

the sociolinguistics of calligraphy and in particular writing's place as a tool of social prestige. Writing has currency. Writing has its own linguistic economy. Amy McNair well describes an episode (one of many) in the history of Chinese culture where the creative reinterpretation of the past was used for contemporary political means. This volume is useful not only to scholars of Chinese cultural history but in the inter-textual reading of art by sociolinguists and cultural anthropologists alike.

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In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project. By Christine B. N. Chin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 299p. \$52.00 cloth; \$20.50 paper.

Reviewed by
Temario C. Rivera
International Christian University

In a moving narrative steeped in critical interdisciplinary approach, Chin explains how state elites in Malaysia have made use of foreign female domestic workers to advance the country's niche and competitiveness in the global economy and negotiate the terms of social consent and control over the society's multi-ethnic middle classes.

Showing the multi-faceted intersections of the global and local political economy with that of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion and nationality, the book addresses systematically a little studied aspect of contemporary Malaysia's quest for economic development and modernity: the systematic use of foreign female domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia to underpin further industrial growth while ensuring middle class consent for ambitious state policies.

By the 1980s, Malaysia's rapid economic growth through its export-oriented industrialization policies facilitated by the new international division of labor had created a Malay bourgeoisie and a significant middle class. However, economic growth gave rise to a new set of problems. In mobilizing large numbers of the Malay working women, the multinational factories in the export processing zones, in the same breath, deprived the expanding middle classes of their traditional source of low wage household help. As further stressed by Chin, it became politically incorrect for the state leadership under UMNO to call for Malaysian live-in domestic workers for the middle classes since the political elites themselves had officially encouraged the

upward mobilization of Malays under its twenty year (1971–1990) New Economic Program (NEP).

In its pursuit of modernization, the state leadership under Mahathir in the mid-1980s called for a “larger population to create a larger consumer base with an increasing purchasing power to generate and support industrial growth . . .” In this quest for the state’s “modernity via consumption” project, the author points out that the primary target groups were the women from the middle and upper-middle classes who are in fact expected to bear more children and to work outside the home at the same time. To address these problems, the state officially reopened its immigration gates in the mid-1980s for low wage foreign labor, after being closed since 1957 to preserve the country’s delicate ethnic balance. In reality, however, as the book documents, Malaysians were employing female domestic workers as well as construction and plantation workers from Indonesia and the Philippines as early as the late 1970s because of the acute need for low-wage labor. This policy also frees the working class Malaysian women to participate mostly in manufacturing industries rather than domestic service.

Consistent with the British colonial practice of using low wage migrant labor from China and India to perform particular economic functions and assign geographic space to specific ethnic groupings, the contemporary Malaysian elites have used migrant labor from Indonesia and the Philippines to enhance the economy’s competitiveness and command the consent and support of its expanding middle classes.

In “arranging and rearranging the internal frontiers” of Malaysian society thru the import of low-wage foreign female workers, the current state elites have imposed three employment rules, indicating the government’s direct efforts to shape the material and symbolic aspects of social relations. There exists an income rule (higher annual incomes for families hiring Filipina domestic workers and lesser for those seeking Indonesian domestic workers) which established the basis for inclusion and exclusion into the Malaysian middle classes. There used to be a religion rule requiring that only Muslims were allowed to employ Indonesian-Muslim domestic workers whereas non-Malay/non-Muslim employers could hire only Filipina (Christian) domestic workers. Indicating the state’s project to demarcate intraclass ethnoreligious boundaries, the religion rule was rescinded in 1991 in response to growing protests from both Malay and non-Malay employers in light of the deportation of several illegal Indonesian female workers with no immediate alternative foreign workers to take their place. Finally, there is a family rule enforced up to the present which requires employers seeking foreign domestic workers to submit their marriage certificates and their children’s birth certificates. Chin argues that this is the state’s way of constructing and legitimizing its preferred nuclear family form for the middle classes and defining in the process the parameters of both public and private morality.

The book’s most fascinating and poignant chapter documents the strategies of survival and resistance employed by the Filipina and Indonesian female domestic workers in an environment where they are largely treated as bought commodities with virtually no legislated rights and where abusive employers are rarely prosecuted. Employing James Scott’s idea of “infrapolitics” as everyday forms of resistance falling short of openly declared contestations, Chin examines a remarkable array of such

strategies, sometimes double-edged, ranging from calculated forms of defiance such as deliberately making extended phone calls, foot dragging and feigning illness; performing unexpected acts to defuse tense situations such as simply smiling in response to employer's show of anger; fasting; the use of bodily fluids to contaminate their employer's possessions; and dressing and acting differently on their few rest days. These actions help them "recover and reconstitute their sense of dignity" and signal attempts to renegotiate employer-employee relations. As the author further points out, these forms of resistance may backfire and could in fact strengthen negative representations of foreign domestic workers by the state, media and middle class employers, but someone reading these "hidden transcripts" of the female domestic workers end up realizing that the foreign maids turn out to be more civilized and humane than their employers.

In contrast to the traditional explanations on transnational employment offered by neo-classical economic models of rational actors who supposedly make decisions on the basis of push-pull factors (for instance, low wage vs. high wage polarities), Chin rightly emphasizes the deliberate role of states in facilitating and perpetuating this phenomenon. The book uncovers a systematic and integrated network of labor-sending and labor receiving state representatives linked in turn to private domestic employment agencies who all actively facilitate this transnationalization of migrant or contractual labor. Justified as rational responses to labor needs and related problems of the rapidly liberalizing global economy, state elites from both the sending and receiving countries, moreover, have also used the export-import of contractual labor as an unproblematic route to modernity. As also pointed out by Chin, the Philippine state for instance has made a ritual of glorifying its contractual workers spread all over the world as its "modern heroes", implying in effect that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with a practice that continues to subject its citizens to all kinds of abuses, exacting in the process enormous social costs.

Consciously written in the emancipatory tradition of critical theory that seeks to understand the historical and diachronic dimensions of structural change, this book succeeds admirably. Chin has contributed a solid and inspiring piece of scholarly research that advances our understanding of how state elites have used transnational labor migration to advance economic projects and routes to modernity while glossing over the fundamental social costs suffered by the workers in the process.