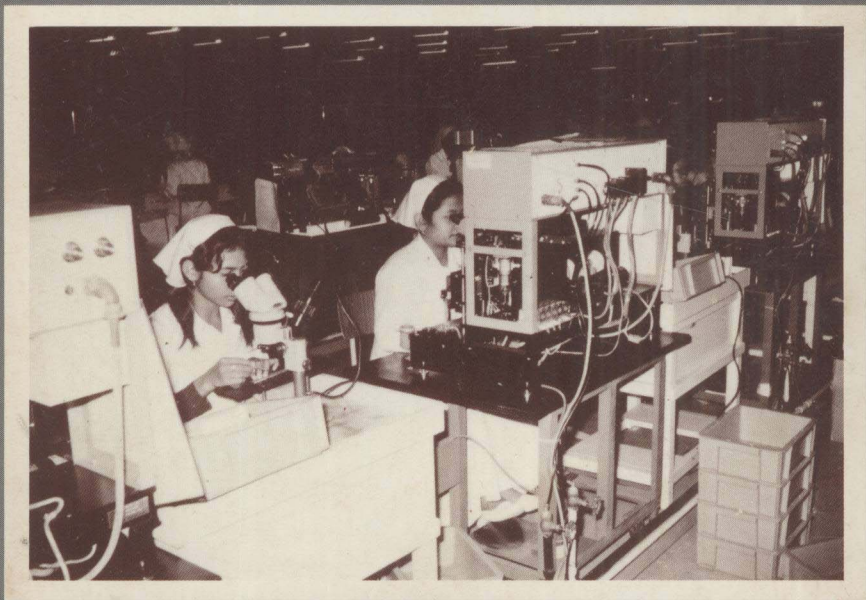


AIHWA ONG

SPIRITS OF RESISTANCE
AND
CAPITALIST DISCIPLINE

FACTORY WOMEN IN MALAYSIA



*Spirits of Resistance and
Capitalist Discipline:*

FACTORY WOMEN IN MALAYSIA

Aihwa Ong

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Preface

Why are Malay¹ women workers periodically seized by spirit possession on the shopfloor of modern factories? Educated Malays regard spirit beliefs a cultural relic which, like rustic speech and gestures, should have been left in departed villages. My aim in this book is to demonstrate how spirit attacks speak to the contemporary experiences of Malay women and their families as they make the transition from peasant society to industrial production.

To discover the meanings the market economy and industrial wage labor have for Malay women, it is necessary to talk about women as historical subjects and in terms of their subjective experiences. This inquiry deals with struggles over the means and meanings of gender in the context of exchange, disjunctions, and conflicts generated by land dispossession and the subjection of peasants to new forms of control and domination.

The proliferation of new disciplinary techniques, sexual images, and episodic outbreaks of spirit possession in the industrializing milieu leads me to ask: What is the relationship between work discipline and sexuality? What contradictions in the social experiences of factory women are mediated by evil spirits? In the new constellation of power relations, what do conflicting agencies and consciousness tell us about the nature of cultural change?

Capitalist development in Malaysia² engenders new forms of discipline in the everyday life of Malays, who up until recently were largely rooted in village (*kampung*) society and engaged in small-scale cash cropping. If "discipline" is taken to mean the effect of the exercise of power in the interests of capitalist production, then social control can be traced through a variety of cultural forms which enforce com-

pliance and order within and outside economic enterprises. This inquiry will explore how changing relationships in the peasant household, village, and the global factory mediate divergent attitudes towards work and sexuality among Malays and within the wider society.

The extension of capitalist relations in Malaysia involves the simultaneous processes of agrarian transition and industrial capitalism which together are transforming Malay society in fundamental ways. In coastal Selangor, developmental change has produced not a classic proletarianization but a multiplicity of social strata. Caught in the flux of land dispossession, the majority of villagers are cast into unstable wage employment generated by the operations of transnational factories. What are the structural effects of centralized state power, on the one hand, and the decentralized operations of transnational corporation, on the other, on the nature of class power in the countryside?

The rise of a female Malay industrial force in Malaysian "free trade zones" is accompanied by divergent representations of female gender and sexuality in the ideological discourse of dominant political groups. Almost overnight, neophyte factory women barely out of their adolescence have become contradictory symbols in public commentaries on morality and "truth."³ How do these conflicting images of their sexuality mediate the diverse interests of groups and classes? What do they tell us about the deployment of sexuality and hegemonic ideology?

Within the factory, working women confront industrial discipline as a manifold and wide-ranging network of overt and covert power relations. Marxists frequently assume that capitalist relations of production have an over-determined logic, based on the extreme separation of mental and physical labor, and the banishment of imaginative life from the factory floor. If that were the case, what is one to make of the production of "corporate culture" in transnational corporations? How are technology and cultural practices brought to bear in the production of "docile bodies," and a new subjectivity in female workers?

Caught between noncapitalist morality and capitalist discipline, some factory women alternate between states of self-control and spirit possession. The *hantu*, evil spirit of an archaic Malay world, is not alien to the sanitized environments of high technology factories. If one considers the complex *hantu* imagery as part of a noncapitalist

critique of capitalist practices, what are the contradictory meanings of these nightmarish visitations in modern factories? Does the symbolism of possession episodes speak to an elegant opposition between the production of use values and of exchange values, as Michael Taussig has claimed for South American workers (1980)? Alternatively, is the devil simply the shadow of a traditional belief system, or does it represent a contemporary assault on the Malay sense of humanity? Furthermore, does the *hantu* metaphor disclose an intense ambivalence in the factory women, their felt tension between old claims and new desires induced by capitalist culture?

To answer these questions, I have woven many narrative streams through the work. The voices of neophyte factory women, in counterpoint to corporate images and in protest against public abuse, articulate an intersubjective mode of apprehending the world. In their everyday vocabulary of moral piety, as well as in the possession indictments of male power, women workers seek to express new identities, to empower their relations with men and the wider society, and finally to diminish control by dominant power structures. This study is thus a composition in many discordant voices, claiming no final authority. It is an unfolding story that remains to be told more fully by young women living in the shadowy recesses undisclosed by the electronic gaze of the late twentieth century.

This book grew out of my meetings with hundreds of informants and friends in Kuala Langat, Selangor, where I spent fourteen months in the field (1979–80). I wish to express my gratitude to the people of the district — smallholders, factory workers, day laborers, petty traders, ordinary villagers, government officials, factory personnel — women, men, and children of different ethnic backgrounds who made my stay an enriching and unforgettable experience. In Sungai Jawa (a pseudonym, like all other village and personal names in the main text) Md. Naim b. Ahmad and Misripah bt. Hj. Ali welcomed me into their family as someone *kurang Jawa* (“not yet Javanese”), to be guided, with kindness, patience, and humor, through the intricacies of Malay-Javanese *kampung* life. My field assistant, Rageswari Balakrishna, competently conducted reams of time budget surveys. Villagers displayed warm hospitality and occasional impatience, breaking easily into conversations of remarkable interest and wit. I hope that by presenting their stories and daily experiences, which

form the stuff of this study, I nowhere betray their trust or interest. May the book be of some satisfaction in particular to the young factory women whose quiet courage and steadfast loyalty to their families and themselves are yet to be appreciated by the wider society.

My training in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University brought me, by a circuitous route, back to the heartland of Malaysia I had not known as a locally-born Chinese. My academic sensibility has been guided by Joan Vincent, Clive Kessler, Robert Murphy, and William Roff.

I am grateful to the following institutions for funding various phases of my dissertation research from which this book is derived: The National Science Foundation (grant no. BNS-787639) and the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, which provided additional support for preliminary write-up at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. I also wish to express my appreciation of research facilities at the following institutions: *Arkib Negara Malaysia* (The National Archives of Malaysia), Petaling Jaya, the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, and the National University of Singapore.

June Nash took an early interest in my dissertation and encouraged its metamorphosis into a book. Asraf Ghani's penetrating comments sharpened the contours of my argument as I began the task of revision for publication. Before it went to the press, this manuscript benefitted from critical suggestions by Brackette Williams. Different chapters were also read by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Alan Dundes, Scott Guggenheim and Cristina B. Szanton. Finally, the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, provided the necessary situation and diversions for time away from the task of writing. With such fine support, remaining flaws in interpretation are mine alone.

Berkeley, California
March 1986

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List of Abbreviations

ABIM	<i>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia</i> — Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia
D.O.	District Officer
EJI	Electronics Japan Incorporated
ENI	Electronics Nippon Incorporated
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority, government land schemes for the settlement of landless families
FMS	Federated Malay States
FTZ	Free Trade Zone
JCC	Joint Consultative Committee
JKK	<i>Jawatan Kuasa Kampung</i> — Village Committee
KEMAS	<i>Kemajuan Masyarakat</i> — Community Development projects for women
K.L.	Kuala Lumpur
MAS	Malaysian Airline System
MUZ	a manufacturer of musical movement components
NEP	New Economic Policy
PAS	<i>Partai Islam Se Malaysia</i> — Islamic Party of Malaysia
SSDC	Selangor State Development Corporation
TOL	Temporary Occupational License
UMNO	United Malays National Organization, the dominant party of the ruling National Front coalition

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Chapter 1

Spirits and Discipline in Capitalist Transformation

Writing this book is rather like opening Pandora's box: what kinds of spirits is one releasing? My inquiry into the meanings industrialization has for Malaysian society necessarily elicits the social significance of neophyte factory women not only for peasants but also for managers of transnational companies, government officials, Islamic zealots, school teachers, village children, and the wider society. Ethnographic knowledge builds upon a negotiated reality between the anthropologist and informants, and my claim to this alongside other possible interpretations rests on the inclusion of many voices seldom heard in the cacophony of academic and political exchanges. By documenting changes in rural society and weaving a multi-stranded, multilingual social reality into the account, this text discloses diverse reactions to an emerging Malay female proletariat, as well as their own eloquent descriptions of the disruptions and ambivalences of cultural change. Thus, while my interpretation may refract like a multifaceted lens, it preserves a dialectical tension vis-a-vis various particularistic views expressed about changing Malay society. In this account, the *hantu* (evil spirit), hovering over the passage of young Malay women into industrial modernity, becomes "an image which mediates the conflict between [non]capitalist and capitalist modes of objectifying the human condition" (Taussig 1980: xii).

The introduction of industrial capitalist discipline into Malay society involves both resistance and assent to change in work patterns, consumption, group identity, self-consciousness, and ultimately, a greater

synchronization of local life with the rhythm of advanced capitalist societies. The historical and ethnographic contexts lead me to ask: What are the effects of capitalist development on Malay peasant society? What are the possible connections between capitalist discipline and cultural discourse? How are the experiences of neophyte factory women and their images of vice and virtue mediated by the visitations of Malay spirits in modern factories?

To answer these questions, I take a dialectical approach by juxtaposing opposed or contradictory social phenomena. My descriptions will continually oscillate between the analysis of changing material relationships and the interpretation of cultural attitudes and practices both emerging and receding in the wake of Malay proletarianization.

This book seeks to illuminate cultural change in an industrializing society by talking about changing peasant beliefs and practices in a situation of shifting, complementary, and contradictory meanings. Previous analyses of Southeast Asian cultures have emphasized the syncretist paradigm of cultural streams (Geertz 1964) or the two-tiered model of great and little traditions (e.g., Scott 1976). Departing from this framework of society as a segmented system of cultural traditions, I consider divergent and discordant cultural forms in Malaysia where a complex network of bureaucratic mechanisms has been deployed to mobilize meaning in the discursive practices of everyday life, for the maintenance and reproduction of the political economy.

For too long, anthropological concepts of "culture" have been one-dimensional, overly comprehensive and extrahistorical. Clifford Geertz made a significant break when he urged that "culture" be taken as "webs of significance" (1973: 5), constituted by a system of shared meanings, symbols, and practices, to be read "from the native's point of view" (1979). What has been of less interest to Geertz is the question of power in the production, definition, and maintenance of dominant cultural patterns. More recently, Eric Wolf called for an examination of different cultural forms in specific social-historical contexts. He emphasized the importance of relating alternative symbol systems and practices to the "field of force" generated by the mode of production (1982: 387). The task of the analyst is to decode and understand changing cultural meanings, their making and un-making, in relations of domination and resistance.

In this book, "culture" is taken as historically situated and emergent, shifting and incomplete meanings and practices generated

in webs of agency and power. Cultural change is not understood as unfolding according to some predetermined logic (of development, modernization, or capitalism) but as the disrupted, contradictory, and differential outcomes which involve changes in identity, relations of struggle and dependence, including the experience of reality itself. Multiple and conflicting complexes of ideas and practices will be discussed in situations wherein groups and classes struggle to produce and interpret culture within the industrializing milieu. Raymond Williams has suggested that in class-divided societies hegemonic domination is not to be understood as merely controlling ideas and practices but as "a saturation of the whole process of living." By this he means that dominant meanings and practices shape the substance of everyday experiences: our lived expectations, meanings, and practices constitutive and constituting our sense of social relationships and of reality (1977: 110).

In Malaysia, industrialization has been accomplished through pervasive bureaucratic redefinitions of group identity and relationships in domains of public and private life, including the constitution and boundary-marking processes which define these. Such processes are currently intensified in many third world states undertaking capitalist development. Since hegemonic attitudes and practices are necessarily incomplete (at any time, oppositional forms exist), continual activities through education, media, and employment structures are required to defend, modify, and even incorporate countercultural tactics of subordinated groups (Williams 1977: 121-27).

Taussig (1980) and Williams thus emphasize the cultural construction and reconstruction of divergent meanings and action which embody a specific distribution of political and economic forces. Such a formulation enables us to deal with cultural change without a false opposition between ideology and practice. Michel Foucault's explication of the varied forms modern power takes is pertinent for our understanding of how social organization and realities are being reconstituted in some third world societies. By suggesting that the operations of modern power are in fact productive rather than repressive (i.e., effectuated through repression) he argues that schemes of discursive practices are involved in the complex production of rituals, objects, and "truth" (1979: 194). The effects of power/knowledge relations (e.g., scientific management) are to implant disciplinary techniques in bodies and human conduct, thereby complementing more overt forms of

control in everyday life. In transnational corporations, we see that relations of domination and subordination, constituted in scientific terms, operate not only through the overt control of workers' bodies but in the ways young female workers come to see themselves. In their changing positions within the family, the village, the labor process, and wider society, they devise counter tactics for resisting images imposed on them and come to construct their own images.¹

A heightened sexuality attributed to Malay female workers by the Malaysian public can be considered the contradictory cultural constructions of a society intensely ambivalent about the social consequences of industrial development. In looking at the complex relation between sexuality and gender, it is necessary to eschew the assumptions of received concepts such as "women's roles," "sexual inequality," and "patriarchy" either in their implied sense of "achieved states" (Williams 1977: 11-20) or as suitable starting points of analysis. Many ethnographies written about "women's status/role" in third world societies often lack this critical understanding of gender as cultural constructions, both imposed and increasingly self-defined, in particular historical situations. Even more rare, as Marilyn Strathern has pointed out, is the recognition that in some societies, gender may not be the primary organizing code of sexual difference but rather an idiom for other kinds of social differentiation, such as prestige ranking (1981). Perhaps most critically, the preoccupation of "women's studies" with statistical measurements of structural "inequality" overlooks the self-formative activities of women which partially structure their identities and the immediate relationships within which they are enmeshed in daily life. As a consequence, they leave underanalysed the dialectical relation between processes out of which constraints are developed and within which gender is culturally formed and transformed. This inquiry asks why sexuality should become a key image/construct in Malay transition to industrial capitalism; what does it tell us about culture as a dialectical construction? It is a major contention of this work that local meanings, values, and practices have been reworked within the operations of administrative organs, capitalist enterprises, and civil institutions.

In Malaysia, capitalist discipline operates through a variety of control mechanisms in social, political, and work domains both to regulate and legitimate unequal relations which sustain the process of industrial modernization. By "discipline" I mean the effects of the

exercise of power on the subjugated, and the enforced and induced compliance with the political, social, and economic objectives, considered rational and functional for capitalist production. The development of political mechanisms of control, whether in state offices, development projects or factories, necessarily involves changing material relations as well as an altered sense of reality, changing self-knowledge, and cultural justification of the social order, in times of noncrisis.

The following section will discuss how the cultural construction and reconstruction of meaning, gender relations, and sexuality are involved in new disciplinary systems and forms of resistance generated in rural Malay society. It will be argued that class formation is not the only process whereby new consciousness and practices emerge or are superseded.

The concept of "proletarianization" is fraught with Marxist assumptions derived from Lenin's discussion of the transition from Czarist feudalism to agrarian capitalism in Russia (1964). The situation in the corner of Peninsular Malaysia I am concerned with is not representative of the classic case of rural differentiation into a small number of agrarian capitalists and a multitude of rural laborers. Rather, the on-going dispossession of Malay peasants in Kuala Langat will be considered in relation to (i) an expanding state bureaucracy for the integrating fractions of the peasantry loosened from the land, and (ii) global corporate strategies based upon the fragmentation of the labor force dispersed throughout the world system. In other words, we are talking about circumstances in which the changing conditions of production and reproduction are less ordered by merchant capital than commanded over by the state apparatus and by global capital. This centralization of bureaucratic control over local reproduction processes is not limited to the production of exchange values but extends to the production of cultural values as well.

The crisis is seen in processes involved in the social reproduction of the *kampung*, the basic community, territorial unit, and the social matrix of everyday life. In Kuala Langat, *kampung* households exhibit differential capacities to reconstitute the labor process in smallholding production as more households come to control smaller parcels of land. But the formalism of landownership categories is only one (and often misleading) dimension of changing peasant-capital relationships. The making of new class relations is dependent not only upon