

“Transnational Interactive Service Work and Gender Under Economic Globalization:  
A Case Study of the Hotel Staff as Locally Employed Japanese Women in Kuala Lumpur”

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This study is an empirical analysis of the interactive service work performed by Japanese women at luxury hotels under the umbrella of international hotel brands located in Greater Kuala Lumpur.

As Malaysia and Japan pursued their economic partnership, Japanese companies actively expanded their businesses in Malaysia. Japanese companies established branches and offices in Malaysia and frequently sent their staff to ensure coordination with their headquarters. The expatriates responsible for the local operations stayed in Malaysia for several years, and the number of short-term Japanese business travelers commuting between Japan and Malaysia also increased.

This study interrogates the experience of Japanese women working at luxury hotels in Malaysia while assisting and cooperating with Japanese visitors. These women support the interaction between Malaysia and Japanese companies, contributing to the economic partnership between both countries.

However, there are three main factors which place these Japanese women in a highly vulnerable position: (1) the special nature of transnational labor, (2) the gender relations in labor control, and (3) control from both managers and customers in the triangle relationship of interactive service work. Most of the women leave their jobs or return to Japan after two years of employment, and do not continue working in the long term.

This study positions the labor of these Japanese women as “transnational interactive service work”, and the actual conditions of their work is revealed through their experiences.

For this purpose, observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Japanese women who were engaged in interactive service work as locally employed staff at luxury hotels in Greater Kuala Lumpur.

In Chapter 1, I reviewed three categories of studies: (1) studies on international migration labor of Japanese women, (2) studies on hotel labor under globalization, and (3) studies on the theory of interactive service labor processes. With regard to (1), since the 1990s, the phenomenon of locally employed Japanese who have "moved from the north to the south" has attracted attention (Mori 2020). The resulting studies focused on the personal motivations of migrant women who sought employment. There was a focus on how Japanese young people are sent overseas as local employees through recruitment agencies. (Matsutani 2015).

In Chapter 2, the development of the economic partnership between Malaysia and Japan was outlined, intertwined with the changes in industrial structure before and after the war in Malaysia and

the rise of globalization and the new international division of labor.

In Chapter 3, I examined the rise of international hotel brands in Malaysia since the late 1990s.

Addressing the organizational structure within the multinational corporations, the chapter demonstrates the hierarchical relationships among employees in relation to nationality, race, and ethnicity across the departments within an organization, while the types of employment are largely defined by which department they belong. The hierarchical relationships between employees are linked to their accommodation. Also, the Malaysia visa system aligns and reinforces the hierarchy. In other words, migrant workers are hierarchically placed into the hotel organization and assigned to their work sites through the visa system.

Chapter 4 examines how and why these Japanese women chose to work as locally employed staff in Malaysia, even if they had previous experiences working in luxury hotels. From the perspective of the employers, these women had already been well trained. There were three routes for them to be employed: through recruitment agencies, internship agencies, and direct hiring. Among them, the internship programs were the major route of migration. Some participants were interns at the time of interviews, while those who were directly employed had also undergone such programs in Malaysia during their student days. Also, the internship agencies often received commissions from the participant and the hotels.

Chapter 5 analyzes the work environment of the Japanese women at international hotel brands in Greater Kuala Lumpur. The number of Japanese hotel staff in Greater Kuala Lumpur has not been clearly identified in statistical surveys, and telephone surveys were conducted continuously from 2016 to 2019. In 2019, the total number of Japanese female staff in Greater Kuala Lumpur was 18, of which the most were 11 worked at the reception, the largest category. These women had limited contact with the outside world and built close relationships with other Japanese women in affiliated hotels. They supported each other during their work. Moreover, to improve their working conditions, they increased the frequency of negotiations concerning promotions and pay raises by shortening their two years contract period to one year.

Chapter 6 focuses on their working conditions of live-in staff (working while living in the hotel), which defines the way of work for the majority of the Japanese women I interviewed. This section examines how the live-in accommodations enable their work time fragmentation, being on call for 24 hours. The Japanese women staff were expected to provide as much support as possible to meet the expectations of Japanese male guests who faced difficulties living in a foreign country without any relatives. Those customers from Japan in particular received care from these female workers that went beyond the scope of their duties. For example, when the male guests were not well, the Japanese female staff were responsible for their care. In other words, some of the full spectrum of labor power needed by Japanese companies in the region was covertly outsourced to the Japanese staff at hotels.

Chapter 7 considers the labor process of Japanese women working in the hotel industry in the Greater Kuala Lumpur area. Using the triangle relationship analysis and a research framework of interactive service labor process theory, the study analyzes the alliances and conflicts of interests among managers, workers, and customers, based on interviews with Japanese female staff. This section conducts an analysis of the interview text using a four-quadrant matrix: each line of the interviews is assessed to determine whether it meets the customer' or managers' expectations while being aligned to the distinctive requirements of Japanese or international business customers. The international business means something typical to the interactive service work provided at a Malaysian hotel. Based on the analysis, the study then compared the *transnational interactive service labor* of Japanese female staff working at luxury hotels with the "bridge work" (Otis 2016) in previous research.

As a result, Japanese female hotel staff in Greater Kuala Lumpur experienced interpersonal conflicts and negotiations with stakeholders from a different language and cultural area than Japan. While they were working as live-ins, they were taking on the reproduction of the labor force of Japanese business travelers. Also, they responded to off-site work and on-call work in a state where they had internalized the norm of valuing "fulfillment". In this regard, they were placed in a labor relationship similar to an "enclave" that reproduces the labor practices of Japanese companies while being in Malaysia. Moreover, the formation of this "enclave" played a role in alleviation or reducing the friction and conflicts experienced by Japanese business travelers during their stay in Malaysia.