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YOSHIMURA, Mako

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Economic Development and Migrant Workers in Malaysia :

Indonesian Workers in Estates

Mako Yoshimura

*Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences
Hosei University*

Introduction

Since the 1970's, the Malaysian economy has developed remarkably under the New Economic Policy (NEP) 1971-90 and the National Development Policy (NDP) 1991-2000. In the process of industrialisation, the economy has faced labour shortages. The problem is very serious in the agricultural, construction, domestic service and manufacturing sectors. In these sectors, severe labour shortages have led to dependence on foreign labour, mainly from Indonesia.

Malaysia has long been a multi-ethnic society. Chinese and Indian immigrants entered the country during the British colonial period. In the last two decades, the issue of foreign workers has been discussed as a social problem, which is a new stage of history of migrant workers in Malaysia. In the early 1980s, the majority of migrant workers were undocumented/irregular ("illegal") workers who entered the country "illegally" and worked "illegally" in Malaysia. The Malaysian government started the regularisation programs of undocumented migrant workers from 1988.

This paper discusses foreign labour in the shifting Malaysian labour structure: the formation of multi-ethnic society in Malaya, economic development and labour shortages, the process of regularisation of migrant workers since 1988 and presents a case study of Indonesian workers on an estate in Johor, Malaysia. In the discussion, the position of migrant workers in the labour market is also examined as changes of labour demands and labour market segmentations in Malaysia.

I. Malaysia as a Multi-Ethnic Society and Migrant Workers

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society with Malays, Chinese, Indians and others. This multi-ethnicity was formed with Chinese and Indians as migrant workers in the development of the tin mining and rubber industries under British rule.

Many Chinese came as coolies to work in the tin mines run by Chinese capital in the 1840s-90s, while some Chinese were capitalists and merchants in the Straits Settlement. Many Indians came to work as rubber tappers for rubber estates (plantations) opened by the British after the "rubber boom" in 1909-11, while there were some *chettiers*, colonial government servants, etc. On the other hand, the majority of

Malays were smallholders (paddy, rubber, etc.) and fishers while the top of the society were the Malay sultans and those elites who worked with the British colonial government.

This segmentation in the labour market did not change even after independence. The basic structure of the ethnic division of labour lasted until the 1970s, causing occupation structure and income differences by ethnic group. Malaya brought much profit to the British Empire through export of tin and rubber and it had an important position among the British colonies. The tin industry developed mainly on the West Coast of the Malay Peninsular in the second half of the 19th century. The tin industry was dominated by Straits Chinese and the majority of labourers were also Chinese they brought from China. From 1912, however, British mining companies gradually took over the industry and they employed Chinese workers.

Many of the Chinese coolies in the tin mines were from Canton and Fukien districts. Usually, the Chinese coolie brokers hired by the Chinese tin mine owners went to their hometowns to recruit workers.

On the other hand, the rubber industry was started by British rubber planters and developed rapidly from the beginning of the 20th century. However, they were not able to recruit local labour, as Malays generally preferred to plant rubber by themselves, even on a small scale, to working as labourers with poor working conditions. Also, it was difficult for British companies to hire many Chinese because of Chinese own recruitment and labour control and the bondage of secret societies.

The British rubber companies brought Indians as labourers to Malaya with the assistance of the British colonial government. India was under the same British rule, and the climate was also tropical.

The British planters noted that Malay workers always wanted to go home, while Indians would work under poor working conditions. It was generally said that the Chinese were more hardworking but the Indians were paid less and easier to control. Eighty percent of rubber estate workers in Malaya were Indians while Chinese were 17% and Malays were only 2% (Malaya, Statistics Department, 1938).

Indians came to Malaya through the labour demand of European (mainly, British) estate companies. They were brought (under the Indian recruit system) with the direct assistance of the British colonial government, while the Chinese coolies were brought by Chinese. The government planned and guided importing of labour from India and supported the European companies. About 80% of Indians were unskilled labourers and the most of them were recruited directly or indirectly by European companies. Also, most of the clerks, teachers and doctors were employed by European companies (Sandhu, 1969, p. 305).

At the time of Independence in 1957, the rubber industry employed 277 thousand workers and the tin industry employed 38 thousand workers. The ethnic composition of employment in the rubber estate industry was Indian 52%; Chinese 29%; Malay 19%; and Other 1%. The ethnic composition in the tin industry was Chinese 68%; Malay 16%; Indian 15%, while two thirds of the government sector was dominated by Malays (Federation of Malaya, 1959, Appendix 1, p. 29).

Thus, the development of the tin and rubber industries did not include Malays, either as wage labourers or as capitalists. Malay sultans practised a kind of capitalism and were active as entrepreneurs in the early history of tin mining industry but they were eventually excluded from the industry. Malay peasants planted rubber as small

holders of cash crops and could maintain their access to the market since Chinese middlemen worked for their rubber marketing. However, the colonial government always supported the big European estate companies.

The British colonial government thus did not work to harmonise relations among the ethnic groups. Later, the Japanese military government took advantage of ethnic relations during their occupation of the country in 1942–45. Japanese attracted the Malays with the slogan of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. On the other hand, Japanese were afraid that the Chinese supported main land China so they watched the Chinese and slaughtered them in many areas. This policy of ethnic division practised by the Japanese military administration aggravated ethnic relations between Malays and Chinese in the community.

After the Japanese government surrendered, the British returned to Malaya, and independence was achieved in 1957. However, the ethnic division of labour did not change. Malays still worked as smallholders in the rural areas, while Chinese were engaged in the modern commercial and manufacturing sectors. The income gap between Malays and non-Malays was not solved. It was this economic imbalance which brought about the May 13 ethnic riots in 1969. The government responded by announcing the New Economic Policy in 1970 and implemented it from 1971 to 1990.

II. Labour Shortages and Migrant Workers

1. Economic Development and Labour Shortages since the 1970s

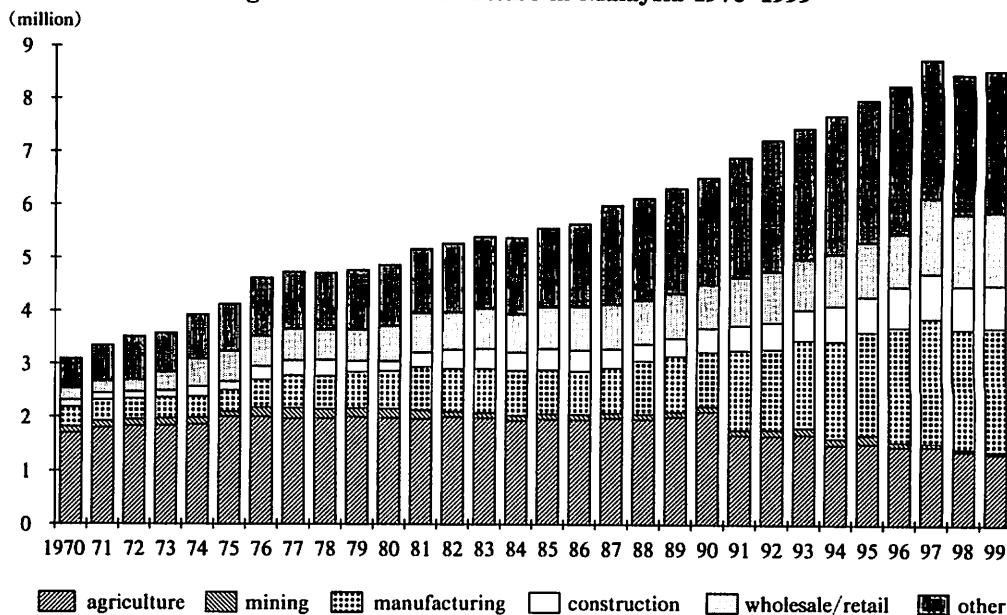
The Malaysian economy achieved rapid growth from the Second Malaysian Plan 1971–75 to the Sixth Malaysian Plan 1990–95 under the NEP and NDP. The average economic growth rates were 6.7% (Malaysia, 1991b, Table 2–2, p. 39) for 1970–90 under the NEP and 8.7% for 1990–96. In 1995, the GDP was 120.3 billion ringgit.

The NEP's aims are (1) the eradication of poverty and (2) the restructuring of society.¹ The NEP gave privileges to Malays in employment, share-ownership, education, permits, land-ownership, loans, etc.² The policy encouraged Malays to enter modern sectors such as manufacturing and service sectors so that they would have opportunities to increase their income level.

The estate sector, together with the tin industry, dominated the economy during the period of British rule in Malaya. However, from independence in 1957, the government tried to develop the economy through industrialisation and the diversification of the agricultural sector, in order to adjust the mono-culture structure of the colonial economy, which had depended on export of rubber and tin. Moreover, under the NEP aims of the eradication of poverty and the restructuring of society, the target of eradication of the poverty was the rural area, which represented under-developed areas and low-income Malay households.

The manufacturing sector has lead economic growth. The proportion of exports accounted for by manufactured goods climbed from 11% in 1970 to 85% in 1999, whereas raw materials fell from 79% to 15%, while the proportion of GDP attributable to the agricultural sector declined from 31% to 9 % for the same period. As well as the decrease of importance of agriculture in the economy, the government policy of encouraging replanting from rubber to oil palm and the weakening of rubber prices on the international market caused the proportion of rubber's exports to shrink from

Figure 1 Labour Structure in Malaysia 1970–1999



Source : Malaysia, Ministry of Finance, *various issues*.

33% in 1970 to 2 % in 1995.

Figure 1 shows the change of labour structure by sector for 1970–1999. The largest sector of the labour force is the service sector, for which the share of the working population rose from 33% to 56% in 1998. During the same period, the proportion of the labour force engaged in the agricultural sector declined from 51% in 1970 to 16% in 1998, whilst the proportion engaged in the manufacturing sector rose from 11% to 27% (Malaysia, 1999, Table 4-2, p. 99).

In the process of rapid economic growth since the 1970s, the economy has faced acute labour shortages in many sectors, especially in the agricultural, construction, domestic service and manufacturing sectors.

In the agricultural sector, the shortage of labour is crucial for the estate sector. The reasons are that (1) estates need many labourers for large scale crop production, (2) planting, harvesting and products cannot wait, (3) upkeep and harvesting must be continued, and (4) automation and mechanisation are still limited and estates cannot be managed without labourers.

The shortage of labour in the agricultural sector occurred for several reasons. First, the Indian estate workers returned to India following the “May 13 Riots” and as a result of the government policy requiring work-permits for non-citizens, introduced in 1969.³ Second, the shift from rubber to oil palm changed the nature of labour requirements. Third, other job opportunities have increased in the urban areas. Fourth, demand for labour increased in the rural areas because of government development programs such as the FELDA⁴ land schemes.

The manufacturing sector is now facing labour shortages, too. In the 1970s, this took the form of a shortage of trained human resource such as engineers and technicians as well as administrative staff. However, in the 1980s, the problem of the shortage of unskilled labour and semi-skilled labour became general for the manufacturing

sector, especially since the unemployment rate decreased with the recovery from the recession after the mid 1980s. The unemployment rate was 2.8% in 1995/96 and ensuring labour supply is not easy for employers.

There are six main reasons that labour shortages are serious in specific sectors such as agriculture, construction, domestic service and manufacturing sectors. First, the wage levels are generally low compared to the service sector. Second, the work is often tough work for long hours in difficult environments with poor working conditions. Third, skilled or semi-skilled jobs and professional or technical positions are preferred to unskilled work because of rising levels of education. Fourth, many other job opportunities are offered in other sectors because of the general labour shortage in the country. Fifth, labouring jobs have negative images such as "poor," "less educated," "dirty," etc. And sixth, the urban lifestyle is favoured and office work is preferred (Yoshimura, 1997a, p. 110; Yoshimura, 1998, p. 42).

Thus, youths avoid manual work because they consider jobs in estates, construction sites, factories, and domestic service, etc. as low-paid and low-status, with low career prospects. They prefer working in offices or factories with air-conditioning, under the better working conditions available in urban area (Yoshimura, 1997a; 1997b). Furthermore, they even wait for better jobs.⁵ In these circumstances, it would be difficult to bring youths back to these jobs because of such negative images, even if the wages and working conditions were improved.

Therefore, the sectors with difficulties of labour supply have come to depend on foreign labour.

2. Regularisation Program for Undocumented/Irregular ("Illegal") Migrant Workers

Information on international immigration flows into Malaysia suffers from the lack of a proper statistical base. Currently, it is estimated that there are two and a half million migrant workers, including undocumented workers, in Malaysia. There were issues of undocumented/irregular ("illegal") migrant workers even in the 1970s, but in the 1980s, such issues emerged as serious social problems as they became increasingly visible.

However, there is a complex history of foreign workers in Malaya/Malaysia. Chinese and Indians, who moved into British Malaya as tin mine coolies and estate labourers from outside the Malay world, are now Malaysians. On the other hand, labourers within the region, including Indonesia and some parts of the Philippines and Thailand, came from areas formerly considered part of the Malay world, whereas now these countries' nationals are foreigners who come to Malaysia as undocumented workers.

The majority of migrant workers in Malaysia are Indonesians. Although the Malaysian government signed the Medan Agreement in 1984 to control the labour supply from Indonesia, it did not restrain undocumented immigration. Furthermore, as foreign workers who had worked in jungles and fields gradually came to work in urban areas, issues concerning foreign labour have come to the fore as social problems in the country in the 1980s.

In 1988, the Malaysian government amended the Immigrant Act for the first time since it was passed in 1963, in order to penalise agents. Further, the government directed registration of foreign workers after 1988 through the Regularisation of

Migrant Indonesian Workers Without Permit (*Proses Pemutihan Pendatang Tanpa Izin Indonesia*) mainly for estate workers and construction workers in 1989,⁶ and the following Amnesty Program for domestic helpers. The government also permitted the employment of foreign labour in the manufacturing sector in 1991, so the Malaysian economy depends on foreign labour in most sectors. The ministries, employers associations and workers groups continue to discuss aspects of the foreign labour situation. The government also studies the current situation and means of controlling the foreign labour.

One decade has now passed since the introduction of the regularisation program of foreign workers. Initially, employers complained of many problems with paperwork, long delays and the lack of proper guidelines. They also were afraid of the future labour force situation. Foreign workers' work permits were initially valid for a three-year period, and the government at first announced that employers would not be able to apply for renewals. However, the later government announcement, that renewals of work permits might be allowed if necessary, was welcomed by employers, since this would enable them to keep a stable labour supply.

3. Urban Development and Migrant Workers in the Construction Sector

Utilisation of foreign labour in the construction sector is related to development projects in Malaysia. The construction industry requires many manual workers and is dependent on foreign labour in the current labour situation. The construction boom, mainly in urban areas like Klang Valley in the rapid economic growth of the late 1980s, raised the utilisation of undocumented foreign workers. The government allowed the employment of foreigners on construction sites in 1989 because of the industry's requests and social conflicts about undocumented workers. However, even after the government policy of regularisation, many undocumented foreign workers continued to work on construction sites. About half the foreign workers on construction sites in the Klang Valley are undocumented. In early July 1997, police conducted raids on foreign workers in construction workers' quarters and sites. 192 out of 347 foreign workers were arrested as undocumented on the construction site for IOI Shopping Complex in Puchong (*Sun*, 2 July 1997), and 130 out of 300 foreigners were arrested on the site for a shopping complex in Bandar Baru, Bangi (*Malay Mail*, 9 July 1997). The former case shows that 55% of foreign workers were not registered and the latter that 43% were not registered.

Although contractors could register their foreign workers, they utilise foreigners without registration. This is because : (1) they can keep lower wage standards ; (2) they can save the cost of registration, EPF, paperwork, etc. ; (3) they do not have to prepare proper accommodation followed the government guidelines for workers ; (4) they do not have to wait and can get the required number of workers easily whereas they would have to wait for recruitment and registration if they follow the proper procedure ; (5) they can not easily control the number of workers after registration as they have to register workers for three years, and (6) even after registration, workers are insecure and unstable (Yoshimura, 1998b, p. 47). The first, second and third points involve cost saving and the fourth, fifth and sixth points involve control of the volume of labour.

Construction work is divided into pieceworks among sub-contractors, and there

are sub-sub-contractors who work under the sub-contractors. In the industry's sub-contracting structure, they get profit with the piecework payments, so cost and schedule are important concerns for profit and contracts. So, as long as there is an option to utilise foreigners, the illegal utilisation of foreigners remains as a structural problem of the industry.

Recently, the industry has been suffering from shortages of skilled workers and artisans like bricklayers and carpenters as well as unskilled manual workers.⁷ Some complain that building fixtures are relatively poor because of shortages of professional carpenters and artisans and the introduction of foreign workers.

The construction industry saves costs by utilisation of undocumented foreign workers. The proportion of labour cost of the total is 30–40% in the construction industry. So if it is possible to reduce wages for workers, this allows further cost reduction and more profit. The average wage of undocumented foreign workers is approximately 70% of Malaysian workers, as understood from research on construction sites in and near Kuala Lumpur (Salleh and Rashid, 1997). Moreover, there are many issues concerning bad working conditions such as tough work for long hours, lack of toilets, poorly built and unhygienic accommodation without proper toilet and bathrooms. The mass media often features such problems and it has become widely known that the industry takes advantage of undocumented foreigners.

Malaysia promotes various development projects. The development itself creates the structure of foreigners' undocumented labour. If employers register foreigners under the proper procedure, it takes time and expense and it affects the cost and schedule of the project. Big government projects like the new International Kuala Lumpur Airport, opened in June 1998, were controlled with a strict schedule and cost guidelines and cost increases or delays cannot be allowed. It is the same with public sector projects such as low cost housing and new township projects as well as private sector projects such as shopping complexes and condominiums in and around Kuala Lumpur. Since Malaysian youths are no longer willing to work on construction sites, foreign labour is crucial for such development projects. However, the issue of foreign workers in the construction industry is very structural and deeply related to urban development in the economy.

4. The Economic Crisis and Migrant Workers

The economic crisis attacked the Malaysian economy in 1997 and the growth rate of employment fell from 4.6% in 1997 to -2.4% in 1998. The retrenchment was 84,000 in 1998, which is four times the 19,000 retrenched in 1997. While the unemployment rate was first estimated at 7–9% in 1998, the actual rate was 3.2% or 280,000 in that year.

In February 1998, a tripartite committee was formed by government, employers and labour union to discuss retrenchment, and guidelines were announced in August. Employers were suggested to apply wage cuts, reduce working hours and lay-off instead of retrenching workers. The local labour market was also buffered from the direct impact of retrenchment by foreign labour. The economic turndown did not lead to many labour disputes and strikes in Malaysia, unlike in Indonesia, South Korea and Thailand.

Because of the economic crisis, the Malaysian government and mass media insisted that Malaysians should come first in employment. The government froze new

applications and renewals for foreign workers, raised the levy for foreign workers and conducted operations against undocumented foreigners. Illegal entrance by Indonesians increased because of the economic situations in Indonesia and it was reported that many Indonesians were waiting to enter Malaysia illegally. The Malaysian government deported illegal immigrants and announced that 200,000 Indonesians, including undocumented workers, were to be sent back to Indonesia by August 1998. The number of registered foreign workers with Temporary Employment Passes (TEP) thus decreased from 1.2 million in 1997 to 762,000 in 1998.

The decrease of foreign labour was remarkable particularly in the construction sector. Registered foreign workers in this sector were reduced by half from 288,000 in 1997 to 141,000 in 1998, and further, to 79,000 in the year 2000. The construction sector was struck by the economic turndown and restraint, which caused the discontinuation of big projects.

The employers, however, kept foreign labour because they knew that Malaysians would not come to work in their sectors even in the recession in which it was difficult to get good jobs.

The estate sector whose foreign labour fell from 276,000 to 149,000 in 1998, again increased the number of foreign labourers to 186,000 in 2000. The estate sector was not struck directly by the economic turndown because of good commodity prices in 1997. However, the employers' association had been concerned with retaining a sufficient labour force since 1996, when the government expressed fears that the economy was too dependent on foreign labour.⁸

The policy on foreign labour had actually been changed in 1996, before the economic crisis. The government announced a policy to reduce dependence on foreign labour in 1996 when the total number of registered foreign workers exceeded 1 million.

At that point, the Malaysian government approved only three nationals, Indonesians, Thais and Cambodians. Cambodians were newly listed as approved foreign workers because of a request from the Cambodian government. Domestic service was still allowed for nationals of the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Thailand.⁹ Sri Lankan and Filipina domestic helpers were highly evaluated because of their English ability.

Bangladeshis were excluded in new applications for TEP after 1996 although they were the second biggest group among foreign workers in Malaysia. The government still allowed the renewal of TEP of Bangladeshi workers, but complained that Bangladeshis caused social conflicts (e. g., quarrels, unscrupulous agents, mingling/marriages with Malay women¹⁰) although they were considered to share the same culture as Muslims. Later, the government lifted the ban of Bangladesh workers in 2001.

The total of registered foreign workers were 726,000 in July 2000. The majority were Indonesians (74%) and the second biggest group were still Bangladeshis (19%) although their numbers were reduced.¹¹

There were 726,000 registered foreign workers with TEP in July 2000, in the categories of manufacturing (34%), estates (26%), domestic help (22%), construction (11%), and service (7%).¹² The manufacturing sector is still the biggest employer of foreign labour while the construction sector fell from its foremost place (together with the estate sector) as employer of foreign labour in 1996, to fourth

place after the economic crisis.

The government introduced limitations on sectors eligible to file applications of unskilled foreign workers. Eligible sectors included the export-oriented manufacturing sector (more than 50% of the products should be exported), the agriculture sector (estates, flower/food cultivation, livestock, etc.), the construction sector and the limited service sector (restaurants, cleaning and laundry, general workers of cargoes, welfare houses, golf caddies, and island resorts). The government also announced 136 jobs to be closed to foreigners in March 2000. These included various service jobs in the hotel and tourism sector as well as executive and supervising jobs in sectors including manufacturing sector and construction.¹³

III. Segmentation among Migrant Workers by Nationality and Gender

The main flows of current labour immigration are as follows : (a) from Sumatra and other nearby Indonesian islands to Peninsular Malaysia ; (b) from Kalimantan, Indonesia to Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) ; (c) from the Philippines to Sabah and Sarawak ; (d) from South Thailand to the Northern States of Peninsular Malaysia, and (e) from Bangladesh to Peninsular Malaysia.

The foreign workers are mainly nationals from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Philippines, Pakistan and Thailand.

Indonesians account for 65% of Temporary Employment Pass (TEP) of foreign workers in 2000. There are many Indonesians in Malaysia because (1) Indonesian historically have come to Malaysia as neighbours ; (2) Malays and Indonesians are similar ethnic groups and their outlooks are similar ; (3) the languages are similar and communication is easy, and (4) Indonesians are Muslims like Malays and the culture and customs are similar (Yoshimura 1997b, p. 124). On the other hand, Indonesian workers are criticised. (1) Indonesian working attitudes are sometimes found fault with ; (2) Indonesians easily move to higher paid jobs such as construction jobs, and (3) there are increasing problems such as crime, involving Indonesians.

The second biggest group is Bangladeshis (21%) as they are also Muslims and share the same values and customs despite the language differences.

Indonesians mainly work in the estate sector (37%), the construction sector (34%) and as domestic help (23%), and the share of manufacturing sector is only 6%. On the other hand, nearly half of Bangladeshis work in the manufacturing sector (46%), with the construction sector (30%) and the estate sector (18%) being second and third in numbers employed. Bangladeshi migrant workers are mostly male while Indonesian women often come to Malaysia as factory workers, domestic helpers, etc. despite the fact that they are Muslim. The education level of Bangladeshi migrant workers is generally higher than that of Indonesian migrant workers (Yoshimura, 1997a, 1997b).

Filipino migrant workers come to Peninsular Malaysia mainly as domestic helpers (90%). Females are predominant among Filipino registered workers in Malaysia because of this job structure. The case in Sabah and Sarawak is different and the Filipinos include men freely moving from the Sulu islands to work in estates in East Malaysia. Among the category of domestic helpers, the ratio of Indonesians (67%)

is almost double that of Filipinas (29%). However, Filipina domestic helpers have a good reputation as professional maids because of their professional attitudes, English ability and better educational background. The wages and the employers' income regulation for Filipina helpers are higher than for Indonesian helpers.

Thus, foreign labour is not homogeneous and there are different characteristics by gender and by nationality, although they are all supposed to be unskilled labour.

Since Malaysia has long been a multi-ethnic society, it has the potential to accommodate outsiders with different cultures, religions, languages, and customs. However, the local community resents the increase of social costs such as medical expenses and education for foreign workers' children, and fears of social conflicts and an increase in crimes.

Many Indonesians and Bangladeshis are registered as workers in Malaysia. They are Muslims and share the same values and culture with Malays. Indonesians share the same religion and language as Malays and come from the same region. Nevertheless, this similarity gives rise to other problems. Because they could be potentially categorised as Bumiputera and added to the Bumiputera population if they settle in Malaysia, they cannot always share ethnic interests with non-Bumiputera Malaysians. Bangladeshis were once excluded from the list by the government, in fear of cultural and social conflicts even when they could share the same religion as well as a similar culture.

Migrant workers are less protected as workers, and they are considered a labour reserve which is easily expendable in the labour market. Migrant workers would not be employed if there were sufficient labour supply in the labour market and they will be sent back to their countries when the economy slowed down. In times of recession, it is foreigners who are fired first. Still, as mentioned above, they have a certain niche in the labour market, as employers prefer cheaper labour to save labour cost and now prefer humble migrant workers for so-called 3D jobs and sectors which locals avoid.

Local workers are afraid that their job security is jeopardised by migrant workers. Employers take advantage of this situations and sometimes drive locals out since they prefer cheaper and hardworking migrants. These trends also undermine workers' status and security as well as wage level and working conditions. And local workers cannot share the interests with migrant workers to protect all workers in the labour market.

Theoretically, migrant workers might return home when their home economies develop. The sectors that currently depend on foreign labour might recruit labour from other countries and/or shrink the labour intensive sectors. Even in such a case, industries still want to recruit migrants when they have the choice for cheaper labour. This contribute to the creation of a global chain of exploitation.

Therefore, it is crucial to change the Malaysian labour structure which depends on and takes advantage of migrant workers.

IV. Labour Structure and Migrant Workers in Estates : A Case Study in Johor

1. Labour Structure of the Estate

Johor is the southern-most state of Peninsular Malaysia and is currently one of

the busiest parts of the country, where investment and economic development are active because of the location on the border with Singapore. Whereas Singaporeans come to Johor to enjoy cheaper food, goods and entertainment, the Malaysians in Johor commute to Singapore for the higher wages. Because of these transactions between Johor and Singapore, the capital town of Johor state, Johor Bahru has been called "the most expensive town in Malaysia" (*Business Times*, July 5, 1991).

Young people in Johor want to work in offices, factories, etc. in Singapore for the higher wages and the number of Malaysians who commute to Singapore is estimated to be approximately 60,000. Also, Johor Bahru and industrial estates such as Pasir Gudang offer job opportunities. The labour shortage is serious and the dependence on foreign labour is heavy in Johor: the ratio of registered foreign workers by state is 14% in Johor, second only to the capital city where half of registered foreign labour was employed in 1996 (data from Immigration Department). Johor is "an estate kingdom" with 253 of the 1,376 estates in West Malaysia, so the labour shortage is more severe for estates in Johor than other states in the Peninsular Malaysia.

The Malaysian government encourages replanting from rubber to oil palm. It is rational for an estate to replant with oil palm because of the decline of rubber prices on the international market and the expectation for palm oil demand in the market. In addition, because of the climate and soil, the productivity of rubber in Johor is not as good as other states in the peninsular.

Rubber cultivation requires tapping, collecting, weeding, spraying, etc. The main task is tapping. While other work does not require any skills, tapping is skilled work. So the estates cannot replace tappers by foreign workers. Tappers are all Malaysians and more females are employed as tappers than in other sections. The family members can help the tappers by cleaning tapping cups, collecting rubber liquid, etc. They have to start work early in the morning and since young people do not work in estates, the estate cannot keep enough tappers.

The estate with the author surveyed in Johor cut down all the rubber trees to replant with oil palms in 1993 because productivity and profitability were not good. Moreover, even if they had wanted to keep the rubber section, the estate could not keep enough good tappers in Johor, nor could they replace them with foreign workers.

The oil palm section requires harvesting, picking and collecting of the bunches, cutting branches, weeding, spraying, etc. The fruit bunches are heavy and the main labour in the section is by young male workers except for spraying which does not necessarily require male workers. The workers are mostly Indonesians, especially in harvesting and collecting.

2. Introduction of Indonesian Workers and Registration

In accordance with the government's program of regularisation of undocumented foreign workers, the H. J. S. Estate the author surveyed applied for work permits for 92 Indonesian workers in 1989. There were, however, foreign workers on the estate in the 1980s before the program. Before the program, the Indonesian workers in the estate were supposed to be undocumented. The foreign workers worked under contract with contractors. The estate did not ask for the workers' documents and they did not know the exact number. Hence, there is no exact data about foreign labour in the 1980s. But the proportion of foreign labour can be estimated by the

number of contract workers because the current contract labour provided by contractors is composed of foreigners.

In 1978, it appears that the majority of contract workers were Malaysians, since the annual report of the estate reported that the contractors gained the labour from FELDA, where residents are Malays, and that there was adequate labour supply in the estate in 1978. In 1982 and 1983, however, the labour situation was getting very acute for the estate and they were short of male harvesters. The Malay workers left the estate for the FELDA scheme and replacement was difficult. Since then, annual reports mentioned the labour shortage and workers' leaving. The annual report in 1985/86 mentions that the 240 contract workers included 109 additional tappers recruited to do recovery and to tap the replanting areas on contract. As tappers are supposed to be Malaysian, it follows that approximately 50% of the non-resident contract labourers were still Malaysian. 94 out of 227 contract workers were tappers in 1986/87 and 64 out of 235 in 1987/88. So roughly 30–40% of non-resident contract labour was accounted for by Malaysians in 1986–88. Thus it was in the late 1980's when most of the contract labour was taken over by Indonesians.

The increase in foreign labour is associated with the replanting from rubber to oil palm. This shift brought changes in the nature of demand for labour on the estate, and the new labour requirements for the oil palm section could not be met by local labour. This estate planted oil palm on a large scale in 1979 and harvesting began in 1982 when the annual report noted the shortage of harvesters.

The oil palm harvesters are supplied by contract labour. In the check-roll list of the estate workers in 1980, only 60 out of 748 workers were contract workers and those 60 workers were harvesters. In the check-roll list in 1992/93, 226 contract workers consisted of 60% harvesters, 10% pickers and 20% field workers. Estate-direct-employed labour did not include harvesters and pickers. From the beginning of oil palm section, the tough labour was carried out by contract workers, who were Indonesian.

The Indonesian workers were employed under contract through contractors. The contractors brought Indonesians into the estate and the estate registered them in the estate's name. The estate did not have to be involved in the recruitment process of undocumented workers, and could also control the labour force and pay for the amount of work. Thus, the introduction of foreign labour was accompanied by the externalisation of labour.

3. Indonesian Workers in the Estates

The H. J. S. Estate employed 256 Indonesian workers in 1993. They were all men in their mid twenties on the average, who had left their families in the *kampung* (villages) in Indonesia.

The major group was born in the period 1970–74 (18–22 years old in 1992), which accounted for one third. The mean group was born in 1965–69 (23–27 years old in 1992). As a whole, the group of 1970–74 (33%) and 1965–69 (23%) forms 50%+.

Indonesian workers in Peninsular Malaysia come from various areas in Indonesia. Yet the Indonesians of this estate are mainly from Lombok Timur, Indonesia. According to the check-roll list of Indonesian workers, about 70% of workers were from Lombok Timur and 80% from Lombok. Among 124 Indonesians interviewed,

84% or 102 came from Lombok and 70% from Lombok Timur. The estate staff could not suggest the reason why most of the estate workers came from Lombok Timur. Probably, Indonesians from Lombok introduce their friends and acquaintances to the same contractors who brought them to the estate.

Most of them and their parents are paddy peasants in their *kampung*s. The average educational background was 5.6 years schooling while the parents' average length of schooling was even less, 2.5 years.

Indonesian workers came to Malaysia for "money (*duit*)" (64%). They said that they could make a living by farming, fishing, etc. in the *kampung*s, but they cannot earn enough for their children's education. They came to Malaysia because they can earn more, and they worked for "survival," "better life," "future for children (i. e. education)," "a new house," "additional rice field," "a buffalo," etc.

Their wages were paid by the estate through the contractors, according to the MAPA (Malayan Agricultural Producers' Association) Agreement, which applies to Malaysian workers. The 124 workers' monthly income varied from 100 to 900 ringgit, with the average income being 299 ringgit which is much less than Malaysian workers' average income. The average saving was 141 ringgit per month, which meant that they saved almost the half of their earnings. The saving rates of earnings varied from 25 to 80% except for two workers who could not save money to send to their families in Indonesia.

They got information about jobs in Malaysia through friends, neighbours, and family members who had already been to Malaysia. They asked "*teckong*" (boat masters) to bring them to Malaysia. The Indonesians from Lombok usually paid 200,000–300,000 rupiah (240–360 ringgit) per person for ferries to Malaysia. Although the expenses for ferries were costly and they used savings, sold a buffalo or property, they could pay back the debts for ferry fees in several months. However, two people from West Java paid respectively 2,700 thousands rupiah (3,240 ringgit) for an air ticket and 80 thousands rupiah (96 ringgit) for ferry. One of them cannot send any money to Indonesia because 150 out of 200 ringgit is deducted for the debt.

Besides four people who got passports in Indonesia, none of them came to Malaysia with any travel documents. While three fifths worried about this, one fifth did not worry when they entered the country because many Indonesians have done the same thing. In any case, they considered the Regularisation Program to be good for them and they understood its meaning.

In the estate, the Indonesian workers found some difficulties with work at first, as the work is different from work in their *kampung*, but eventually they got used to it (67%). They took the view that estate work is similar anywhere and that it is just a job, though it is tough working under the strong sunshine. 10% of the workers, however, see the work as difficult. Some insist that they would never do the same work in Indonesia.

The Indonesians hope to go back home as soon as possible (80%). After completing the three-year contract, they (81%) wanted to go back to the *kampung* life as paddy farmers, fishers. They (90%) preferred a quiet life in their village and did not hope to live in Malaysia.

The estate staff considered that Indonesian workers were "hard-working," "humble," "modest," "serious", etc. Indonesian workers worked in a group with an Indonesian "*mandor*" (supervisor). Although they said there was no conflict between

Indonesians and Malaysians, the staff did not mix Indonesians with Malaysians in a group in the field because Indonesians would follow the Malaysian system of work. Also, the staff did not mix Indonesians from different districts because there was some communication gap because of the different dialects.

The estate wanted the Indonesians to bring their families to improve their stability and to help them to concentrate on their work, as the Indonesian workers always missed their families. Also, the wives could work in estate and the children could go to school. While the estate encourages Indonesians to bring their families, the Indonesians say that it is too tough for their wives to work on the estate.

The situation in Sabah, East Malaysia was different. The estates on which the author conducted a survey in 1992 had utilised migrant workers for a longer period. Indonesians (Bugis) and Filipinos (Sulu) had worked in the estates for many years and their children went to local schools. They wanted to settle down in Malaysia for the sake of their children's education and future.

In the longer history of international labour migration, the pattern of male sojourners' coming to a country might be replaced by the pattern of migrants' settling down with their families in the country. When this happens to Malaysia, the case of the estate in Johor is in the former category and the estates in Sabah are the latter. Yet, since the Indonesian workers on the estate in Johor said they would go back to their hometown if they could be well paid, it was clear that they preferred working in their own country to working in Malaysia, if their home economy developed sufficiently. In this case, the estate sector might seek migrant workers from other countries. So, while the estate sector currently competes with other local sectors (i. e. construction, manufacturing, etc.) which require unskilled labour, the sector has to consider the economic situation in the labour-sending countries and the future Asian regional economy.

The estates cannot manage without foreign labour and consider the regularisation program to be an appropriate procedure to ensure a stable labour supply, as well as for the workers' protection. On the other hand, it is also said that the estate industry is a dying industry in this developing economy.

The H. J. S. Estate the author researched faced labour shortage in the 1980s and gradually introduced foreign labour, and replanted rubber with oil palm because of its greater profitability. The shift from rubber to oil palm required a change in the nature of labour in the estates, demanding male labour whereas tapping was semi-skilled work. Also, it was critical for the estates that young Malaysians did not want to be estate workers with the associated negative images (poor, dirty, tough, less-educated, etc.). Malaysian staff understood that they could not manage the estate without foreign labour and they considered Indonesian workers to be good labourers.

The Indonesians usually came to Malaysia by boat or ferry without any documents (i.e. passport, ID or work permit). They came to the estate through contractors with introduction by "teckongs," and friends or acquaintances. In the H. J. S. Estate, Indonesian labourers worked under contract but they stayed in workers quarters with water and electricity offered by the estate. They worked hard to send money to their families in villages in Indonesia.

Malaysia has a history of immigrant workers in the estate sector. The first generation of estate workers were Indian immigrants who came since the rubber boom in 1909-11. Their children, the second generation, were born in Malaya as

estate workers like their parents. They experienced the independence with their children, the third generation, developed an identity as Malaysians. At the same time, other ethnic groups gradually joined the second generation as estate workers. However, the younger people, the fourth generation, do not want to work on estates but in factories and offices. The Malays who joined the estate sector by the second generation would stay in the estate sector as managers and staff in the economic development which occurred under the New Economic Policy whereas Indonesians and Bangladeshis came to Malaysian estates as the fourth generation. Yet they wish to return home when their home economies develop and the estates would then expect to obtain labour from other countries.

Conclusion

Since the 1970s, the labour structure has been transformed by the change of ethnic division of labour, the increase of female labour and the growth of foreign labour (Yoshimura 1995, 1997c, 1997d). The increase of foreign labour, in particular, brought a new segmentation to the labour market in Malaysia.

Malaysian youths came to prefer more professional/technical white-collar jobs while foreign workers were employed as unskilled labour at the bottom of the labour structure. Migrant workers were not always registered and were thus easily exploited.¹⁴ Even when they were registered, it did not always mean that they were protected by law. This situation has caused a division of labour by nationality at the bottom of the labour structure and has encouraged the casualisation of employment.

The position of migrant workers in the labour market is different from local workers. While a Malaysian worker is considered for his/her quality and background such as education, career, skill, etc., this is not the case for migrant workers. Qualifications of migrant workers are not considered and they are massed together with other unskilled labour without qualification.¹⁵ However, social/cultural adaptability such as Islamic background and communication ability such as knowledge of Malay and English are considered. Thus, even among the foreign workers classified as unskilled labour, gender and nationality produce some segmentation.

Many Indonesians and Bangladeshis are registered in Malaysia. They are Muslims and may share some of the same values and culture. Indonesians in particular are neighbours who speak Malay so the society can accept them without difficulties. However, they could not be employed if there were enough labour supply in the local labour market and they would be sent back to their own countries once the economy slowed down. There have been cultural and social conflicts as well as labour control and resistance by local workers, including fears of casualisation of employment.

The labour market is thus not homogeneous, but consisted of workers with various natures and different backgrounds. So the positioning creates a variety of segmentations. Foreign labour is often considered as a group of homogeneous unskilled labourers. But characteristics differ by gender and nationality, although they are supposed to be in the category of unskilled labour at the bottom of labour market.

The labour structure in Malaysia thus is linked with the problems of ethnic groups, politics (including government policies on ethnicity), its social transformation, policies on foreign labour and immigrants, religion, culture and customs,

women's status, education and human resource development, etc. There are many issues of domestic labour structure and social structure which have to be grappled with in the analysis of migrant labour. Labour shortages cannot be resolved without discussion of human resource development, restructuring of domestic industrial structure, technology transfer, foreign workers, overseas Malaysians,¹⁶ the division of labour within the ASEAN region,¹⁷ etc. At the same time, it is necessary to continue following the transformation of segmentations by ethnicity, gender and nationality in the Malaysian labour market (Yoshimura, 1997d).

The labour market in Malaysia has often been characterised by the ethnic division of labour formed by Chinese and Indian immigrants during the colonial period. Today, the division of labour by ethnicity is not as fundamental as it was in the colonial days. The segmentations historically formed by ethnicity will be further loosened as Malaysian society further develops and as education improves in the future. Malaysian society, further, has become an education-oriented society, emphasising education as a major factor for the future. And Malaysian youths prefer not working as manual labourers. Thus, segmentations in the society and economy are looser than other developing countries where segmentations may be embedded in the social system.

The increase of migrant workers brought new segmentation by nationality and this raises another discussion about the division of labour. Foreigners are not automatically coming into the Malaysian labour market. They come because there is a system which utilises them even during the economic recession. The situation of divided labour, however, should not be made permanent and migrant workers should not be used as objects to be exploited. Labour shortages should be anticipated¹⁸ and further legal protection for migrant workers should be discussed. The society is shifting and it should be moving to ensure a good future for all the people.

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Notes

- 1 The New Economic Policy was designed to reduce socio-economic imbalances among ethnic groups and across regions, and was characterised as *Bumiputera* ("child of soil" in Malay) policy, or pro-Malay policy.
- 2 The Malay privileges dated back to the British colonial period and the British government defined the special status of Malays by establishing the position of the Malay

- sultans, setting up Malay reserves, etc.
- 3 During 1960–77, the estate industry transferred from rubber to oil palm which needed less labour, so the evacuation of Indian workers did not directly cause the labour shortages at that time (Nayagam, 1990).
 - 4 Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) was founded in 1956.
 - 5 Ministry of Labour, Malaysia 1987/88 undated, p. 2. This phenomenon was seen in the 1970s, as Dispak Mazumdar (1981) pointed out.
 - 6 Under this Regularisation Program of Migrant Indonesian Workers Without Permit (*Proses Pemutihan Pendatang Tanpa Izin Indonesia*), estates should register their undocumented Indonesian workers. In the process of regularisation, the workers were to be repatriated via Melaka and from there to Dumai, Indonesia where they would stay for one day and one night to obtain their travel papers. Then they would be taken back to Melaka where they would apply for and be given work permits.
 - 7 The construction sector in Malaysia faces serious shortages of skilled, professional and technical staff. Professional technicians' ratio per one million labourers in the construction sector is 630 (400 technicians/635,000 workers) in Malaysia as compared to 6,200 in Japan, 2,200 in South Korea, and 1,870 in Singapore (*Business Times*, 4 March 1997).
 - 8 Interview with the managing director of an estate managing company, and who is also a committee member of the estate companies' association.
 - 9 Interview with Puan Habibah, Ministry of Home Affairs, Malaysia in September 2000.
 - 10 Bangladeshis are Muslims like Malays, and local Malay women are often attracted by Bangladesh men of good features. This usually caused social conflict with their families and local men.
 - 11 Interviewed at Ministry of Home Affairs, Malaysia.
 - 12 Data was provided to the author by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Malaysia in September 2000.
 - 13 Interview at the Ministry of Home Affairs, Malaysia.
 - 14 Jones (2000) discusses the structure of exploitation of Indonesian workers by agents and brokers as well as by local governments and other actors who make money from migrant workers. He cites many cases in Sabah, using a lot of material from Indonesia.
 - 15 The author discussed migrant workers' background and educational level and the employers' considerations through two case studies in Yoshimura (1994, 1997a) and Yoshimura (1995, 1997b). Yoshimura (1994, 1997a) discusses a case of Indonesian workers in estates in Johor and Yoshimura (1995, 1997b) discusses a case of Bangladeshi workers in a factory in Selangor compared with Malay workers. These two case studies also show that Malaysian views and attitudes towards jobs are changing.
 - 16 IMP2 devotes a chapter to strategic directions and initiatives for development and emphasises human resource development (Malaysia, 1996, Chapter 11). The measures to ensure future human resource development in the chapter include foreign labour policy and the implementation of measures to bring back highly skilled Malaysians who are currently working overseas, in addition to training and upgrading labour skills. This mirrors the labour market situation in Malaysia, in that they have to consider international labour movements along with acute shortages of labour, including skilled manpower (Yoshimura, 1997c pp. 12–13, 1997d).
 - 17 As part of the division of labour in the ASEAN region, there are several economic growth triangle plans. Malaysia is working on several economic growth triangle plans with neighbouring South East Countries. They are (a) Singapore-Johore-Indonesia Growth Triangle (SIJORI), (b) the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMTGT), and (c) the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). As the Singaporean government proposed the SIJORI in 1989

following the labour shortages and wage increase in the domestic economy, Malaysia hopes to relocate labour intensive industries in the country and to utilise the cheaper labour in the area by promoting these regional growth area plans. This can be a measure to resolve the situation of undocumented foreign labour flow and to regularise the management and control of labour flow within these regions. These regions are areas where, historically, people have moved freely. The setting up of borders in the modern period, and economic gaps in the regions re-defined such population movement as illegal entrance, illegal stay and over-stay, illegal employment and illegal work (Yoshimura, 1997c p. 13, 1997d).

- 18 The measures to deal with labour shortages are (1) greater automation and mechanisation for labour intensive processes ; (2) upgrading of industries and production processes by high-level technology ; (3) developing skilled manpower through training ; (4) promoting female labour participation ; (5) bringing back of retired skilled manpower; (6) improving part-time employment and flexible employment, and (7) relocating labour intensive industries in the ASEAN growth triangles (Yoshimura, 1997c).

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