

Migration Systems and Identity

Javanese Domestic Workers in Hong Kong and Singapore

WAYNE PALMER

In its more than forty years of existence, Indonesia's overseas labour migration programme has recorded almost seven million departures, with Hong Kong and Singapore being popular destination countries in the Asia-Pacific region. These migrants' capacity to integrate into these countries is circumscribed by a migration system that makes their stay temporary and extracts between 30 and 100 per cent of their income during their first and sometimes subsequent periods of employment for payment of fees to migration intermediaries. Like Singapore, post-handover Hong Kong has a legislature that passes employment and immigration laws for application in that territory only. The conditions and experience of Indonesian migrant workers in the city-states are similar in this respect, but they are different from each other in three main ways. In Hong Kong, there is a minimum wage; it is criminal for employers to deny some labour rights; and the state there guarantees migrant workers a wider range of civil and political rights. Each place presents migrant workers with a unique set of opportunities and constraints to negotiate life and work, and the ways Indonesian domestic workers have gone about this have contributed to the formation of stereotypes about their character there.

Comparative approaches such as these have been used to study the behaviour of other large Asian diaspora groups, including the Chinese and Indians.¹ These studies warn against essentialism and so risk drawing conclusions that are in fact generalisable to a much broader

1 Oonk 2007, Tan 2004.