anthology rather than my own in order to share the language as it would be encountered by a reader of the anthology itself.

helping someone into bed to "administering food and medicine, fulfilling personal hygiene and sanitary needs, providing massages, performing sputum suction and urinary catheterization, accompanying patients to hospitals, and providing shopping services" (Wang and Liu 2018: 119). This kind of work often does not follow a strict timetable with regular down time. Many caretakers are essentially on duty 24/7, sleeping in the same rooms, even the same beds, as those they care for and attending to their needs in an intimate way that resists clear definition and quantification via an hourly wage.

This growing need for carework has located Taiwan within a network of global care chains that have increased the mobility of bodies as domestic workers, alongside other migrant laborers, flow to and through First World cities (Hochschild 2000; Sassen 2001). The gendered construction of carework points both to the fact that these bodies predominantly belong to women and also to the way carework has been transformed into unskilled, low-paid labor in the marketplace. Originally located within the domestic sphere, women were expected to take on carework because of love, duty, and a natural affinity for the work, and to "earn" non-monetary rewards—satisfaction, affection, pride, security, and so on. These origins continue to color the way carework is figured as part of the market economy: "when intimacy becomes employment, it loses status as a labor of love and becomes regarded as unskilled work that anyone can perform because women have undertaken such activities without payment" (Boris and Parreñas 2010: 11). That is to say, women's work in the form of carework or intimate labor is either its own reward or it must be "easy" work. In both cases, it becomes low-paid labor in the marketplace.

The transformation of carework into a form of paid labor in the global marketplace is also inflected by colonial histories and the development of global capitalism, meaning gender is not the only factor at play. The way migrant women are moved into and through domestic caretaker positions in Taiwan is structured by a localized gendered-racialized logic that has strongly felt material consequences. For instance, both intermediary brokers—private entities to which the Taiwanese government has largely outsourced the management of domestic migrant labor—and employers (individuals) in Taiwan express a general "preference for lighter skin, which exhibits a similarity with, and allows for more inclusion in, local Taiwanese society," and strong feelings about the different "natural abilities" of women from different countries, which impacts the kinds of caretaking roles these women are offered (Loveband 2004: 337). While my goal is not to demonstrate different poetics rooted in categories of identity, I want to make clear that the experiences these women have as caretakers in Taiwan are inflected by physical and felt identity markers beyond those of gender. This is important, first, because it is essential to complicate a simplistic approach to understanding carework that looks only through the lens of gender, and, second, because it informs my choice to use the circulation of affect as a means of exploring how migrant women negotiate the shifting bonds of care.

The way emotions and bodies figure in structuring the care chains in East and Southeast Asia is, in part, the reason I have taken up affect as an entry point into poetry written by migrant worker women. Affect theory originated in psychology's interest in the biology of emotions as innate, universal responses driving consciousness and has been taken up by literary and gender studies

often to identify how affect shapes social values, gender ideals, and collective groups. Affect is thus one way to consider how ideas and discursive practices manifest in the material world through embodied responses that can lead to a range of individual and group actions. While these embodied responses can take the form of emotions, and I look at how feelings like love and loss circulate in and around the concept of carework, the concept of "emotions" generally points to nameable, known states of being, and "affects are becomings," they "signify the intensities and potentialities of feeling sad or joyful that can either place the body within existing social relationships or prompt her to go out into the world, into other forms of social relationships" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 60; Piocos 2021: 8). That is, examining affective discourses around carework attends to the dynamic state of precarity and possibility in which these women live. For another thing, conceiving of the experience of loss, for example, "as a mere feeling or emotion" limits understanding to an individual's inner experience (Piocos 2021: 8). Affect puts emotions between bodies, the textual as well as the corporeal, and as a theoretical framework turns the conceptual lens towards relationality and interconnectedness. Affect, therefore, is an entry point into the way political ideologies and social communities form and move as well as an entry point into the emotional and embodied nature of carework.

Poetry, too, trucks in affect. As an expressive mode of writing, it is often used to interrogate and share highly emotional experiences or to examine the experience of emotion itself. The poetry I have read by migrant worker women almost always explores emotions in relatively direct ways. Furthermore, poetry moves. Not only can migrant workers type out a poem on a cellphone, but they can easily circulate it, quickly posting their writing to social media, messaging it to a friend, or submitting it to a writing contest. Thus, poetry written by migrant worker women is a valuable site for considering how these women engage in the circulation of affect and affective discourses around carework. Moreover, poetry has long been considered an elite mode of literary production. As a genre with high cultural value, poetry has the potential to lend (a feeling of) credibility to those who write it and to what they write. It is, perhaps, a way for those occupying a lower social status to insert their voices into a higher social stratum, and it has been a way for migrant worker women to circulate a range of affective experiences within and beyond their own communities.

In fact, the poems I look at below are all published in anthologies collected from winning entries to the Foreign Worker's Poetry Writing Competition 外籍勞工詩文比賽, a venue founded and run by the Taiwan Labor Commission—an arm of the national government. Each of these anthologies, entitled *Taipei, Please Listen to Me Again!* 臺北請再聽我說！or *Taipei, Listen to Me* 臺北聽我說 and spanning the years 2006 to 2018, begins with a foreword by the Taipei mayor and/or the Labor Commissioner and contest judges, which helps to situate the poetry for their readership. These forewords rely heavily on affect as a political tool, which it is well suited for because affect "assists in making us susceptible to the emotion effects and power influences of … social forces and ideologies" (Harding 2004: 875). As I will show, readers enter these anthologies through a Taiwanese discourse around care and migrant labor that is constructed to maintain the power differentials that undergird the current configuration of the care economy, and this same discourse runs through the poetry selected for publication by these government-run contests.

However, the way affect is attached to carework in these poems also disrupts government discourse, gesturing toward an ethic of care as migrant worker women navigate the sticky, unfixed bonds of messy dependence.

Citizen Family-like-ness and a Modern Taiwan

The Taiwanese government is well aware of how dependent the country is on migrant labor to care for its aging population, and this sentiment certainly appears in the forewords to the *Taipei, Please Listen to Me Again!* anthologies. Migrant workers have come from far away, leaving family, friends, and country, to become "an integral part of us that supports the development of our society" 成為支撐社會發展不可或缺的力量 (Lai 2017: 8, 7); to make "major contributions" 貢獻鉅大 (Chen 2014: 31, 28); and to ensure "30 thousand families [benefit] because of our migrant friends providing laborious service" 亦即約有三萬個家庭受惠於這些外勞朋友，提供繁瑣耗力的照顧服務 (Ma 2006: 12, 7). However, while there are occasional references to political protections, these forewords continually lean into a discourse of care, often grounded in a familial relationship, to address any negative aspects of the migrant worker experience. By focusing on the relationships migrant workers form with Taiwanese citizens, attention is shifted away from political and structural change toward individual and interpersonal affective exchanges.

Sometimes the language of family belonging is overt. For instance:

> "We could perceive the family-like love and friendship established between workers and Taiwanese people" 我們可以感受到他們與國人之間建立像家人般的親情與友誼 (Lai 2015: 10, 8)
>
> "Domestic caregivers are closely related to the family of employers by taking over the most painstaking care work of the elderly and patients for many families" 而家庭看護工更為許多家庭的長輩、病患承擔了最辛苦的看護工作，他們與雇主的家庭息息相關(Chen 2014: 31, 27)
>
> "We ought to regard foreign workers as family instead of outsiders" 將外勞視為家人...而非外來者 (Hau 2014: 12, 9)

In each of these examples, the closeness and the otherness of the domestic worker takes shape around a family-*like*-ness. The role within the Taiwanese family is acknowledged, even lauded in terms of the good feelings it produces and the kinds of labor undertaken, while at the same time the "foreign" status of migrant workers is always apparent in phrasing and word choice: "family-*like*" 像家人般的, "the family *of employers*" 雇主的家庭, and "to regard *foreign* workers *as* family instead of *outsiders*" 將外勞視為家人...而非外來者 (emphasis mine). This discourse is

extended to the relationship migrant workers have with Taiwan or Taipei as well, where the "host" country becomes a home-*like* place:

> "The poetry exhibits their rich emotion and concept of struggling as well as their touching sentiment of treating Taipei as their second hometown" 字裡行間常見他們豐富的感情、打拼的精神，以及把臺北當成他們第二個家鄉的心情，令人動容 (Chen 2014: 32, 27)

> "They have lived with us night and day. They have shared their feelings with us. Taiwan is like their home from home" 透過朝夕與我們相處，情感交流，臺灣可說是他們的第二個家鄉 (Hau 2013: 11, 7–8)

This sentiment also comes through in more subtle ways that betray a desire, from the perspective of the Taiwanese, that migrant workers develop positive affective connections with Taiwan. For instance, in 2017, the Labor Commissioner "hopes" 希望 that through this contest migrant workers will find "Taiwan is no longer an island of hard work to them, rather, it's an island of literature that is filled with inspiration and artistic thoughts" 臺灣不再是外籍勞工朋友眼中的辛勞之島，也是盈滿靈感與文思的文學之島 (Lai 2017: 9, 7). In 2016, she similarly hopes Taipei will "also be the connection of the beautiful memories" 更可以連結美好的記憶 (Lai 2016: 10, 8). In other words, the Taiwanese government appears deeply invested in presenting Taiwan as a supportive and home-like place, "a land of humanity and justice," 有情有義的土地 (Hau 2013: 13, 9), as experienced by migrant workers.

One reason for this is that using a discourse of home and family allows Taiwan to further its nation-building project through multiculturalism and inclusivity, setting it apart from a China seen by the Western world to be insular, unfeeling, and homogenous, despite similarities and/or differences in policies pertaining to migrant labor between the two nations. The focus becomes how at home Taiwan is able to make its "foreign friends" feel, because the ability to make them—the foreign other—"feel at ease and happy" indicates "whether Taipei City can be a healthy cosmopolitan city or not" 如何讓這些遠離家園，在異鄉作的外勞朋友，愉快自在，將是檢視台北市能否成為一個健康大都會城市之重要指標 (Ma 2006: 13, 8). In fact, in 2006 the mayor of Taipei suggests that "publishing this poetry collection" can lead to "more consideration, more understanding, more tolerance and care for our migrant friends. And then Taipei City will be a multicultural cosmopolitan city of the world" 這本外勞詩文選集的印行，能引發更多人對外勞的關懷，彼此間能有多一層的認識和多一點的寬容與照顧，一是本市成為多元文化薈萃的國際城市 (Ma 2006: 13, 8). I locate an extension of the affective discourse of home and family in the welcoming/good feeling these sentiments construct around the language of "feeling at ease," "understanding," and "care." This home and family-*like* feeling figures Taiwan as modern through inclusivity and tolerance—and thus worthy of nationhood.

Beyond its global image, a discourse of home and family, accompanied as it is by a number of specific affective registers—ease, comfort, care, warmth—allows Taiwan to discursively shift the responsibility for the well-being of migrant workers from its own shoulders, the shoulders of policy, to those of Taiwanese citizens more generally and Taiwanese families more specifically. As Lan points out, the Taiwanese government has increasingly moved to "outsource" the governance of workers "to commercial brokers and employers," meaning private companies and individuals are responsible for managing the movements of migrants (Lan 2022: 6). Perhaps that is why it is necessary to promote poetry that "helps Taipei citizens to understand their [migrant workers'] feelings more and treat them with sincerity and respect" 讓台北市民更了解他們的心境與感受，從而能真心誠意的互相尊重與包容 (Shih 2006: 32, 29) and that "remind us the Taiwan employers, should provide friendly working environments and healthy system so that the foreign workers could work without fears and improve their lives" 提醒著身為臺灣主人的我們，必須提供友善的環境與健全的制度，讓 他們在異鄉也能無所畏懼地冒險，改變自己 的人生 (Chen 2012: 28–29, 25). This emphasis on "becoming a friendlier city filled with warmth" 成為更友善的、更有溫度的城市 (Lai 2016: 10, 8) and "car[ing] more for the foreign worker friends" 一起關懷外 勞朋友 (Chen 2012: 29, 25) as a means of improving their working conditions locates the well-being of migrant workers in the kinds of positive affective experiences that are produced by interpersonal relationships rather than in legal protections or adequate pay.

My point is not that there is anything wrong with urging for or creating the circumstances that will encourage positive affective experiences for migrant workers in Taiwan. Rather, what I see is a discursive strategy that shifts responsibility for the well-being of migrant workers to interpersonal rather than political interventions and positions migrant workers as adjacent to (the) Taiwanese families(y) in ways that undermine their status as self-actualized agents and professionals. In this context, reading poetry in these anthologies—and elsewhere—that similarly takes up the discourse of home and family, that dwells on affective pleasures and interpersonal bonds, that thanks Taiwan for all it has offered, can feel a little…icky. This poetry does not demonstrate the kind of class consciousness or feminist outrage that, as a Western scholar deeply invested in making visible and disrupting the way systems of power operate to maintain political, economic, and even aesthetic hierarchies, I want to see. And it would be disingenuous to argue that these poems, selected by the institutions that benefit from circulating this kind of affective discourse, do not participate in that circulation in ways that collude with those systems of power. At the same time, even in the poems that seem to most directly express emotions and experiences aligned with institutional strategies to maintain power, I feel other registers at work.

A Poetics of Care(work) and Messy Dependence

One rather simple way in which migrant worker women complicate the -*like*-ness of home and family as constructed above is by expressing how these bonds result not just in warmth and comfort, but also in sadness and loss. As caretakers for the elderly, these women often suffer as they watch those they care for suffer, even to the point of accompanying them through death and mourning

their passing. In the excerpt above from "Love Between a Grandmother and Grandchild," the speaker expresses a deep empathy for the Ama she cares for: "Looking at you, my heart aches / If I could take on your pain, I would" Nhìn bà lòng cháu xót xa / Nếu đau thay được cháu đau thay bà 看您我心哀傷 / 如能代痛我願替您 (Zhou 2014: 100–101, 98). The speaker in "Two Angels" Hai thiên thần bé nhỏ 兩位小天使 by Phùng Thị Lan Anh expresses a similar sentiment: "Step by step my children learn to walk / Mama gently guides them / When they slip and fall / Mama's heart hurts" Từng bước con tập đi / Mẹ nhẹ nhàng dìu dắt / Khi trượt chân con ngã / Trong lòng mẹ quặn đau 兒學每一步 / 母細心扶攜 / 愛兒失足倒 / 母內心絞痛 (Phùng: 2012: 107, 105). In both cases, the relationships forged through carework are an entanglement of love and pain.

Then, there is the experience of watching someone you care for intimately pass out of this world. In Sri Lestari's poem, "Matryoshka" Matriyoskha 俄羅斯套娃, the speaker takes us through the slow decline of the woman she cares for, using the metaphor of a Russian doll to represent how many "lives" this woman seems to have—how many times she has dipped close to death. The speaker sits near her Ama in the hospital, praying for her recovery: "Hang on…hang on… / My quiet prayers turn to imploring / … Ati…am I going to die? / You asked / Of course I said no / Because you have seven lives / Like a Russian doll" 堅持住…堅持住… / 我輕輕的祈禱變成了哀求 / …阿蒂…我會死嗎? / 你當時那樣問 / 我當然回答還沒 / 因為你有七條命 / 跟俄羅斯套娃一樣 (Lestari 2018: 124). In these lines, the depth of the speaker's emotional connection is expressed through the repetition of "hang on" and the way her prayers turn toward desperation. The closeness this Ama feels to her caretaker also comes through as she voices to her the fear of death: "*... Ati…am I going to die?*" Even through her own fear and sadness, the speaker attempts to reassure the older woman. Similarly, the Vietnamese poet publishing under her Chinese name, Ruan Shihua 阮氏花, writes about the loss of the woman she cares for with heart-wrenching sadness in her poem "Nighttime Longing for Ama!" Đêm vắng nhớ bà! 夜靜思念阿嬤! : "My heart hurts and tears flow / I look to the night sky, and call out to her in the empty night / Two days without her! Two sleepless nights / My eyes fill with tears, remembering the moment of separation" Không vất vả, lo âu mà lòng dạ rối bời / Tim cuộn đau và nước mắt cứ rơi / Cháu nhìn trời đêm, gọi bà trong đêm vắng / Hai ngày vắng bà, hai đêm cháu thức trắng / Mắt lệ tuôn tràn nhớ giây phút biệt ly 心中絞痛眼淚直流 / 仰望夜空、靜夜裡哭喚您 / 兩天不見！我兩晚失眠 / 眼淚四溢憶起別離時 (Ruan 2015: 88, 82). The pitch of the speaker's sadness reverberates through her body—pain, tears, empty calls, sleepless nights. These intense feelings of loss offer a messier image of the family-*like*-ness Taiwan has to offer than do the forewords discussed above.

Furthermore, even when the work of care does not end in the separation of death, it necessarily ends in a separation. Looking again to Zhou's poem, the affectionate, even loving rendering of the relationship between caretaker and the woman she cares for takes a turn at the end with the speaker's inevitable return home: "Vietnam and Taiwan separated by an ocean / Grandma and grandchild far apart, we'll miss each other deeply / On the day I return home, I will leave my tears here / Two tracks flowing down my cheeks" Việt-Đài cách trở đại dương / Cháu bà xa cách nhớ thương vơi đầy / Ngày về lệ giử lại đây / Hai hàng lệ chảy đong đầy bờ mi 越台相隔千里 / 您我

遠隔無限思念 / 返鄉日情留此 / 心中不捨淚流滿面 (Zhou 2014: 101, 99). Ending on the return home emphasizes the -*like*-ness of family in bonds of affection that one can never entirely settle into.

The nature of this geographical distance also makes apparent the way dependency flows in both directions along the bonds of carework and decenters Taiwan as a "cosmopolitan city of the world," resituating it more firmly as one locus in a web of transnational dependencies. Inserting physical distance rather than cultural, national, or socio-economic distance between caretaker and receiver of care, particularly where it is the "foreign friend" who has mobility and will leave behind someone who clearly cares for and depends on her, works to undermine the paternalistic hierarchy embedded in the language of being "considerate" to migrant workers. This is a separation and distance both caregiver and care receiver might feel equally—the speaker in Zhou's poem states grandmother and grandchild will "miss *each other*" (emphasis mine) twice in the last five lines—if differently; it is not only caretakers who risk loneliness and discomfort. Those receiving care must navigate their own dependencies.

From the perspective of returning home, the experience of family-*like*-ness for migrant workers is also no longer centered in a multicultural, urban Taiwanese dreamscape. Instead, it is fundamentally structured by transnational political and economic forces that have forced both caretaker and receiver to disrupt the basic structures of their families of origin. Lacea's poem "Living With my Dreams in Taiwan" 在台灣實現我的夢想 firmly decenters Taiwan as the speaker expresses joy at returning home and highlights the fact that Taiwan is a place of work that she has only traveled to in order to support her own family: "Next year my final working contract is expiring / Inside of me, going back my home country, smiling / Now all my children, college degree is done / But in my heart, it's certain I'll miss everyone. / Thank you and so long Taiwan!" 明年我的最後工作合約即將到期，回到我的祖國，我所有的孩子微笑著等待我，大學學位都完成了，但是在我的心裡，我會非常想念每一位。 / 謝謝你再見了臺灣！(Lacea 2017: 126, 120).[4] Imroatus Solehah does something similar, starting with the very title of her poem, "Meeting and Leaving" Pertemuan Dan Perpisahan 見面與分離. She focuses on the fact that "There is a meeting, there must be a leaving / no one can prevent it" Ada pertemuan, pasti ada pula perpisahan / Dan tiada siapapun yang mampu menghalang 見面，一定會有分離 / 沒有人能夠阻止 (Solehah 2006: 150, 146), and her speaker tells us that, "Even though I have boundless love for you" Walau sayangku padamu tak terkira 我有無盡的愛 (151, 146), now "our work ties" oleh karena ikatan kerja 我們之間契約 (151, 147) have ended, and it is time to return home. She wishes Agong well and hopes he finds a new caretaker. There is care and affection, even love, on the part of the speaker. Yet, her matter-of-fact discussion of the nature of their relationship, their work ties, suggests that this love may not exceed Agong's longing for or dependence on her and his need to now find "a reliable person to take care of you" lagi penjaga / Yang setia menemanimu di hari senja 這個值得信賴的人會照顧著你 (151, 147). Moreover, because we stay in the speaker's

[4] Lacea, a Filipina woman, who as of 2017 had worked as a caretaker for eleven years, originally wrote this poem in English.

perspective and do not get to know what happens to Agong, it is clear that they are not family who will keep in touch across an ocean; she is an economic migrant leaving her place of employment and her employer behind.

Indeed, the -*like*-ness of a Taiwanese family and home in the poetry of migrant worker women is also inflected by the reality of their status as paid employees. Just as Erin and Umirah use the language of "employer," "job," and "contract" above to describe their experiences, both Lacea and Solehah write speakers that make clear the economic nature of the relationship between themselves and those they care for. Lacea further underscores the economics thus: "I come to Taiwan to work with my life's goal, / To have a house on my own, be it simple, / To give my family a decent life back home, / To send my children until college education. / I've been working here for eleven years, / While my daily tasks sometimes in tears, / But every time my children enters in my head" 為了我的生活目標我來到臺灣工作，/ 讓我能擁有自己的房子 / 簡單來說，給我的家人一個像樣的生活回家，/ 及供應我的孩子讀到大學畢業 / 我一直在這裡工作了十一年，/ 雖然我在日常工作中還是會流淚，/ 但是一旦我的孩子進入腦海中時 (Lacea 2017: 121, 116). She goes on to build intimate relationships with the elderly people she cares for, but it is her economic situation and the success of her children that informs her choice to come to Taiwan and helps her persevere. Furthermore, the sadness expressed by the speaker in her poem when the first grandfather she cares for passes on is colored by the way it affects the speaker's circumstances: "Farewell grandfather! Everybody was mourning, / And now it's me, sad and left wondering, / Where do I go from here?" 永別了祖父！ 每個人都在哀悼， / 現在是我，悲傷而離開，我想知道， / 我何去何從？ (124, 119). Saying goodbye to the man she's been caring for is both an emotional loss and the loss of employment and stability. These two excerpts illustrate the way material dependency is wrapped up in the emotional entanglements migrant workers experience in Taiwan: Love, affection, and grief for those they care for cannot be separated from their need for stable housing and financial support to care for their own families, whom they long to return to.

This careful foregrounding of the economic and professional dimensions of migrant worker life in Taiwan is deepened in poetry that illustrates the difficult nature of the work these women do and how those they care for depend on them. While the discourse of family affect heavily circulated in the forewords to these anthologies implies that kindness, warmth, comfort, and inclusiveness go a long way toward compensating migrant workers for their labor, the emphasis in these poems on how hard they work and the skills they must accrue argues for a different accounting and recognition of the value of carework. Nguyễn Thị Hoa, in her poem "Success in Formosa" Thành công nơi Đảo Ngọc 成功在寶島, not only lists all of the caretaking skills—language, cooking, and cleaning—the speaker needs to succeed in her job, emphasizing their nature as learned skills by repeatedly describing how her employer is kind enough to teach them to her, but also gives a rich description of the labor involved in caring for the elderly: "New moon, full moon / She is making progress but it's hard / I worry in my heart / She's still weak, what do we do?/ I think hard / Chinese and Western treatments / Every day I massage her with hot salts / To relax the body and help blood flow / Day by day, months pass / Taking care of her was hard,

but success! / When she is happy, so am I / The family thanks and praises me" Trăng non rồi đến trăng tròn / Bà ngày tiến bộnhưng còn khókhăn / Thật lòng trong dạ nghĩ suy / Bà nay vẫn yếu ta nên làm gì? / Lương tâm suy nghĩ pháp y / Đông y kết hợp ta thời Fù jiàn / Ngày ngày rang muối mát xoa / Cho gân bà giãn huyết thông khắp người / Ngày qua ngày tháng lại qua / Gian nan vất vả chăm bà thành công / Bà vui tôi cũng vui lây / Gia đình khâm phục công dầy biết ơn 日復日又月圓 / 阿嬤進步仍難走路 / 心中擔憂想著 / 阿嬤身弱該如何？ / 盡心盡力幫阿嬤 / 中西醫配合同復健 / 天天炒鹽按摩 / 筋肉放鬆血液流通 / 日復日月復去 / 困難辛苦顧嬤成功 / 阿嬤快樂我也樂 / 家人稱讚感恩功勞 (Nguyễn 2016: 78–79, 67). The woman in this poem is thoughtful and attentive, resulting in improvement in the health and well-being of the elderly woman she cares for and praise from her employer. She is a skillful and hard-working caretaker, and the family she works for depends on her.

The crucial role caretakers play in the health and well-being of care receivers appears throughout these poems. Agus Susiyanti carefully builds the importance of her speaker's role in the life of the Ama she cares for by describing the physical and emotional work she does, which ultimately positions her as the most important person in her Ama's life:

> At night everyone is deep asleep and dreaming sweetly / I stay beside you, listening patiently to your complaints / This tired body is fine, it doesn't matter if I can keep you company / Ama… / No matter if you long forget how to walk, I will always support and carry you / No matter if you forget you know me, I won't be sad / No matter if you're angry with pain and suffering / I will learn to care for you and dote on you even more earnestly / There's just one thing that makes me happy / You can still call out my name / You might not recognize anyone else, / but you still remember my name
>
> Disaat malam semua orang terlelap menikmati mimpi / Aku masih setia bersamamu mendengarkan segala keluh kesahmu / Badan ini lelah , tak apa asal bisa menemanimu / Ama... / Walaupun engkau lupa bagaimana caranya berjalan / Aku akan selalu sabar menuntun dan memapahmu / Walaupun engkau lupa tidak mengenalku, setidaknya aku tidak pernah bersedih / Walaupun engkau sering marah-marah karena rasa sakit yang engkau derita / Justru aku akan belajar lebih tulus lagi menjaga dan menyayangimu / Setidaknya satu hal yang membuatku bahagia / Engkau masih bisa memanggil namaku (Susiyanti 2017: 72–73)
>
> 夜晚中大家沉睡著享受美夢 / 我仍然守著您聆聽您的抱怨 / 身體累了也無所謂 只要能夠陪伴您 / 奶奶 / 雖然你已忘了如何踏腳走路 / 我會一直耐心地扶您背您 / 雖然您忘記了也認不得我，至少我從來沒有悲傷 / 在您的怒氣裡感受到您所受病痛的辛苦 / 反而我會更認真守護與疼愛您...至少有一件事讓我

> 很開心 / 您仍然可以呼叫我的名 / 雖然您誰都不認得，但您只記住我姓名 (Susiyanti 2017: 70)

The sacrifices the speaker makes to care for this older woman are so significant that even after Ama no longer recognizes her own family, she recognizes her caretaker. Solehah's poem "Meeting and Leaving" makes the vital role caretakers can play in the lives of those they care for even more explicit:

> Agong, / I care for you from morning to night / No matter if I don't get enough sleep / My exhausted body feels nothing / I hope you're not distressed / Agong, / No one cares about you / No one cares about your physical condition / No one listens to your cries / Relatives leave like the wind blows
>
> Kakek tua, / Siang malam kau kujaga / Kurang tidur tak mengapa / Badan penat pun tak kurasa / Asalkan engkau tiada bermuram durja / Kakek tua, / Tiada yang peduli dengan dirimu / Tiada yang mau tahu sakit sehatmu / Tak ada yang mau dengar keluh kesahmu / Sanak saudara hanyalah angin lalu (Solehah 2006: 149)
>
> 阿公，/ 我從早到晚照顧你 / 睡眠不足沒關係 / 疲倦的身軀毫無感覺 / 希望你不要苦惱 / 阿公，/ 沒有人理你 / 沒有人在乎你的身體狀況 / 沒有人聽你的哭訴 / 親人如同風吹過般離去 (Solehah 2006: 144–145)

In these configurations of family-*like* bonds, it is the domestic caretaker, the "foreign friend," who becomes the central family figure in the lives of the Taiwanese person they care for.

Following these examples, carework begins to take the shape of a constantly shifting and uncertain network of emotional, financial, and material connections. In *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability,* Akemi Nishida puts forth "messy dependence" as a way to conceptualize the human condition and the work of care. In her exploration of the care economy in the United States and the challenges caregivers and receivers both inside and outside of the healthcare industrial complex face, Nishida finds that the liberatory possibilities of interdependence can be complicated by a desire for or leaning toward reciprocity. Messy dependence is a way to center the experience and perspective of disabled people, who can show us "what the generative wealth of need and dependency is" (Nishida 2022: 149–150). The messiness Nishida inserts into the concept of dependency is particularly apt when discussing the experiences of migrant workers, as she draws on Martin F Manalansan IV's theorizing around queer immigrants, affect, and nationalism. As Nishida puts it, Manalansan "illustrated messiness as the reality and portal for queer migrant futurity against the backdrop of how neat categorization and measurement of populations have been used as a colonial and capitalist mechanism for controlling and disciplining queer migrants" (130). In other words, Nishida pushes back against a Western, strongly American, neoliberal understanding of personhood rooted in the fully self-

determined, independent individual. She locates something essentially human in the uneven and unfixed bonds of care that connect us, suggesting we look to those most dependent, those whose bodies and configurations of being are considered most unruly by the systems of power interested in control and discipline, as we imagine more humane and caring futures.

I see this messy dependence in the poetry of migrant women working as domestic caretakers in Taiwan, "a sticky, oozy, glue-like substance leaking out of our bodyminds, reaching out and sticking to others," ultimately forming complex affective bonds and relationships that challenge neat systems of categorization, whether articulated through the language of economic compensation, professional responsibilities, national borders, or family relationships (Nishida 2022: 149). In the context of the care economy, the poetry of migrant worker women makes visible and felt the laborious, skilled, and necessary nature of the work these women do, making an argument for increased pay and improved working conditions. Intentional or not, read together, these poems construct a collective voice that is powerful and points to a shared experience by migrant worker women and a shared sense of their own value. At the same time, because this shared experience and sense of value is deeply rooted in affective experiences, these poems make visible the failure of a capitalist system, built around the notion of independent individuals and skills-based regimes, to account accurately or satisfactorily for the work of care. The way these poems express the messy dependence of carework, where the experience of caring is made felt as a complex, poignant, painful, and pleasurable entanglement, argues for the fundamental importance of care itself as an ungovernable act.

Coda: Poetry as Care

In Joan C. Tronto's exploration of care as an ethic, she painstakingly parses the construction of care in a Western moral framework where "moral boundaries exist and function … to maintain the positions of the powerful" (Tronto 1993: 20). In this context, she notes that "it is difficult to know whether the least well off are less well off because they care and caring is devalued, or because in order to devalue people, they are forced to do the caring work" (113). In other words, when those occupying the position of caregiver voice their investment in care itself, it is easy to devalue this sentiment, either using it to justify continued exploitation by romanticizing the lives and moral character of those who, because they are living in precarity, are "more likely to exhibit an ethic of care," or writing it off as a practice of "plac[ing] too much value on their contributions to the lives of those they help" in order to make up for "the inadequate value society places upon their work." But Tronto argues that these expressions of the value of care are in fact "a proper reflection of the value of human life" (117). So, while there are many possibly contractionary reasons why the poetry of migrant caregivers published in these government-sponsored anthologies articulates feelings of family-*like*-ness—including the agenda of the institutions selecting which poems get published and the self-selection of writers who may be familiar with what kind of sentiments tend to appear in winning poems—I argue that it is both valid and important to read this poetry as an expression of the value of care itself, not just as work, but as an ethical practice—a mode of being.

Indeed, the very act of writing and sharing poetry becomes a practice of care. Both Umirah and Erin told me that their interest in writing and sharing writing helped them to meet other migrant workers and/or writers online and form communities where, “when we get bored or something, we can talk and write everything about anything” (Ramata 2023). Even now, when she is no longer working in Taiwan, Erin continues to write with her virtual friends. Not only does writing poetry allow one to make space for the personal amidst the day-to-day work of caring for others, but it is an important means of solidifying community amongst a group of people who do not often get to physically share space. Being a part of a community lends strength. This strength can be found in shared affect, in seeing reflected in the words of another your own experiences and feelings—feelings you have felt, but now, rather than feeling them alone, you get to feel them alongside the poet. This strength can also manifest in the material world, in the sense that once these women are connected, they rely on each other for various kinds of help, whether in the form of snacks and gossip together in the park, information about how to escape to shelters and navigate their rights, or the kind of moral support necessary to persevere. Finding and growing community through poetry is a radical, often messy act of resistance and care when the political and economic forces of global capitalism seek to benefit from one’s silence and isolation.

References

Boris, Eileen and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas. “Introduction.” In *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. Eds. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010, pp. 1–12.

Cancian, Francesca M. and Stacey J. Oliker. *Caring and Gender.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000.

陳業鑫 Chen Yesin.《局長序》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 12 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市政府勞動局編印, 加斌有限公司, 2012, pp. 22–37.

———.《局長序》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 14 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 時代數位內容股份有限公司, 2014, pp. 26–45.

Cipta, Erin. Personal Interview. 2023.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. London, Athlone Press, 1988 [Published in the U.S. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987].

Harding, Jennifer and E Deidre Pribram. “Losing Our Cool?: Following Williams and Grossberg on Emotions.” *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 6 (2004) 863–883.

郝龍斌 Hau Lung-pin.《市長序》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 13 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市政府勞工局編印, 時代數位內容股份有限公司, 2013, pp. 6–25.

———.《市長序》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 14 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 時代數位內容股份有限公司, 2014, pp. 6–25.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. “Global care chains and emotional surplus value.” In *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*. Eds. Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens. London: Jonathan Cape, 2000, pp. 130–146

Lacea, Irene Alaba. “Living with My Dreams in Taiwan.” In《臺北請再聽我說！第 17 屆外籍勞工詩影選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 傳動數位設計印刷有限公司, 2017, pp. 116–126.

賴香伶 Lai Hsiang-Ling.《局長序》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 15 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 時代數位內容股份有限公司, 2015, pp. 6–17.

———.《局長序》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 16 屆外籍勞工詩影選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 眞昀書店有限公司, 2016, pp. 6–17.

———.《局長序》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 17 屆外籍勞工詩影選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 傳動數位設計印刷有限公司, 2017, pp. 6–17.

Lan, Pei-Chia. “Contested skills and constrained mobilities: migrant carework skill regimes in Taiwan and Japan.” *Comparative Migration Studies* 10, no. 1, article no. 37 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00311-2

Lestari, Sri. “Matriyoskha” 《俄羅斯套娃》. In《臺北聽我說》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 厝味文化股份有限公司, 2018, 124–131.

Loveband, Anne. “Positioning the product: Indonesian migrant women workers in Taiwan.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 34, no. 3 (2004) 336–348.

馬英九 Ma Ying-jeou.《市長的話》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 5 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市政府勞動局編印, 閩豐寶業有限公司, 2006, pp. 6–27.

Nguyễn Thị Hoa. “Thành công nơi Đảo Ngọc”《成功在寶島》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 16 屆外籍勞工詩影選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 眞昀書店有限公司, 2016, pp. 65–79.

Nishida, Akemi. *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Desire*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2022.

Phùng Thị Lan Anh. “Hai Thiên Thần bé Nhỏ”《兩位小天使》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 12 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市政府勞動局編印, 加斌有限公司, 2012, pp. 104–108.

Piocos III, Carlos M. *Affect, Narratives and Politics of Southeast Asian Migration.* New York: Routledge, 2021.

Ramata, Umirah. Personal Interview. 2023.

阮氏花 Ruan Shihua. “Đêm vắng nhớ bà!”《夜靜思念阿嬤! 》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 15 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 時代數位內容股份有限公司, 2015, pp. 82–89.

Sassen, Saskia. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2nd Edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

師豫玲 Shih Yu Ling.《局長的話》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 5 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市政府勞動局編印, 閩豐實業有限公司, 2006, pp. 28–41.

Solehah, Imroatus. “Pertemuan Dan Perpisahan”《見面與分離》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 5 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市政府勞動局編印, 閩豐實業有限公司, 2006, pp. 144–151.

Susiyanti, Agus. “Ama”《奶奶》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 17 屆外籍勞工詩影選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 傳動數位設計印刷有限公司, 2017, pp. 70–73.

Tronto, Joan C. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Wang, Lih-Rong and Michael P.H. Liu. “Investigating the Well-Being of Migrant Care Workers in Taiwan from the Perspective of Social Inclusion.” In *Gender, Care and Migration in East Asia*. Eds. Reiko Ogawa, Raymond K.H. Chan, Akiko S. Oishi, and Lih-Rong Wang. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 117–136.

周氏進 Zhou Shijin. “Tình Bà Cháu”《阿嬤情》. In《臺北請再聽我說！第 14 屆外籍勞工詩文選集》. 臺北市勞動力重建運用處編印, 時代數位內容股份有限公司, 2014, pp. 96–101.