

Zeitschrift: Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera
d'etnologia

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

Band: 16 (2011)

Artikel: The visual production of "maids"

Autor: Killias, Olivia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007269>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 30.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE VISUAL PRODUCTION OF «MAIDS»



Text and photos: Olivia Killias



«You know, it's a market», a Malaysian maid agent tells me, «Malaysia is willing to pay, and Indonesia is willing to sell»¹. She shows me files of Indonesian domestic workers ready to be hired by Malaysian employers. These files, called *biodata*, contain information on each domestic worker's age, height, weight, religion, marital status and years of work experience. A picture showing the worker in question is attached to the top of each file (see *biodata* portrait)².

Go to the website of any maid agency in Malaysia and you will see dozens of pictures similar to the one featured above: portraits of young women in full «maid» uniforms, sporting identical haircuts, holding their hands in front of them in a posture that signals that they are on duty, and always smiling. Clearly, what is being advertised here is a standard «maid», and this standard «maid» is essentially reduced to a labouring body. This is evidenced both by the term *biodata* and by the type of information provided – the age, height, weight and skin colour are among the most prominent features of domestic worker profiles. The standardized photographs underline this focus on the body and contribute to the idea that choosing a domestic worker is a matter of physical measurements – apart from these, it is suggested, domestic workers are all the same, and thus easily replaceable.

The migration of Indonesian domestic workers to Malaysia takes place through the «*biodata* system», as agents call it. This system is prevalent throughout (South) East Asia, strictly regulated by states and orchestrated by transnational networks of private, profit-oriented agencies. Recruitment agents back in Indonesia «assess» prospective migrants and enter their *biodata* into a set of categories before sending the files to their partner placement agencies in Malaysia; very often, this also involves «adjusting» the age or marital status of an applicant to make her more attractive to potential employers (Constable 2007: 73). The Malaysian agents then publish the women's profiles on their websites along with slogans assuring prospective employers that they will be given «plenty of *biodata* for selection», «quality maids for quality life» or «the most

reliable, honest and competent domestic maids». Such slogans, and the practices of recruitment agencies more generally, do more than just match potential employers' expectations; according to James Tyner, the marketing strategies of maid agencies «socialise employers regarding the «proper» and «expected» performance of domestic workers» (1999: 2000).

Furthermore, Nicole Constable (2007: 68) has argued that the publication of domestic workers' profiles on websites, available to everyone and directly in the public gaze, stands in stark contrast to the ways in which employers' data are handled. In fact, neither pictures of nor information about employers is available to the workers, let alone to the general public – hence, the selection process is a thoroughly unequal one: employers choose workers and not the other way around.

THE PRODUCTION OF DOCILE BODIES

While the *biodata* system offers Malaysian employers the comfortable and quick option of selecting their «maid» with a few mouse clicks, prospective domestic workers have to undergo lengthy disciplinary process in secluded training camps before being able to migrate abroad. In fact, as Lenore Lyons has rightly observed, «domestic workers are not simply produced through discourse: a range of material practices [...] serve to «make» the maid» (Lyons 2005: 1).

The compulsory training of Indonesian domestic workers is carried out in special camps run by commercial recruitment agencies back in Java. Often housed in former hospitals or schools, surrounded by high fences and guarded by male security staff, these camps are completely cut off from the outside world and supposed to protect the good virtue of young migrant women. Women sleep in large, open dormitories, where beds stand in rows and where everybody can easily be seen (stills series camp). Workers have no privacy and cannot escape the overseer's gaze at any time of day or night. In fact, training camps for Indonesian migrant domestic workers cor-

¹ I would like to thank Sabine Zurschmitten, Yasemin Akis and the two anonymous reviewers of *Tsantsa* for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this article. My gratitude also goes to the many research participants who agreed to take part in this study, especially to the women who agreed to be filmed. Although I discussed my research activities with the participants, particular ethical questions emerged that are inherent to contexts of detention and the extreme power relations at play. As Melanie Griffiths has argued, it can be questioned to what extent people incarcerated in closed institutions can ever truly give consent (2010: 2; see also Brown 2002).

² Except for the cover photograph (which is an example of a *biodata* photograph produced by a maid agency), all stills presented in this article have been extracted from digital video footage that I shot while doing fieldwork in recruitment agencies in Java, Indonesia, between 2007 and 2009.

respond in many ways to Foucault's definition of a «disciplinary institution», and as Rudnycky has argued, the technologies deployed by these agencies clearly imply «certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes» (Foucault 1997: 225, quoted in Rudnycky 2004: 412). Per definition sites of transition, such camps prepare domestic workers for their employment abroad by training them in language skills, various aspects of domestic work, and, most importantly, deference (Rudnycky 2004; Killias 2009) (see stills series training).

Training camps are characterised by continuous flows of migrant women entering and leaving the premises, and although many have to stay for months, no migrant is there to stay forever. Interestingly, moments of entrance and exit are marked by a series of strict and fairly ritualised procedures that evoke van Gennep's *rites of passage* (Krome 2009: 13). When a woman first arrives at a camp, her luggage is checked, and mobile phones and addresses of relatives and friends are generally taken away, thus separating her from her former social networks.

Additionally, the agency seizes items such as cosmetics, perfumes and clothes considered too revealing, and all women are required to have their hair cut. While agents claim that long hair, which is traditionally associated with ideal feminine beauty in Indonesia (e.g. Parker 1997: 506), needs to be cut «so that hair doesn't fall into the food while they're cooking», domestic workers that I interviewed saw a different kind of reasoning behind this practice (see stills series haircut). They argued that agents cut their hair «just like a man's» (*macem orang laki-laki*) because employers don't like their domestic workers to look too attractive: «they are worried about their husbands!» Hence, domestic workers are deliberately denied the bodily attributes generally associated with femininity³.

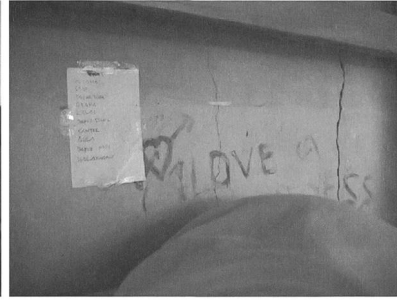
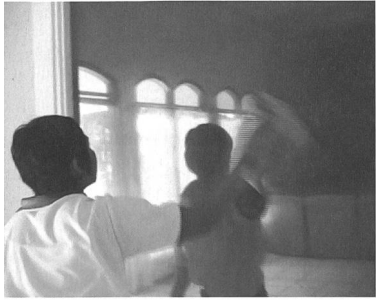
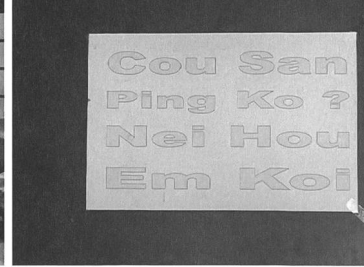
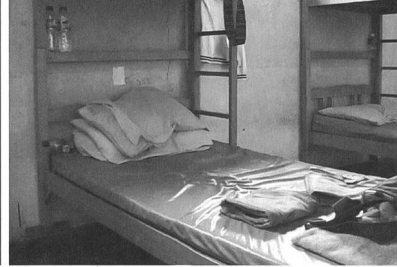
In a similar way, Judith Rollins has argued that domestic service is probably one of the only labour sectors in which being unattractive is considered to be an advantage (1990: 76). Rollins understands this as being part of a more general politics of deference, in which domestic workers constantly need to reaffirm

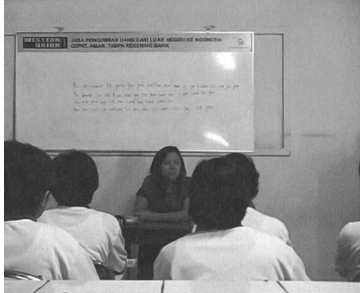
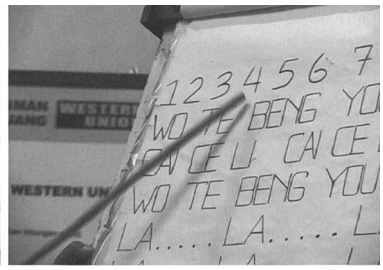
their employer's superiority through acts of deference – downplaying their intelligence, keeping quiet about material possessions, and not looking «too» attractive. «Maids» need to be inferior to their «madams» in every way (ibid.; see also Constable 2007).

Hence, entering a training camp marks a clear *rupture* with women's former lives. The photograph, generally shot at the camp within the first few days of the arrival of a new recruit, completes this separation and seals the transformation of women into «maids». Typically, professional photographers come to the agency with their equipment and set up a studio; they know precisely what kinds of photographs are required and go about their job very systematically. One after another, the workers to be photographed are required to wear the uniforms provided by the agency. For the passport and visa photographs, they wear a simple, red t-shirt in front of a background, the colour of which depends on the requirements of the destination country (stills series passport); for the advertising photograph, they are required to wear a white-and-red apron provided by the agency (stills series process photo). The photographer then carefully combs the hair of the woman so as to reveal most of her facial features and positions her head in the «right» posture; his assistant checks that the apron is worn correctly and makes sure she is standing straight «without seeming stiff», as they explain to me (stills series photographers). As the photographs are being taken, the women are given various instructions: to wet their hair, hold their heads in a slightly different position or keep their hands crossed in front of them so as to show off their fingers (stills series preparation). According to the photographers, employers want to see that their future employee still has all her fingers (*tanggannya utuh*).

The fact that migrant domestic workers are required to wear an apron for these portraits is interesting because it is rare for Malaysian employers to require their «maids» to do so; in the photograph, the apron says something about the work to be done and is a claim to professionalism. The colour of the apron, red and white, symbolises the colours of the Indonesian national flag, which is no coincidence, as I was told by the manager of the agency. It echoes the essentially nationalist dis-

³ Interestingly, the deliberate practices of agencies seeking to make domestic workers look less feminine might actually allow some women to experiment with their sexual attractiveness in unintended ways, for instance by underlining a masculine hair-cut by dressing and acting like men. Hence, while training camps are disabling for migrant women in many ways, they also seem to offer them a space for experimentation, far from their usual societal roles as wives and mothers. I thank Ara Wilson for pushing me on this point.

















course that seeks to valorise Indonesia's migrant working class by referring to migrants as the national heroes of remittances (*pahlawan devisa negara*).

The smile, however, is the most important component of the photograph, and much effort is put into getting it «right». The photographers repeatedly make the recruits aware of the importance of their smile: «Smile so that employers get interested in you, so that you get an employer quickly.» The «right» smile has to seem natural and sincere, but it is the result of intensive efforts in many cases. As the stills show, one woman being photographed had to try hard to achieve the «right» smile (see stills series smile). The photographers urged her again and again to smile more, more widely, or more naturally.

The importance of the «smile» is also emphasized in the event that women fail to be selected by a foreign employer. A woman I met in a training camp was desperate for an employer, but it seemed no one had wanted to employ her for months; a staff member at her agency declared that this was because she «could not smile» (*tidak bisa senyum*).

Interestingly, for the visa photographs (see still series passport), the women were dressed in everyday red t-shirts and not asked to smile. The different compositions of these two sets of pictures – taken by the same photographers, of the same women, in the same agency – prove that the pictures for the *biodata* serve a different purpose, which is to appeal to the imagined requirements of potential employers overseas. The apron stands for the cleaning, washing and cooking, or the *dirty work*; the smile stands for the *emotional work* that workers are expected to carry out, attending to employers' needs and caring for children and the elderly (see Parreñas 2001: 171).

The time-consuming composition of the photographs, and especially the physical contact throughout the process of composing the pictures, stirs up excitement, flirting and jokes between the male photographers and the female migrants. While one woman is being photographed, others get ready and wait around, often commenting and joking about the *mise-en-scène*. As Siti, the woman photographed for the passport, was being prepared for her portrait by the two photographers, her fellow recruits were giggling. One of them asked: «How come you're quivering when you're having your picture taken? Look at that touching!» She was obviously referring to the fact that the photographer was arranging Siti's hair and uniform; all of them laughed and Siti accused her friend of being naughty.

At the end of the photo shoot, the women were required to pay for the pictures taken; this is just one of the many expenses that migrant domestic workers incur in order to be able to travel abroad (see Killias 2009; Lindquist 2010). Then, the photographs are handed over to the agency, which processes them: the photographs used for the visa applications are attached to the appropriate forms, and the *biodata* photographs are sent to the partner placement agencies in Malaysia, Hong-Kong or Taiwan, where future employers will choose their «maid» from a catalogue.

While domestic worker portraits may have become commonplace across Asia, they are never commonplace for the women portrayed; for them, the very moment in which such a picture is taken marks the separation from home, the full integration into a training camp, and the beginning of a liminal phase, the phase of waiting for an employer. The still pictures freeze this particular moment of «betwixt-and-between». As David MacDougall put it, «still images give us moments when the future is just about to unfold» (2005: 13). As we look at these photographs, most of the women in them have started working abroad, and upon their return to Indonesia, many of them will pin their *biodata* portraits on the walls of their living rooms – as a souvenir and token of their overseas migration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BROWN Christine

2002. «Entering secure psychiatric settings», in: Nigel RAPPORT (Ed.), *British Subjects*, p. 223-238. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

CONSTABLE Nicole

2007 (1997). *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

GRIFFITHS Melanie

2010. «I'm not a criminal but I've been here 11 months» – The criminalisation of asylum seekers in a British immigration detention centre». Paper presented at the conference *The Meaning and Practice of Immigration Detention: Perspectives from Legal, Political and Social Theory*, University of Oxford, May 2010.

KILLIAS Olivia

2009. «The politics of bondage in the recruitment, training and placement of Indonesian domestic workers». *Sociologus* 2: 145-172.

KROME Corinna

2009. *Preparation Practices in the Transitional Space of Training Camps*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Albert-Ludwigs Universität, Bachelor Thesis.

LINDQUIST Johan

2010 «Labour recruitment, circuits of capital and gendered mobility: Reconceptualizing the Indonesian migration industry». *Pacific Affairs* 83(1): 115-132.

LYONS Lenore

2005. «Embodying transnationalism: The making of the Indonesian maid». University of Wollongong, Faculty of Arts, Research Online. Published online at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/86> (accessed 26/01/11).

MACDOUGALL David

2005. «Doon School Images». *Tsantsa* 10: 12-19.

PARKER Lynett

1997. «Engendering school children in Bali». *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3(3): 497-516.

PARREÑAS Rhacel Salazar

2001. «Transgressing the nation-state: The partial citizenship and «imagined (global) community» of migrant Filipina domestic workers». *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26(4): 1129-54.

ROLLINS Judith

1990. «Entre femmes: les domestiques et leurs patronnes». *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 84: 63-77.

RUDNYCKYJ Daromir

2004. «Technologies of servitude: Governmentality and Indonesian transnational labor migration». *Anthropological Quarterly* 77(3): 407-434.

TYNER James A.

1999. «The web-based recruitment of female foreign domestic workers in Asia». *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 20(2): 192-209.

AUTHOR

Olivia Killias studied social sciences at the Universities of Lausanne and Amsterdam. She is currently enrolled as a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern. Her doctoral research deals with issues of bonded labour in Indonesian domestic worker migration and is empirically grounded in fourteen months of multi-sited, transnational ethnographic fieldwork.

olivia.killias@anthro.unibe.ch