



## Follow the Maid

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A component of contemporary globalization is a flow of labor that Saskia Sassen has called “the return of the serving classes”, (Sassen 2000: 510) though in Southeast Asia I struggle to locate an era from which they ‘returned’. The intimate domestic labor of female service has long been a defining feature of upper-middle and upper-class households; what has changed are the transnational and national dimensions, the social and bureaucratic ritualizations, and the political-economic import of that labor.

Joining the Philippines, Indonesia has become one of the main domestic labor supply states globally, particularly since the 2004 passage of the ‘National Law on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers Overseas,’ which cemented large scale labor emigration as part of the country’s development plans. While the framework of state-sanctioned labor export is broad, the reality is fairly narrow: until 2010, between 60–80 per cent of all emigrating laborers were Indonesian women in domestic service (p. 5).<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is marked by its intimate dimensions – madam-maid relationships and close cohabitation – but, as Olivia Killias’s anthropological study shows us, it is also part of a large scale, transnational, and bureaucratic process. It is the process and infrastructure of care migration that Killias carefully studies. Hardly the smooth transnational flows imagined by globalization, opacity, friction, and explicitly national interests and dialectics characterize the domestic care chain.

Focusing on one chain stretching from a rural Javanese village to Malaysia, Killias brings ethnographic detail to an uneven process involving brokers, recruitment agencies, state bureaucrats, maid agencies, individual maids, and contractors. This is a contribution to the literature, which has tended to focus on maids’ situations in their places of work, rather than on the process of becoming a maid and the multiple regimes involved therein. In this, Killias brings novel focus to the temporal dimension of the work

as well insightful analysis of the discourses of mobility. There is the structured legal regulation of time through visas, residence permits, and fixed two-year overseas contracts and the segmented but often looping cycle, as the Indonesian state encourages migrant domestic workers both to leave and to come home. More individually, there is a ‘right’ time to go abroad, which is connected to women’s life cycles. At the village level, young, single women migrate to large cities on Java to work as live-in domestic helpers ‘in search of adventure’ and is so common as often to be considered a rite of adulthood. Only once married and with a child, meanwhile, are women deemed ‘ready’ to work abroad.

Killias shows how mobility is controlled and discursively legitimized from multiple perspectives. Women’s travel overseas is reframed as dutiful worship – as *halal* (p. 44) – and the explicitly domestic nature of her work (p. 68) is emphasized to leave the traditionally male right to mobility intact. It is deemed socially inappropriate for women to travel long distances unescorted, thereby making mobile male brokers indispensable if young women are to leave their villages. These brokers take on a role of protector for the women, which gives them additional discretion and power. She also notes that as much as this gendered labor division requires male brokers in Indonesia it also requires female agent professionals in Malaysia. Female maid agents in the destination country are the intermediaries between the employers and the maids, and as in the home where the ‘maid issue’ is generally understood to be a woman’s issue, it is also assumed that a female agent better understands the demands of such work and “can approach

the maids more closely”, as one agent put it (p. 144) – thereby propelling Malaysian women professionally in this industry.

*Follow the Maid* pierces the modernist assumption that contracts necessarily bring about fairer working conditions, showing instead how a system of bonded labor has reappeared – one that draws from colonial indenture programs. Late-19th to early-20th century indentured laborers became indebted to their employers to cover their migration fees (leading to the panic around ‘runaway’ laborers). The same holds for Indonesian migrant domestic workers today, but through a particularly gendered understanding of mobility. Whereas male migrant workers in Indonesia must borrow money from their networks in order to initiate their emigration processes (USD 600–1000), female migrant workers can emigrate essentially for ‘free’ (USD 50 in minor fees) (p. 66) because their perceived lack of mobility makes them more easily indentured and controlled as such, enabling employers to take on more comfortably the upfront ‘risk’ of the investment.<sup>2</sup>

Before they go abroad, women enter into the liminal space of the recruitment agencies – ‘total institutions’ where they are trained to become overseas maids and await placement. Indonesian Law No. 39/2004 “permits private recruitment agencies to detain prospective migrant workers provided they are treated ‘reasonably and humanely’ and in accordance with implementing legislation” (p. 109) despite contravention of the basic human right to freedom of movement. In addition to the physical confinement, women are stripped of their mobile phones and of the contact information of relatives and friends in their countries of destination; a single pay phone for hundreds of women is provided and visiting times are restricted (p. 112). While the agencies construct a threat of young, mobile, female sexuality to legitimate their practices, Killias argues, that it is instead financially motivated, as the demand for Indonesian domestic workers outstrips the numbers actually willing to go, and agencies wish to control their ‘share’ of the supply (p. 113). Shorn of their hair, their clothes, makeup, perfume, and even photographs of their family (p. 112; 116), Killias’s ethnography of these total institutions shows the creative and subversive ways in which women on the inside distinguish themselves amid efforts to

homogenize them as exchangeable, sanitized, even defeminized laboring bodies, as well as how they help one another and interpret their liminal state. At the end of the day, Killias concludes, the agencies only minimally train the women in care work; the emphasis is on cultivating patience and submissiveness (p. 122) – key traits needed in order to work in the most intimate spaces under highly controlled hierarchical relations.

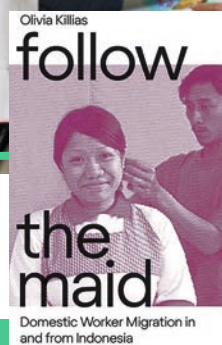
Focusing on Asian migration within Asia allows Killias to disrupt the migration studies literature, which largely developed out of a focus on migration to Europe and North America. It also is no small matter, as between 2006 to 2016 over 2.5 million Indonesian women worked as domestic help in Malaysia alone (p. 5). An interesting point was the construction of national difference between Malaysian madam and Indonesian maid. A maid agency Killias visited in Malaysia created a board with photos of run-down wooden houses with the caption ‘This is what my home back in Indonesia looks like’ (p. 145). “By portraying Indonesian domestic workers as backward and poor, Malaysian agencies define them as different from their employers, sometimes in primordial terms”, she writes; which “allows employers to imagine themselves as modern, urban and middle-class” (p. 147).

Indeed, Killias’s attention to semiotics and to discourse is one of the most rewarding and successful aspects of this excellent study. I only wish more time had been spent on the domestic work performed within Indonesia as a crucial part of the inurement and acculturation integral to such hierarchized forms of living and working. The flagrant inequality that frames and enables live-in domestic service is deeply present on Java, without any need to travel to Malaysia. I would imagine that in the process of becoming a maid the most crucial step is the cognitive processing of and acculturation to inequality that enables one to live within another socio-economic class’s existence, with ‘patience and submissiveness,’ without that class meaningfully interacting with your mode of existence in return. That would happen first on Java, and most crucially so. The first rite of internal migration is rendered quickly here as young women in search of adventure in the city, but it seems to me there is a missing prior step. Indeed, Killias gives a tantalizing glimpse of the complexity of the arrangements and hierarchies involved therein, particularly on pp. 74–76 when she discusses the difference between *ngenger* and *pembantu* practices, and an employer’s embarrassment at verbally acknowledging the existence of their *ngenger* arrangement in front of Musri, the domestic worker, herself (p. 75). She mentions that activist reports have placed renewed focus on it, in which the “legacy of ‘pre-modern,’ ‘slave-like’ *ngenger* arrangements is said to shape contemporary paid domestic service on Java” (p. 75). Nevertheless, *Follow the Maid* is an excellent ethnography, indeed. Would that we could encourage Killias to follow the maid still deeper and on and on.

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### Notes

- 1 That proportion has since decreased due to an Indonesian moratorium on sending domestic workers to Saudi Arabia, one of the largest global markets, and an attempt by the Indonesian government to increase non-domestic labor emigration. However, the numbers remain staggering, with between 100,000 and 500,000 Indonesian women emigrating for domestic service every year for the last decade (p. 6).
- 2 Even domestic workers’ returns to Indonesia are managed, with officials approaching workers in the luggage claim areas of airport terminals, ushering them to separate zones, instructing them to deposit their money in certain banks, and escorting them home through a licensed bus companies (p. 42).



Southeast Asian workers enjoying their day off by playing bingo, Hong Kong. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons licence courtesy ‘Istoletthetv’ on Wikipedia.