Who’s in Charge, The Government, the Mistress, or the Maid? Tracing the History of Domestic Workers in Southeast Asia

Bela Kashyap

Introduction

In 2009, an unexpected avalanche of news reports occurred in Malaysia. Local employers made the headlines time and again in what seemed an endless stream of cases of abuse, and debates on migrant domestic labor dominated the local newspapers. These problems were not new, as indicated by an open letter penned in 2006 by Human Rights Watch (HRW), addressed to both the Indonesian and Malaysian governments. The letter was written in a period of bilateral negotiations leading up to a Memorandum of Understanding between the two nations, scheduled to take place in April of that year. The letter advocated that both governments take substantive action on behalf of the migrant domestic workers coming from Indonesia.¹

The atmosphere was politically charged with the potential for serious repercussions. Official reports in Malaysia cited 50 cases of abuse of domestic workers annually, a number challenged by social rights’ organizations that estimated much larger numbers. The Indonesian government demanded comprehensive and sustained governmental action by Malaysia, to regulate and reform the employment practices and the conditions faced by Indonesian citizens already present in the country. A failure, they stated, would result in a moratorium in the availability of Indonesian women coming to Malaysia to work in the domestic sector. As expected, these demands remained unmet, and the moratorium on domestic workers was imposed. It took two years of negotiations between these two nations for the moratorium to be lifted in 2011. The pent-up demand for domestic workers immediately drew approximately 50,000 Indonesian women to Malaysia.²

² Lim Wey Wen. “50,000 Indonesian Maids to Arrive for Mid-January,” The Star November 25, 2011.
The current chapter explores this particular regional movement of women, and seeks to place it in the historical context of these multicultural societies, as well as their colonial pasts. To do so, it examines each of the actors in this international drama, the domestic worker or maid, the mistresses for whom they work, and the governments in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore that are responsible for their welfare. All three nations were formerly occupied by colonial powers. Indonesia was first under the Portuguese and then predominantly Dutch rule until European control was interrupted by the arrival of the Japanese during the Second World War. Malaysia and Singapore, on the other hand, together formed part of the vast British Empire until the territory jointly known as Malaya won its independence from Britain in 1957.

This chapter argues that Southeast Asian society changed considerably under colonial rule. Gender roles were dramatically altered in a manner uniquely suited to local culture as well as individual circumstances. The contemporary phenomenon of migrant domestic workers originated in the colonial era and contributed to these changes. These adaptations were compounded in the post-colonial period and still remain visible today. Women in the region today remain bound domestically, even as they take on new financial responsibilities for their families by working outside the home. It is the manner in which women in the region fulfill these two conflicting roles that is significant. The choices they make and the actions they take are firmly dependent on their nation, its history, and the class to which they belong.

In order to understand this contemporary migration, we need to trace the changes that occurred within these societies by looking into their pasts. What were the gender roles in the region prior to the nineteenth century and the settlement of Europeans in Southeast Asia? Did women work outside the home, and did their roles differ within the various ethnic communities in the region, or in different geographical locations? Did they change in any significant manner as local societies came in contact with Europeans new to the region? Equally importantly, was European culture in these settlements altered as they built new communities in Southeast Asia? There are few sources today that help cast light on the participation of women in the workplace from earlier periods. We do know that large families, as well as class divides, were intrinsic to Asian societies. Both cultural norms and established gender roles

3 Responsibility for servants most often fell on the mistresses of the household unless none were present. Under those circumstances, servants reported to the man of the household.

4 The British under the leadership of Sir Stamford Raffles seized an opportunity to intervene in Indonesia in 1811, returning the colony to the Dutch state in 1816 when the cost of retaining the territory appeared too high.