

Book Review

Olivia Killias (2018) *Follow the Maid: Domestic Worker Migration in and from Indonesia*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

ISBN 9788776942274. 246 pp. Softcover £25

Reviewed by

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Follow the Maid, part of the series *Gendering Asia*, is written by Olivia Killias, a senior lecturer at the University of Zürich. Killias delves into the migrant journeys of domestic workers and soon-to-be maids, starting her fieldwork in a rural village in Indonesia that she calls “Kalembah”, then interacting with the staff and prospective maids at a training camp for domestic workers in Jakarta and finally moving to a middle-class suburban neighbourhood outside Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Thus, Killias’ book is based on her participant observation in the Southeast Asian countries of Indonesia and Malaysia, in which her fieldwork took place over a three-year period, ten years before the book was published.

The academic tone of the book may not be so inviting to average casual readers. Thus, it may be difficult to retain their interest through such a thick introduction as well as the first chapter, which are heavily dipped in scholarly works and references. Killias, however, carefully breaks down the book in its introduction, judiciously guiding the readers and giving them a good foretaste of what is to come. Hence, when the most leisurely readers do manage to plough through the academically heavy-laden text, they will finish this book well-versed in Indonesia’s colonial background and have a better understanding of how the country’s current migration regime is tied to its colonial Dutch East Indies history.

After reaching the second chapter of the book, readers would be well-informed about Indonesia’s migration regime which plays a huge role in sending thousands of migrant workers overseas each year, making the country one of the main exporters of labour in Asia. Killias has shown that Indonesia’s migration regime can be traced back to colonial indentured labour at a time when Indonesia was known as the Dutch East Indies. By connecting her fieldwork to the nation’s colonial history, Killias makes her work seem all the more grounded within the context of Indonesia’s migration history rather than just publishing a collection of narratives on migrant workers’ journeys and the complexities involved in the relationships with their families. Hence, by giving a detailed historical backdrop of Indonesia’s colonial history, even the casual reader will gain a better understanding of the historical significance of Indonesia’s colonial history for its current migration regime.

Killias succeeds in giving a highly detailed account of the processes involved between the intermediaries and about “frictions” in the global care chain. As stated in her introduction, she went to great lengths to describe in detail, through her narratives and interviews with her informants, the whole range of the intermediaries involved in the functionality of the global care chain. Killias also describes the conditions in which maids generally need to work, such as the long hours of work starting early in the morning till late at night as well as the requirement by the state to live-in with the employer and the cutting off of one’s self from family back home in Indonesia.

Killias emphasises the fact that Indonesian domestic workers do not have any say in the employers that they work for and are unable to negotiate the length of their service. However, this situation is not unique to domestic service providers in other countries. Au pairs and nannies in the West more or less do the same work and are just as involved in the intimacies of the families that they work for. Thus, it may puzzle some readers, especially those from Hong Kong and Malaysia, as to why so much emphasis is placed on Indonesian domestic workers having to live-in with their employers and not being able to choose them when this is not unusual in domestic services in the West.

On the issue of maintaining familial ties, from reading Killias' book it is hard to imagine that in this time of technological advancement and increasing globalisation, domestic workers are very much cut off from their families back home in Indonesia and other connections that they might have in their destination countries. This lack of access to peers and to families back home is largely due to the recruitment agencies' severing of ties when migrant workers arrive at the camp for training; the prospective maids also have to deal with the confiscation of their phones. Killias describes in one narrative a worker who sewed the telephone numbers of her connections in her destination country into her skirt and was not caught. A migrant worker going to such lengths to evade this regulation shows how much communications with the home and the outside world is forbidden within these camps. Through these narratives, it makes one wonder or even criticise the Indonesian agencies for their lack of humanity in administering the migration process of domestic workers. Killias makes this observation even more bleak when she compares this predicament to the relative ease with which Filipino workers, the Indonesian migrants' counterparts, are able to maintain intimacy with their children via text messages, letters or presents as well as the sending back of remittances. This is a stark contrast to the Indonesian migrant workers and their family members who are greatly discouraged from communicating with one another; maids are only allowed to contact loved ones back home at certain times of the month or year. Killias explains this discrepancy between the Indonesian and Filipino migrant workers by explaining that a great deal of money has been invested in the domestic workers' employment, and that any risk of losing a worker would lead to a financial loss for both the recruitment agency involved and the employer.

Thus, Killias' narratives reveal how little the Indonesian state trusts their own citizens in that they implement programmes to "protect" their citizens who work abroad. This is because the agencies involved in domestic workers' migration abroad firmly believe that their citizens brought up in rural villages are "backwards" and thus must be made to "adapt" to their employers' expectations.

Overall, it is interesting to read that although migrants go abroad to build a better life at home, many migrants end up being permanently on the move. This sad reality gives the book somewhat of a sombre ending. The endeavours of the migrant domestic workers are applaudable, in that after Killias has shared the atrocities of what some of them have gone through, one can only admire how a migrant worker would still put herself at risk at the hands of employers she has never met in person and has no say in choosing or the duration of her employment with them. Yet, the narratives are sad in that, despite their endeavours and the anxieties heavily felt by their families and relatives "left behind", the goals of "a better future" are often barely achieved and, as previously mentioned, the migrants end up being permanently on the move.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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