

*Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo*

RHACEL SALAZAR PARREÑAS

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Much has already been written about the sexual migration of female entertainers in Japan.<sup>1)</sup> While the phenomenon has a fairly contemporary history, the multifarious layers of both the overall narrative and individual stories count for a plurality of interpretations, not least of which come from the entertainer themselves. On the other hand, getting the perspective of entertainers within their work context poses a dilemma for research methodologies as participant observation creates both strategic and organizational challenges. Thus we find earlier works employing alternative approaches. Ballestas (1992) offered the first pioneering study in the early 1990s. However, this study was flawed as female entertainers were interviewed prior to migrating to Japan, outside their clubs, and after their work contracts. Others such as Suzuki (2000; 2004) undertook to expand the analysis by examining the societal dimension of mainstream general consciousness with the presence of Filipina female entertainers as wives of Japanese males. Likewise, Suzuki examined how Japanese husbands imagined their wives, and in what ways the women negotiated their sense of self and identities.

These previous works have offered glimpses into the lives of migrant female entertainers in Japan as well as Japanese society's reception and perception to them. However, the precise context in which they physically inhabit the realm of providing commercial and sexual entertainment remains an open yet seemingly forbidden enclave. To overcome these practical dilemmas, Rhacel Parreñas conducted fieldwork studies in the heart of her research environment. Parreñas worked, quite literally, side by side with her subjects, as a hostess. This approach, not unlike that of an investigative journalist allowed her to conduct participant observation inside Tokyo's red light district.

The author embarked on this research largely to debunk the notion that all entertainers who came to Japan are victims of human trafficking as portrayed repeatedly by the US State Department.<sup>2)</sup> Focusing on the narratives of the women themselves, the book offers a firsthand glimpse of their lives. Unflinching in its stark descriptions of day-to-day activities that transpire inside an entertainment club, the author detailed all the mundane and gritty matters of working as an entertainer in Japan.

The book is composed of eight chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Some chapters are reiterations of previous points. For instance, chapter two describes in detail the labor system

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1) For some of the earlier works, see Ballestas (1992), Osteria (1994). See Suzuki (2000; 2004), Satake (2004), Fuwa and Anderson (2006), and Faier (2009) for the more contemporary ones.

2) The 2005 Trafficking in Persons Report particularly influenced how Japan reformed its policy on granting visas to entertainers.

in hostess clubs, how entertainers are expected to pander to customer whims as well as bring in profit to club owners. The third chapter explores the various skills and capital hostesses have to possess to ensure that the masculine egos of their customers are constantly massaged. Yet, both chapters expound on the same point: hostess work demands sexual labor at varying scales (from flirting to intercourse) and this is driven by commercial supply and demand. However, chapter four and sections of chapter six are more vivid in highlighting the author's argument on how the women (and transgender Filipino hostesses) negotiate their lives regardless of their situation.

Chapter four "The Risky Business of Love" succinctly describes the uniqueness of labor entailed in working as an entertainer. Using both their minds and bodies as capital to make a living, entertainers negotiate with their customers the amount of money or goods in return for the attention and services they can provide. In so doing, these women must likewise manage their feelings toward customers, ensuring that at the end, they acquire material gains and not emotional pain. In simple terms, the hostesses follow a general rule that money and gifts are welcome but they must avoid any emotional attachments. In this respect, the author highlights that "in the moral world of hostesses, visceral pleasures that one grants men do not necessarily mean anything more" (p. 130). Indeed this awareness of their own limits, vulnerability, and particular situations, they are working women after all, provides the most compelling argument in support of the author's claim that the majority of the female migrant entertainers in Japan are not trafficked or forced to work against their will. In fact, their judgment is at its most sound in gauging the extent of how much or how little they earn from "falling in love" with their customers (p. 144).

Chapter six "Making Love for a Visa," expands on the implications introduced in chapter four where female entertainers enter into relationships with their male customers, the possibility of getting pregnant, and, at best, securing a marriage certificate. However, as the author pointed out, not a large percentage of entertainers end up marrying their Japanese customers (p. 179). The discussions put forward in this chapter on how clashes follow after marriage due to culture, differing expectations, societal pressures, and other external variables have already been discussed elsewhere.<sup>3)</sup> Moreover, not all Japanese-Filipina marriages languish, as illustrated by Faier (2009). Lieba Faier interviewed couples and families from successful unions attributed to "Japanese" virtues extolled in Filipina women as wives in rural Japan. The latter part of this chapter, "The Sexual Citizenship of Transgender Hostesses," is most noteworthy as the case studies presented challenges to the limits set on intimacy as between opposite genders and that of citizenship as duties, rights and privileges of a natural born or naturalized person.

This section of the sixth chapter is unique particularly as it shows a side of Japan that is welcoming of a traditionally marginalized group, transgendered persons. For a country that is known to embrace many forms of gender, the stories of transgender entertainers and how they managed

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3) See Constable (2005) or Hong-Zen and Hsin-Huang (2009).

to carve their niche in a competitive and discriminating world of sexual labor and commerce paint an altogether more nuanced picture of how the Japanese choose to accept the unwanted.

Parreñas stated that this was a project meant to criticize US policies on addressing issues on human trafficking and yet the entire book contains far more informed and substantive criticism of Philippine migration policies. By contrast, there are only vague references to US transgressions on laws regarding human trafficking.

Ironically, in trying to underscore her idea of indentured mobility among the Filipina hostesses in Japan, the author relies on the same pool of evidence used by US policymakers, and risks falling into the trap of typecasting Filipinos in Japan as perennial entertainers. Despite her claims to the contrary, there is still the feeling that she herself sees the Filipinos in the same light.

Because Parreñas' discussion of the settlement patterns of Filipina hostesses in Japan is narrowly focused on specific forms of vulnerability (p.23), she fails to account for the dynamic changes that have taken place among the Filipino migrant population in Japan. No longer are Filipinos generally classified as entertainers. In their late-30s and mid-40s, they are clearly too old to be considered as hostesses. Despite their numbers, the Filipinos in Tokyo do not represent the Filipino population in Japan. The majority are now long-term and permanent residents.<sup>4)</sup> In fact, the Philippines is among the top five<sup>5)</sup> on the list of countries with registered foreign nationals in Japan. Their status and numbers have a potential impact that will, at the least, prove consequential to Japanese society.

The above observations notwithstanding, this book contributes on the literature on Filipinos in Japan as it enriches our knowledge of what particularly goes in the life of an entertainer.

Cherry Amor Dugtong-Yap  
*Independent Scholar*

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4) See 2011 Immigration Control Report, Japan, Ministry of Justice, [http://www.moj.go.jp/nyuukokukanri/kouhou/nyuukokukanri06\\_00018.html](http://www.moj.go.jp/nyuukokukanri/kouhou/nyuukokukanri06_00018.html).

5) (*ibid.*)

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### ***Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia***

MAY ADADOL INGAWANIJ and BENJAMIN MCKAY, eds.

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The thrill of going over a volume on contemporary popular culture is compounded when the activity betokens a celebrity system whose members may be already enjoying a measure of popularity, and whose fame has the potential of reaching a wider public. The reader could casually drop a statement like “Oh, I knew that artist before she became a global household name” to admiring colleagues, and in effect replicate the outward spread of stardom whose processes new media have enabled and fast-tracked.

The original proponents of film auteurism, however, had more urgent concerns in mind, notably the dismantling of Classical Hollywood influence in the prestige productions of post-WWII pre-New Wave France (Truffaut 1976 [1954], 233–235).<sup>1)</sup> No one begrudges these critics for achieving fame and fortune as filmmakers (and occasional performers), in light of the fact that the larger film movement that their aesthetic activism occasioned resulted in the demise of the Classical Hollywood system as well as the emergence of cinemas not just from Europe, but also from non-Western countries.

*Glimpses of Freedom*, a recent volume from Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program, attempts to provide an impression—a snapshot, as it were—of how a New Wave-inspired mode of practice has been reshaping film activity in the region. Fifteen articles from a mix of scholars and

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1) Mistranslated as the “auteur theory” by the recently deceased American critic Andrew Sarris (1982 [1968]), the *politique des auteurs* (author policy) was the means by which a select circle of critics-turned-filmmakers, originally based at *Cahiers du Cinéma*, proposed to reevaluate Classical Hollywood, by looking at movies in terms of directorial credit; the true auteurs, per their assertion, would exhibit certain stylistic markers that would serve as their “signatures.” See Monaco (1976).