

Merete Lie and Ragnhild Lund: *Renegotiating Local Values: Working Women and Foreign Industry in Malaysia*. London: Curzon Press, 1994 (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Studies in Asian Topics, No. 15). 173 pp.

The authors have embarked on quite an ambitious study. They want to include both ends of the industrialization process in Malaysia - both the reason for investment by (Norwegian) capital, the industrialization process itself, as well as the impact of this process on local women workers. The focus is on working "girls," by which is meant the unmarried women who work in the industrial sector and usually quit the job, when they get married.

The study is refreshing. Through their anthropological approach the authors are able to demystify a number of myths about the behaviour of young workers. Moreover, they approach the subject from a feminist point of view, defined as action-oriented study of the local level. They regard this approach as an alternative to development theories, although they reduce development theories to studies of New International Division of Labour and TNCs, which is too much of a simplification.

The study furthermore includes welfare as one of its topics and contrasts welfare with social well-being, even if this is one of the less elaborated sides of the investigation. The authors also discuss whether the concept social change should be restricted to adjustment to new circumstances, or whether it also should include change of mind and change of values (p. 7). This concept is central for the study, and one of the main results is that the "girls" do indeed adapt to the new situation created by industrialization, education and rising age of marriage of women. In order to investigate social change, the authors look both at the work in the factories and especially the conditions of women at home. This investigation is the basis for two other conclusions: The case studies show that social change is taking place in the first sense of the definition, but as for the change of values, the situation is less clear. The majority of the "girls" still quit their job when they get married, respecting their husband's opinion in this regard, but at the same time they have gained a new consciousness both through the more general education that is taking place today and through their contact with other young people of their own age at the job. The authors accept this fact, but vaguely predict that the behaviour of young women

workers in a longer perspective also will change. The fact is that it has not changed yet:

While negotiating new roles, it seems to be a tacit agreement that the girls do not openly challenge male authority. Once this is recognized, new patterns of behaviour on the part of women may be tolerated. (p. 158)

I find the first part of this conclusion of special interest, because it touches a point which often is overlooked in women's studies: that women do not want to challenge their traditional female role, because this role is still essential for their cultural role as wives and mothers. It is therefore necessary to understand the women's ideas of their own lives to get a more complete picture.

The second interesting point about the conclusions from Malaysia, is that it seems to differ quite a lot from my own research in Vietnam and the Philippines. In neither of these countries would the women generally quit their jobs when they get married. The question is then whether this difference is due to cultural differences, differing labour systems, differing interests of capital or for that matter differing focus of the various studies. Explanations can partly be found in all the reasons.

The chapter about industrialization is less challenging, although one conclusion points out that the reason for investment of Norwegian capital in Malaysia is not only cheap, docile, female labour, which is one of the stereotypes often repeated, but it is due to a combination of several factors (search for raw materials, access to markets, etc.) and only special types of companies are mainly characterized by export orientation, labour intensive production *and* cheap labour.

The chapters which investigate the factory, the settler society near Singapore and especially the life stories of women are the most interesting parts, and especially the in-depth interviews with a number of mothers and daughters (girls). These interviews demonstrate clearly the changes in life conditions and ideas of two generations of Malaysian women.

The weakness of the book is that it has too many purposes, blurring the focus of the book. Several of the chapters could have been elaborated upon, whereas others could have been left out. Even if I see the point in having an analysis from both "ends" there is too

much information which is out of the main scope, and there are too many loose ends.

The husbands and fathers play a very peripheral role until the end of the book, when we suddenly learn that it is the husband that has the final decision power in the family; he even does the shopping in the settler community (this is totally contrary to the gender roles in Vietnam). In much literature about women in Southeast Asia, the patriarchal role of the father as head of the family is a leading theme. It is to be appreciated that the authors do not take this point of view and actually show the important role of the mothers, but is this choice deliberate or is it the result of too much focus on the women?

The girls are regarded as agents of change in the community, but this is only clear in the sample from the settler society and not in the village sample (p. 160). This is probably due to the short distance of the settler community to Singapore, which gives this community a somewhat special position. The authors also "want to show how individuals act as actors of change" (p. 8), which I find unclear when it may be "the young women workers who play the role as actors of change" (p. 84). Several of the figures are moreover difficult to read, and I noted that the book of Tilly and Scott is printed both in 1978 and 1987 (p. 10 and p. 173)!

On the whole the book gives valuable new insights. Compared to the knowledge about other Southeast Asian societies, Malaysia is probably better researched, and the results are interesting for scholars working on other countries.

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