
Border/Less

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ABSTRACT

The Border/less photo essay is a collective work that scrutinises the daily routine of the marginalised foreign workforce in Malaysia. It investigates the foreign workers from various neighbouring countries who seek to greener pastures. From domestic helpers to construction site workers, these workers form the third-largest community in Malaysia. People are people, they are just ordinary folks that work diligently in laboured work, fuelled by dreams of a better life back home in their countries. However, the plight of life never leaves them, they are not only had to endure the life without their loved ones, but also seem so out of place in the eyes of the locals. The term "foreign worker" always connotes to negative and derogatory sense. Through the interactions with these "best known strangers", we hope to ease the invisible border between "us" and "them" and if possible, breakdown the stereotype that deeply rooted in our mind.

KEYWORDS

Visual narrative, Foreign Workforce, Marginalised Group, Border, Stereotype

BIO

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Prologue

(The Story about Foreign Labour in Johor Bahru, Malaysia)

No one can tell how many foreign workers (registered and unregistered) we actually have in Malaysia. From domestic helpers to construction site workers, whether you like it or not, Malaysia's economic sectors are excessively dependent on foreign workers. Together, they have formed the third-largest community in this country.

Who would like to leave the comforts of home behind if it is not lack of opportunity in their home country that forces them to leave for greener pastures? These people are just ordinary folks like you and I, they work diligently and efficiently in laboured work, fuelled by dreams of a better life back home in their countries respectively.

However, the plight of life never leaves them alone. They are not only had to endure the life without their loved ones, but also seem so out of place in the eyes of the locals. The term "foreign worker" always connotes to negative and derogatory sense.

This documentary photo essay examines the daily routine of our best known strangers—foreign labours. Through the collective works from the lecturer and the undergraduates of Southern University College, they scrutinise these marginalised workforce under the norm of Malaysia society. Through lenses, they would like to find out the story behind of these people, as well as break down the stereotype which always portrait the negative image of foreign labours.

The project hopes to bring out these less visible people to the mainstream society simultaneously to display their joy and sorrow. This project aims at providing another way of seeing and intriguing more discussion and interaction between the foreign labours and the local.

Longing for Home

38-year-old Yasin came to Malaysia from Bangladesh eleven (11) years ago. For him, the search for better prospects in a faraway land ties in to his duty as a father of two and a husband. As a machine operator and the sole source of income for his family, Yasin is well aware that his efforts in the now have far greater implications for the future of his loved ones.

Meanwhile, Ahsan has also worked abroad for 11 years. At the time of his leaving, his daughter was in kindergarten, learning to write the word 'papa'. In the blink of an eye, 11 years has passed – Ahsan's daughter is now a graceful young woman, but rarely gets the chance to actually say 'papa' to him. Yet Ahsan remains committed to his mantle as a role model. 11 years ago, all he could speak was Bengali – 11 years later, he speaks fluent Bahasa Malaysia as well as a slew of other languages, picked up from his fellow workers. Ahsan has become somewhat like a 'big brother' to many, often offering unwavering support and assistance to fellow migrant workers. He knows how it feels like to be alone in an unfamiliar land – and as such, his kindness and openness to those in need has earned him many new kinsmen and close friends.

At home, we rely on family; Out in the world, we rely on friends. The same applies to migrant workers in Malaysia – having come so far to find better work, opportunities to socialise are few and far in between. More often than not, co-workers become confidants. Such is the case for Jeen and Ah Heng, who have since become as close as sisters. A devout Muslim, Ah Heng came to Malaysia to find avenues to provide for her family back home, while Jeen, a devoted Catholic, found companionship after leaving her homeland, and continues to strike a new path for a brighter future together in Malaysia with her partner.

Often times, their lives and stories are not so different from ours – many of the choices that they make are done so in the name of hope. Hope for a better life for themselves, and better lives for their loved ones back home.



PHOTO 1: Geracda (Aka Jean, middle) and Ihen Hendrawati (right hand side) become close friends after working in the same workplace, the Indonesian language they spoken tighten their relationship



PHOTO 2: Sometimes, preparing a meal can be improvised too. It would be easier for Ihen to prepare such an abundant of ingredients and spices on floor rather than on the table



PHOTO 3: During their leisure time, Jeen and IHen always like to cook some hometown flavours in the kitchen



PHOTO 4: A sumptuous meal is the best way to ease themselves from missing home



PHOTO 5: A sense of missing home and a sorrow facial expression reflected on the face of Jean when telling her own story



PHOTO 6: To have a friend to share the joy and sorrow, life seems easier too



PHOTO 7: Two of the foreign workers friends of Ahsan in Redwood company, chitchatting during the break



PHOTO 8: Ahsan Habib (45 years old), who works abroad for 11 years, missed the chance to accompany his growing-up daughter. He rarely goes back in order to save more money and send back home



PHOTO 9: A passport size photo reminds Ahsan, there's someone who still waiting for them to go back



PHOTO 10: 38-year-old Joynal Abedin Yasin is a machine operator and the sole source of income for his family

What Makes a Home?

It's not pleasure that brings them here – rather, it's necessity that forces them to leave the comforts of home behind to embark upon a new chapter of life. Yet when we think of squalor, grime, and unease... But are these 'general' impressions a true reflection of the spaces they call home? In this segment, we step into the homes of two migrant workers, each having lived in Malaysia for more than a decade, and take a closer look at their living spaces and lifestyles.

Clean bathrooms, spacious bedrooms, and organised kitchens did not await us. Our first visit takes us to the home of Mohamad Salam, who first travelled to Malaysia from Bangladesh when he was only 13 – and before he knew it, 25 years had flown by. Upon stepping into Salam's home, it's the little things we notice: a faulty lightbulb, sticky flooring, messy stuff in odd places.

This humble 1st-storey shop-house is where he eats and sleeps together with many others like him, who hail from a myriad of different countries. But after going through a divorce in 2004, many of his days are spent alone. A photograph of his daughter, his wife, and her other daughter with her new husband hangs on the wall. But still, he speaks to us about his life openly and candidly, showing us the gentle strength and hardened resolve of his character in facing the numerous challenges that life throws at him.

Our second subject, Mohamad Bokter, also hails from Bangladesh. He's worked in a *dobi* shop for 12 years, yet his cheerful personality shines through his upbeat and optimistic view on life. Like many other migrant workers in the city, he lives upstairs from the shop where he works, in a small room packed with belongings and daily necessities. His little sanctuary holds one bed, one cupboard, and one sofa – but the sofa isn't fit for sitting.

It's piled with clothing. Interestingly, we notice that all the clothing is folded similarly and neatly – a long term side-effect of his daily work, perhaps. As the conversation flows along, he speaks most fondly and longingly about his wife. He tells us that she's a legal assistant, currently completing her studies in the UK with his financial support. There's a lot of physical distance between them, but they keep in touch every single day.



PHOTO 11: This humble 1st-storey shop-house is where Mohamad Salam (38 years old) eats and sleeps; many of his days are spent alone in this tiny room



PHOTO 12: This is the room provides safe sanctuary and a sense of security for the foreign worker like Mohammad



PHOTO 13: What makes an essence of a home? For a lot of foreign workers, maybe it is just a place that can make do with living



PHOTO 14: A photograph of his daughter and his “step daughter” which his ex-wife had with her new husband



PHOTO 15: Rice is the staple food for most of the Asian people, even a simple meal cannot be short of rice



PHOTO 16: A chair and a table form a simple living room, everything reduces to minimal



PHOTO 17: Mohamad Mokter (35 years old) works in the dobi shop for 12 years



PHOTO 18: All the clothing is folded in systematic and organised way – a long term side-effect of his daily work



PHOTO 19: Mohamad's cheerful personality shines through his upbeat and optimistic view on life



PHOTO 20: He lives upstairs from the shop where he works with two of his friends, in a small room packed with belongings and daily necessities