

# The Lives of Others

By Jamie Lin Weirong



Singaporeans familiar with the work of Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) will know of the many stories of abuse, mismanagement and neglect that centre on two groups of workers in society today: foreign construction workers and foreign domestic helpers. For various reasons, these workers on work permits are considered by many to make up the most vulnerable group of migrant workers here.

Aside from the work permit, the current work pass system recognises two other categories of workers: the S Pass and the Employment Pass. The S Pass is generally targeted at medium-skilled work, and requires a minimum salary of \$2,000 per month in addition to certain educational and work experience qualifications, while the Employment Pass is for highly-skilled work, and requires a minimum salary of \$3,000 per month in addition to good educational and work experience qualifications.

What do we know of these workers on S and Employment Passes? Do they share similar experiences with their peers on work permits? How did they get here, what do they do, and are their struggles unique in any way? Over the first few months of 2013, I spoke with five Filipino S Pass holders to find out how their working lives were like.

## The Move

The beginning of their journey would be as good a place to begin as any: what drew these workers to Singapore? My respondents described two main attractions: the salary and the skills. The exchange rate makes it very profitable to work here, as savings can be accumulated more quickly than at home. Arvin,<sup>1</sup> 33, a retail associate at a sportswear company, apportions his salary in this manner: \$500 to rent and utilities, \$500 to food and living expenses, \$500 to savings and \$500 remitted back home. Even though about half of his salary goes to living costs alone, working here remains for him a profitable venture. A second reason is the skill-development that's on offer in Singapore's industries. Lisa, a 24-year-old chef, mentioned the quality of restaurants, the extensive range of cuisines, and the opportunity to work alongside other nationalities as appealing to workers in the food and beverage (F&B) trade. In the local

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<sup>1</sup> All the names have been changed to grant anonymity to the respondents.

construction industry, workers like Faith spoke of the comparatively advanced building processes that give her the opportunity to pick up skills she wouldn't have acquired by working in the Philippines.

On their arrival, Philippines citizens don't need a visa to enter Singapore, unlike citizens of other countries such as India, Myanmar and the People's Republic of China. They qualify for tourist visit passes that don't require applications in advance. These have an initial duration of 30 days, but can be extended up to a 60-day limit. This ease of entry and the sizeable Filipino community here are two factors that considerably ease the transition between leaving home and finding work in Singapore.

Before he came to Singapore, Arvin used to have a friend who would ring him from Singapore and ask that he come interview at the sportswear company he was working at. Some three years ago Arvin finally relented, and after just three days here he'd landed the job. Six days later his pass was approved. As is true for most individuals, finding work depends a lot on one's qualifications matching the opportunities available. Faith, whose work involves project managing construction sites, described how it was the corporate jobs like accountancy and marketing that were highly sought after but much more difficult to secure. Like Arvin, she didn't have much difficulty finding employment when she arrived four years ago at the age of 25, her substantial experience and proficiency in AutoCad making her a choice candidate for local construction companies. She now oversees small- to medium-scale construction projects in such as condominiums and community clubs here.

## The Search

For those who aren't as qualified or connected, however, the Internet provides plenty of opportunities to get one started on the job search. Thousands of jobs are posted on sites like JobStreet, Gumtree and JobsDB by both employers and employment agencies alike. Most of the jobs advertised seem only to be open to Singaporeans and PRs, a requirement which reflects the foreign worker quota system in place, where S Pass holders are limited to comprising 20% of a company's total workforce. Each S Pass holder also costs a company a levy of up to \$390 per month.

For those who struggle with securing an interview, there are plenty of employment agencies that offer help, albeit at a cost. The typical route to employment begins with an interview, followed by the decision to hire, the application for the S Pass, and then the work. There seem to be several different 'models' used by agencies that were described to me by my respondents. Some employment agencies require a non-refundable registration fee before the recruitment process, often in the range of \$50 to \$150. Further fees would likely follow. Other agencies only require payment after a job is secured, but these often charge in the region of \$3,500 to \$4,000 - all this before even a day of work is done. Still others send workers to interviews for free, and charge half of the total fee upon a successful hire, and the other half after the S Pass is approved. Lisa, the chef, told me that all these costs were made clear to

applicants at the outset, although she couldn't quite make sense of what they were for. This was how she said the \$4,000 application fee was broken down to her:

'...application for the pass, for the medical and this and that. But I know it is really quite expensive because I know how much you pay for the medical and the registration of the pass itself and if I'm not mistaken I know the employer itself will pay for the registration of the pass right, and then mostly it goes to the agencies. And it's really quite big, because \$4,000 - how many months you're going to pay that for your salary?'

The Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) website reveals that the total cost for an S Pass application is \$140. Medical insurance is mandatory, which explains why companies make potential employees go for a medical examination, but the cost of this isn't likely to exceed a couple of hundred dollars. There are other costs involved, of course, such as those the agencies incur in liaising with employers, publishing and maintaining ads online, scheduling and coordinating interviews, or processing documents for the S Pass, but it is difficult to imagine how these costs might even approach what the agencies are charging.

At other times things are taken a step further. Lisa recalled her experience of being sent by one agency to a holding company of sorts where she was made to do menial work like dishwashing for \$30 a day. This was euphemistically referred to as a 'training period'. There were about ten or so workers at this F&B company, half of whom were on passes. The rest of them were newcomers like Lisa, who were either waiting for their passes to be applied for, their applications to be returned, or had recently had their passes rejected. Lisa was there for about a week before she realised that something was amiss:

'...I go there because our agreement was they were going to apply my pass because they want me to stay there. They're the ones who're going to apply me a pass but I come in day in day out and after four days they still haven't applied so I said if you don't apply I will not go back anymore. [...] they just tell that they're going to apply pass or the pass is pending, or the pass is rejected. Then they say the boss is busy cannot apply yet, can't do this and that...'

It isn't clear if these companies think that they're doing these applicants a good turn by providing work to tide them over the short term, but the manner in which this is done comes across as deceitful. These workers are already facing enormous pressures from the limited duration of their visit passes, and are living and seeking work in a foreign city with few friends and typically no immediate familial support, which makes it hard not to see such practices as preying upon these vulnerabilities for monetary gain.

## The Pass

Once the interviews are over and the offer of employment has been made and accepted, the workers can now apply for the S Pass. The MOM has devised a very useful tool on its website for just such a purpose, called the 'S Pass self-assessment tool'. The tool collects information such as nationality, age, (proposed) salary, occupation, previous work experience, and educational qualifications, and computes the likelihood that the candidate will qualify for an S Pass. Precisely how this is assessed is not revealed, but the general guidelines describe four main areas of assessment: (proposed) salary, educational qualifications, type of work and work experience.

My respondents described the common practice of inflating one's salaries so as to meet the qualifying criteria for an S Pass. The online assessment functions almost like a calibration tool that one uses to calculate the minimum amount of salary required to compensate for falling short of the other criteria. Without specific knowledge of the mechanics of the MOM's assessment strategy, it is difficult to determine if shortcomings in some areas of assessment can be so simply compensated for by excesses in the others. But from the way my respondents described their experiences, inflating salaries looks to have worked in many instances.

Myla, a 30-year-old who's also a chef, spoke of how her MOM-registered monthly salary was \$2,000 - meeting the minimum S Pass requirement - but that she had a private agreement to receive a lower salary. Mary Grace, 35, a drafter in a construction firm, described a friend as receiving \$1,500 per month as a convenience store assistant, even though her stipulated salary was \$2,000. Upon receipt of the salary each month, \$500 would be returned to the employer. Lisa described her own declared monthly salary as \$2,800, of which \$800 would be put on her 'tab' each month as food items consumed during the course of her work. In all these cases, the salaries have been artificially inflated so that the S Pass applications go through. Curiously, however, though it is primarily the companies that profit, the workers themselves appear to be complicit in their own exploitation, for why would they settle for lower salaries than what had been declared? An S Pass that is valid for up to only two years might not look like a very attractive return, but if one recalls how these workers are often on short term visit passes to begin with, one can begin to understand what this salary compromise does: it buys time. Mary Grace put it this way:

'Yes, she [the friend whose salary is inflated] come here for visit pass then after that she cannot find a job then, because after one month visit pass she need to extend it, after the extension she need to go out from the country. So there's no choice within the two months she must have S Pass so that she can stay longer in Singapore. [...] A lot of people are also doing that [inflating salaries]. Because they just wanted to have the S Pass so that they can

stay here. [...] I think the minimum [S Pass validity period] is two years, so it's quite a long time for them to find another job, the job that they wanted to do.'

The alternative to settling for an S Pass through these means is that the unemployed worker exit and re-enter the country after the expiration of the visit pass, thereby qualifying for a new one. The worker has to spend several days outside Singapore in order for this to work. The usual choice of countries to go to are Malaysia and Indonesia, although Lisa spoke of how it is increasingly difficult to re-enter via Johore as the controls are now being tightened at the border.

Some companies are even craftier. An Employment Pass is a work pass aimed at attracting highly-skilled foreign talent, and to qualify for this an employee must command a minimum monthly salary of \$3,000 in addition to certain educational qualifications and work experience. For the employer, there are several attractions of hiring workers on such a pass: the 20% limit on foreign labour does not apply, and no charge is levied on these workers. And so, if an employee's education and work experience qualifies him/her for an Employment Pass even if the work is considered low- to medium-skilled, some errant companies inflate the employee's salary to the degree that an Employment Pass can be obtained. And just like in the other cases, the additional money is returned to the employer each month. While my respondents did not personally encounter this, they spoke of friends who did. A rather extreme example was Lisa's friend, who works in the F&B industry on an Employment Pass, supposedly earning \$4,000 per month:

'So this friend of mine, he works in F&B also, his pass is E [Employment] Pass already, but as I told you earlier his salary is \$4,000 on the E Pass but he only receives \$1,300. The rest \$2,700 he returns every month to the company.'

It is difficult to imagine how abuse on this magnitude could be true. Yet Arvin also mentioned the same problem, adding that the issue of inflated salaries was more prevalent among his Employment Pass than S Pass peers.

## The Work

Once the S Pass has been successfully applied for, there is some measure of relief. The workers now have both a job and the legal right to remain in Singapore. Faith, the project manager, has been at the same firm for close to four years now. Her work consists of overseeing construction projects and drafting the occasional set of drawings for submission to the Building and Construction Authority or the Urban Redevelopment Authority. As long as she retains her job, her S Pass can be renewed, although the eligibility criteria might change over time. As a result, Faith has qualified for different work passes over the years, beginning first with an S Pass, which was upgraded to an Employment Pass,

and then later downgraded to an S Pass. Though the MOM offers general guidelines for applicants, it doesn't give any specific reasons for rejecting applications, and companies and employees often have to second guess these reasons and tailor their applications accordingly.

The draw of working in the local construction industry lies primarily in the variety of projects Faith is able to oversee, which has allowed her to develop a competence in the more advanced methods of construction that are used here. She works in a small team of seven and is paid well and on time, and has been compensated with time off whenever she's had to work beyond the stipulated number of hours each week.

When asked about the difficulties she's had to face at work, however, there was one particular incident that stood out. A few months ago she was at a construction site overseeing some local subcontracted workers performing trades like carpentry and metalwork. One of the key tasks of project management is to ensure site safety, so when she noticed that one particular worker wasn't careful with his tools, she intervened to ask that he take more care with his work. The worker wasn't very pleased at being told off, and continued to behave irresponsibly. Faith warned that she'd ring his boss and report the matter, and when his attitude remained unchanged that was precisely what she did. A short while later, after having heard from his boss, the man confronted Faith:

'Suddenly he come to me, eh don't go talking to my boss, talk to me, and I don't want to talk to him anymore because I'm really angry with him... he threatened me that he would complain to MOM and cancel my pass. [...] Then he said because, I told him, what's your grounds[?] He said, I can complain because I'm a local here, you're only a foreigner, I'm staying, I'm living here, this is my country, he said like that. [...] Then he said something like it's like my background in construction is not that good like that... Because he was thinking like what is my professional background, he just think that I just came here to work and I don't have any certificate that or that degree on construction site. And number two he was thinking because I'm a girl, I'm the only girl in the construction site...'

The xenophobic sentiment described here is bound up with other issues like educational ability and even the gendered nature of the construction industry, which makes it difficult to parse. But at the very least one might say that the worker's attitude was highly unprofessional in the way it was viciously *ad hominem*, for it was not the rationale behind Faith's instructions that were being disputed, but Faith's very person - her nationality, education and gender - that was being attacked in a shamefully small minded way.

Other respondents described problems that had to do with their employers. Myla's been working in Singapore since 2011 in a restaurant that serves Thai and Western cuisine, and in less than two years she's been promoted from a kitchen assistant to a chef and then to a chef de partie. For the first year or

so she had little difficulty aside from the long hours and tiring work, often working 14 hours on weekends and 12 hours on weekdays with only a two-hour break on some afternoons. Long hours are common for all F&B workers, and while Myla did find the work exhausting, she was learning enough on the job to want to remain.

Last November, however, Myla's employer began to run into financial difficulties and Myla's salary started arriving in sporadic instalments. Small payments in amounts of \$200 or \$100 made it difficult for her to pay rent, let alone budget for the future. For some months she had no choice but to borrow money from her flatmates in order to make rent. Most employees in her restaurant experienced the same problem, and once a Chinese dishwasher didn't even have enough money for the public transport that would get her to work. The manager, who oversees these workers and reports to the owner, had to give her some money against the owner's instructions just so she could continue to travel to work. At the same time, the restaurant became unable to pay its suppliers, and while this was mitigated for a period by switching between different suppliers, after a while they could find no one who would deliver produce. Myla and her co-workers were sent to buy vegetables from Tekka market during the only two-hour break they had in the day.

In such situations, these workers can choose from two courses of action: one, they can simply quit; two, they can seek external help from such as unions or the state. In both situations, they would be the ones who would be left most vulnerable. The fact that the S Pass is tied to an employment contract means that it is revoked once employment is terminated. Quitting would put them back on 30-day visit passes, and while this is certainly preferable to staying on in an abusive work environment, to many this option only exchanges one form of anxiety for another.

Some respondents who've had substantial difficulties at work have also considered the option of seeking external help. At Myla's workplace, for instance, the employees have discussed the possibility of doing so, but have always come up against the same problem:

'The thinking is if we will call or complain in MOM there's a possibility that MOM will cancel our pass, the shop will close, because you know what, there's a lot of, the MOM will investigate our shop, there's a lot - he's [the owner] not following the regulations of MOM.'

As these companies are precisely the ones that are already struggling, whether with poor revenue streams or with bad management, the workers fear that any investigation following their appeal would reveal such malpractice that it would mean certain closure. They are caught in a double bind: their working conditions are unsatisfactory but reporting these conditions runs the risk of putting them out of work altogether, an equally unsatisfactory outcome.

Arvin, the retail associate, described the problem in a slightly different formulation:

‘Even me when I have, I feel like I want to go to MOM or question about something else... I’m afraid that the company might learn about this... do you think my contract will be renewed the next time? That’s the threat. I mean we are okay, you can go to MOM anytime. But I’m thinking they [the company] will not be renewing me anymore the second time around because I’m fighting against them.’

Because Arvin’s sportswear company isn’t in as bad a condition as Myla’s restaurant, what Arvin fears isn’t so much closure but censure. He faces the same issue that most internal whistleblowers face: the danger that an appeal to the MOM would portray him as an employee working against the interests of the company.

The policy of tying the S Pass to employment is clearly meant to ensure that the individuals who stay on are contributing in some useful way to the economy, and thus to the society at large. At the same time, it allows some state control over the management and calibration of industry-specific strategies for foreign labour. Yet on the ground, this often means that unfairly treated workers have the difficult choice between enduring poor work conditions and taking action that risks leaving them with no work - and thus no right to remain - at all.

## The Future

Responses differed on the question of what the future would bring. The crucial factor seemed to be the possibility of career development, with those holding adequately-paying jobs that promised skill training and growth being more eager to remain. Though salary was an attraction at the very beginning, considerations for the long-term had more to do with personal development than with the extent of savings and remittance.

One respondent spoke of how the S Pass didn’t allow much certainty in planning for the future:

‘...there’s no assurance. If you’re working here there’s no assurance if you can work here for, if you’ve long term goal in Singapore, you’ve no assurance you can make it, because it depends on the government.’

Though Arvin works in retail, he possesses relevant qualifications and three years of experience as an airline cargo representative in the Philippines, which he hopes will eventually be put to good use in the airline industry here. His comment suggests some frustration at the malleable and increasingly restrictive criteria for the S Pass. In the most recent set of changes that were proposed earlier this year,

the minimum qualifying salary for the S Pass is set to be raised to \$2,200 per month, and the levy incurred per worker by \$90. The quota for one sector (Services) is also set to be lowered to 15%.

Arvin’s comment also points to a deeper ambiguity regarding the nature of the S Pass and what it is designed to do. S Passes cater to a proportion of the foreign workforce sandwiched between the more transient work-permit workers and the more enduring Employment Pass workers. The categories of work permit and S Pass share limitations such as a quota on the amount of workers and a levy on each worker hired. Dependents of work permit holders are denied entry, as are those of S Pass holders who earn below \$4,000 per month. In addition, a marriage restriction policy applies to work permit holders, who must seek state approval before marrying Singaporeans. Employment passes, on the other hand, come with no quota, no levy, and except in the case of the lowest sub-category of passes (Q1), allow spouses, children, and in some cases, even parents into the country.

	Work Permit	S Pass	Employment Pass
Quota on workers	Yes	Yes	No
Levy on workers	Yes	Yes	No
Dependents	No	No*	Yes**
Marriage restrictions	Yes	No	No

\*except where salary exceeds \$4,000 per month

\*\*except in the lowest sub-category (Q1) of passes, which is subject to the \$4,000 rule

Because of these reasons the S Pass is located rather ambiguously in between the work permit and the Employment Pass. Like the former, there are curbs designed to deter a reliance on these workers for the medium- to long-term, but at the same time the higher salary and educational qualifications, marriage provisions and even the qualified allowance for dependents all go toward the possibility of long-term settlement in Singapore. This ambiguity is reflected in the sentiments of workers like Arvin. While able to contribute to the economy in a more durable way than work permits would allow, these individuals don’t yet qualify for the highly-skilled jobs that would put them on Employment Passes, and are left in a rather indeterminate middle ground as a result.

Other respondents also shared Arvin’s desire to stay for the medium term, but the fact that they are without family remains a big disincentive to a more permanent future here. This concern for dependents is a crucial factor in long-term plans. Faith, who’s been here for almost four years and is happy to stay up to ten, described her inclination to return home after:

‘Because Philippines is still, for me it’s still my home. [...] I’m not sure because Filipinos are quite the family type. So [back home] most of my family, my relatives, are staying nearby. [...] Of course it’s still different with the family around you who can support you if you have any problems or trials, they can encourage you, they can help you to move on.’

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This brief survey of a handful of Filipino S Pass workers has shown that they deal with a unique set of challenges in working in Singapore. These workers might earn more than their peers on work permits, and might also escape the risk of physical strain and injury in their lines of work, but they have to cope with other vulnerabilities in such as their terms of employment or in the nature of their work passes. And while these difficulties aren’t as immediately apparent as the instances of physical distress endured by their peers, they must surely exert a heavy psychological and emotional toll on the workers as well. This ought to warrant no less attention from Singaporeans concerned with the state of migrant workers in our society today.

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