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*Themed Issue: Transnational Labour Mobility Regimes: Organising
Production and Social Reproduction Beyond Borders*

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Living at work: migrant worker dormitories in Malaysia

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The COVID–19 pandemic in Malaysia drew attention to the extremely poor living conditions of the country’s approximately 2.5 million migrants from South and Southeast Asia working in manufacturing, construction, services, and agriculture. International media reports throughout 2020 and 2021 highlighted the overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe accommodations provided by employers, including cramped hostels, stacked containers, and rented apartments. This article addresses how migrant worker accommodation in Malaysia is utilised by the state and by employers as a spatial mechanism of control to regulate migrant labour.

This case study draws on over a hundred in–depth interviews with Nepali migrant workers, recruitment agents, employers, and policy officials in Malaysia. We detail how the Malaysian government’s requirement for migrants to live in employer–provided housing forms part of intensified immigration controls implemented by the federal government. This policy effectively transforms employers into ‘landlords’, bringing migrants’ ‘private space’ under their control, thereby enabling employers’ increased surveillance of their activities. We found that employers utilised the opportunity to discipline their workforces and intensify work regimes. We therefore argue that housing has become a double–layered regulatory tool to deepen labour control among migrant populations, perpetuate a state of temporariness, and reinforce visible boundaries between citizens and non–citizens. In the process, migrants’ living quarters (spaces of social reproduction) have been subsumed into the organisation of production, serving the demands of the low–wage, highly–controlled, political economy of Malaysia.

Keywords migration • labour control • dormitory labour regime • Malaysia • Nepal

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Introduction

In Malaysia, early outbreaks of COVID-19 were associated with accommodation which housed migrants working at factories in Selangor, Johor, and Kuala Lumpur (Khor, 2021). The resulting media attention made visible to the public the overcrowded hostels, stacked containers and accommodation blocks in which migrants were corralled by their employers. An estimated 90 percent of workers from Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, and Myanmar were described as living in substandard overcrowded housing with poor sanitation that was rented to them by their employers (Verghis, 2023). This situation was not new as companies had long housed migrants in Malaysia (Grossman, 1979; Tasleem et al, 2019). In the years preceding the pandemic the federal government had increasingly legally required employers to do so (Khor, 2021). However, despite a recognition of the use of ‘dormitories’ to house factory workers in Malaysia (Grossman, 1979), and of their extensive use in other temporary labour migration schemes in parts of Asia (Piper, 2022), surprisingly little attention has been paid by researchers to their specific function in Southeast Asia (except Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012). This article addresses the question: what role do worker dormitories play in the regulation of migrant labour in Malaysia?

This article offers a contribution to the recently re-emergent literature on labour regimes (for example, Baglioni et al, 2022) and geographic variations in dormitory labour regimes (for example, Schling, 2022; Goodburn and Mishra, 2023). It addresses a significant gap in knowledge about their use in Southeast Asia through analysis of a case-study of Nepali male and female migrants living in worker dormitories in Malaysia. At the time of the research Nepalis comprised the third largest migrant population in Malaysia (after Bangladeshis and Indonesians) (Yeoh and Ghimire, 2023).

Malaysia is the largest recruiter of migrant labour in the East Asia region, with low-wage migrants from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries comprising at least a fifth of the labour force at any given time (Foley, 2023). This is because from the 1970s onwards successive Malaysian governments embarked on mass recruitment programmes largely facilitated by the private sector with the explicit aim of attracting foreign capital and driving industrialisation (Wong, 2006; Bastide, 2021). Today, two thirds of the migrant workforce are employed in export-oriented production driven by multinational corporations (MNCs) (Athukorala and Devadson, 2012: 1499). This includes in the production of electronics, medical supplies, toys, auto parts, rubber, and palm oil (Raj-Reichert, 2020). Around a third of migrants work in agriculture and the service sector, including in security, retail, hospitality, and domestic work (Yeoh and Ghimire, 2023). The regulation of migrant labour is institutionally embedded at all levels of the state, not only the federal government (Bastide, 2021), and increasingly by private transnational regulation within global production networks (Raj-Reichert, 2020).

Housing is more than simply bricks and mortar which provides a place for workers to sleep. They are places where people experience emotions, practice faith, socialise with friends and lovers (Katz, 2001). However, unlike the experience of workers who go to their own homes at night, employee dormitories are spaces where employment practices penetrate deep into the daily lives of workers (Cravey, 1998). In certain geographic and sectoral contexts, for instance in China (Pun and Smith, 2007), India (Goodburn and Mishra, 2023), and Czechia (Schling, 2022), they are

used systematically by employers to house their workers as an integral part of the labour process and are consequently described as 'dormitory regimes'. Dormitory labour regimes constitute a strategy of capital to control and reduce the costs of social reproduction through new regimes of (im)mobilisation and circulation of labour (Pun and Smith, 2007). This is because worker housing which is provided and managed by employers produces specific sets of exploitative labour relations via the extraction of surplus value (Azmeah, 2014). To date, studies of dormitory labour regimes have largely focused on the role of employers and neglected the role of the state and state-capital relations (except see Schling, 2022).

In what follows, we address this gap through analysis of the role of worker housing in the Malaysian state's regulation of migrant labour. We depart from most studies of dormitory labour regimes which tend to enter empirical, and thus theoretical analysis, at the level of the factory (especially in relation to export-oriented production regimes such as Pun and Smith, 2007; Azmeah, 2014; Schling, 2022; Goodburn and Mishra, 2023). Instead, our study advances new knowledge on how the state, on behalf of capital and in collaboration with employers, deployed worker dormitories to regulate the lives and labour of migrants in *all* sectors of the economy. In this way we show how worker dormitories are not unique to factory regimes in export-oriented production.

We first provide a theoretical overview and second, an analysis of the migrant labour regime in Malaysia, including an overview of the regulation of worker dormitories. The remainder of the article establishes the empirical case-study and core arguments. We conclude by arguing that the dual production and control of worker dormitories by the apparatus of the state, as well as by employers (Pun and Smith, 2007; Azmeah, 2014; Schling, 2022), reproduces a exploitative labour relations that rely on intensified policing of the social reproduction and commodification of migrants. The findings have political ramifications through offering an opportunity for an alternative space for new and creative labour resistance strategies targeting employers' provision of housing.

Migrant labour regimes and worker dormitories

This section situates worker dormitories in the context of labour regimes. A labour regime refers to a societal framework incorporating the social relations, institutions and processes that govern interactions between capital and labour within specific geographical contexts and historically evolved time periods (Baglioni et al, 2022). Approaching analysis of employment through a labour regime framework allows for the examination of the various institutions, actors, and processes involved in the production of workers. Regimes consist of interconnected scales of analysis, encompassing individual workplaces, local, national, and international institutions, and processes, as well as the commercial imperatives of firms (Smith et al, 2018).

Worker housing is where workers eat, sleep, interact, and engage in everyday life. By employing labour regimes as an analytical framework, we expand our understanding to encompass spaces of social reproduction and consumption, including as mechanisms of labour control (Jonas, 1996). This approach enables a deeper exploration of how the micro-geographies of labour control mechanisms operate within global production networks (GPNs), ultimately shaping labour conditions and potentials (Baglioni et al, 2022).

Social reproduction refers to the daily biological and generational processes necessary for sustaining life, including the biological and daily reproduction of workers and the workforce, as well as the services essential for their well-being (Bakker and Gill, 2019). Processes of, and control over, social reproduction are integral to understanding how gendered and racialised forms of exploitation manifest in labour markets (Bhattacharyya, 2018). As such, individuals' agency over their social reproduction, including their control over the spaces where it occurs, plays a crucial role in the ability of workers to resist exploitation (Fraser, 2018).

The term 'migrant labour regimes', drawing from labour regime concepts, encompasses the mechanisms through which migrant workforces are organised by both capital and the state (Strauss and McGrath, 2017: 202). For instance, the recent patterns of (temporary) migration in Southeast Asia have been driven by market liberalisation, leading to the increasing flexibility of national labour markets (Kaur, 2014). In this context, temporality – in the form of temporary employment contracts – is employed by states to institutionalise limited rights regimes for migrant workers and to maximise their precarity to meet the demands of capital for flexible labour (Piper, 2022). The temporary nature of migrant labour is fundamental to migration in the region, although it is not strictly defined by time as many migrants may remain in the host country for extended periods and may even settle permanently (Franck and Anderson, 2019).

In Southeast Asia, as states have increasingly imposed restrictive laws on migration, states' management regimes have consequently become more complex, decentralised, and fragmented (Lindquist et al, 2012). Extensive networks of commercialised brokerage actors now play significant roles in assembling migrant workforces which are often highly differentiated by gender, nationality and ethnicity (Jones, 2021; Jones et al, 2023). This has led to a simultaneous blurring and rescaling of the boundaries between the 'state' and the 'market' (Lindquist et al, 2012).

At the same time, the use of worker dormitories that enable the facilitation of the circulation of migrant labour rescale the boundaries between social reproduction and production (Pun and Smith, 2007). In a seminal study, these authors characterised worker housing in China as a 'dormitory labour regime' (DLR), emphasising its systemic use by the state to facilitate China's integration into the global economy. The DLR, they argued, enabled multinational corporations (MNCs) to benefit from the recruitment of low-wage rural (domestic) migrants who could, in the space of the dormitory, be easily exploited, including to intensify the rhythm of the daily production regime. By housing workers, employers controlled both their working lives as well as their lives outside the workplace. The DLR was thus a specific workplace regime which was produced by a combination of central and local state apparatus, global capital and Chinese firms designed to extract value from capital's control over the social reproduction of workers' labour power (Pun and Smith, 2007).

Worker dormitories are especially associated with the mass recruitment and employment of international migrant workers in global production regimes. Azmeh (2014) advances Pun and Smith's study by showing how the DLR used by export-oriented garment factories to house female (international) migrant workers in Jordan was a crucial factor in enabling companies to fulfil the requirements of US buyers for low costs and daily production quotas. The dormitories' geographic isolation, along with language and cultural barriers, served as an *additional* layer of labour control within an already restrictive state migrant labour regime. In this way dormitories played a pivotal role in social control within the workplace, facilitated the temporary

retention or capture of labour by companies, and met the demands of the state for management of migration. Schling (2022) similarly shows how, in the context of the Foxconn production regime in Czechia, a combination of state-produced precarities associated with specific legal statuses and the use of subcontracted labour enabled the production of a highly intensified and socially differentiated work regime. Here, the social relations of the dormitory reproduced ‘the ideological and material categories of citizenship/ foreignness that racialise the social segmentations of labour and life’ (Schling, 2022: 309). In other words, the DLR reproduced and therefore intensified the legal precarity induced by the state categories of immigration and subcontracted employment status.

In summary, worker dormitories are integral components of broader labour regimes, and the labour control mechanisms exerted through them intersect with those of the wider state apparatus and firms (Goodburn and Mishra, 2023). Therefore, there is a clear need to move beyond the ‘space-specific’ and ‘sector-specific’ approach to compile a deeper understanding of their function in enhancing the control of migrant labour in contemporary global production networks (Goodburn and Mishra, 2023). This article grapples with two less-explored areas in relation to worker dormitories in migrant labour regimes. Firstly, the specific role of the state vis-à-vis capital is relatively unexplored in the DLR literatures in terms of the regulation of migrant labour. Our case-study explores the combined and overlapping roles of the 1) Malaysian (multi-scalar) state and 2) firms in utilising worker dormitories to produce specific exploitative labour relations. Secondly, the DLR literatures have predominantly focused on the role of dormitories in export-oriented production. Nevertheless, dormitory regimes of various kinds have also been shown to facilitate the circulation of migrant labour in extractive industries (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011), in agriculture (Brovia and Piro, 2020), and in the construction sector (Bruslé, 2012). In what follows, we therefore adopt a multi-sectoral approach to capture the relation of worker dormitories as a function of the national migrant labour regime in Malaysia, regardless of sector of production.

The migrant labour regime in Malaysia

The relationship between state and capital is deeply intertwined in the context of Malaysia, reflecting the colonial history of recruitment of indentured labour in the region (Kaur, 2014). This section shows how worker dormitories have become integrated into Malaysia’s national regulation of migrant labour. From the 1970s onwards, Malaysia harnessed the mass recruitment of low-wage migrants as a core component of state industrialisation policies (Wong, 2006). The provision of a low-paid external workforce was utilised as a competitive strategy to attract foreign investments and consequently Malaysia’s successful integration into the global economy in sectors such as electronics (Bastide, 2021). Securing low labour costs for MNCs, alongside the establishment of free trade zones and other financial incentives, proved to be an instrumental factor in outcompeting neighbouring Singapore (Devadason and Meng, 2014; Raj-Reichert, 2020).

The 1991 federal Comprehensive Policy on the Recruitment of Foreign Workers enabled the mass and commercialised recruitment of migrants from South and Southeast Asia into plantations and domestic work, later extended into manufacturing, construction, and the service sectors. During this period, MNCs, especially in the electronics industry, lobbied the Malaysian government to increase federal quotas which would allow them to recruit ever larger numbers of low-wage migrant workers

(Philips and Henderson, 2009). As a result of being able to benefit from the cheap migrant labour made available to them by this policy, MNCs subsequently played a pivotal role in driving the expansion of Malaysia's export production, especially in electronics (Raj-Reichert, 2020; Bastide, 2021). In other words, the state regulation of migration that allowed employers to recruit significant numbers of low-wage workers facilitated economic development and the maximisation of MNC profits from Malaysia. However, Bastide (2021) argues it was not only the availability of cheap labour in Malaysia that was attractive to MNCs. Instead, firms were attracted by the fact that Malaysia provided them with access to migrant workers as an exploitable workforce with extremely restricted rights.

ASEAN migrants enter the Malaysian labour market via highly racialised and gendered low-wage visa channels (Nah, 2012). Migrants entering on these visas have no access to citizenship, even for children born in Malaysia to holders of work permits. Visa holders are denied the possibility of bringing their families with them to Malaysia, marrying citizens or legally giving birth in the territory. Pregnant women risk contract termination and deportation. Visas are permanently 'temporary', a form of institutionalised precarity (Piper, 2022), and holders are only legally allowed to renew their stay in Malaysia to a maximum of ten years, although in practice many remain in a condition of 'permanent' irregularity (Franck and Anderson, 2019).

Low-wage migrants' job mobility is limited as work permits 'tie' visa holders to sponsoring employers in specific locales. This limits their ability to change employers easily, even in cases of severe exploitation. Moreover, in Malaysia, employers routinely confiscate migrants' passports even though this is technically illegal (Piper, 2022). Without a valid work permit, migrants are considered 'undocumented' and are subject to detention and deportation by the state (Franck and Anderson, 2019). Furthermore, migrants are denied access to public healthcare and are provided only with emergency healthcare through an employer insurance scheme. Consequently, Nepali migrants in Malaysia frequently report exploitative labour conditions, including restricted access to their passports, extended working hours, occupational health and safety risks, and instances of violence perpetrated by employers, recruiters, the police, and local Malaysian citizens (Mak et al, 2021).

However, while the economic benefits of migration to Malaysia are evident, managing large numbers of 'non-citizens' who are not allowed to settle or to fully integrate has also posed a significant challenge to the Malaysian state's national identity, culture, and perception of sovereignty (Wong, 2006; Kaur, 2014). Consequently, in recent years, Malaysia has increasingly securitised immigration policy, requiring migrants to be registered on biometric databases and to carry migrant-specific identity cards. The police and immigration authorities frequently mount what have been referred to as 'performative' immigration raids and mass deportations, intended to reassure an anxious public that the federal government is in control of immigration (Tedong et al, 2018). The federal government has also increasingly required employers to take a more active role in controlling their migrant employees. Thus, in 2015 employers were made legally accountable for their migrant workforces from the point of application to ensuring their return to their home country, and were required to pay a levy to the state in return for each worker, lost if workers 'absconded' (Low, 2017). The federal government has also sought to increase the responsibility of employers for providing and controlling housing for their migrant employees. New regulations on worker housing aim to ensure that workers are housed near their place

of employment (and are hence under the proper control of the employer). These also aim to address public concerns about migration populations by keeping workers contained away from citizens (Low, 2017).

Employers' regulatory responsibility for housing migrants

In Malaysia, employers' provision of worker housing dates back to colonial-era recruitment of indentured labour onto plantations (Kaur, 2014), and federal regulation of migrant housing is not new. Legislation in 1966 (Act 446) first incorporated the provision for worker housing into the national Labour Code and required employers to adhere to limited standards, including ensuring workers' access to a bathroom. This was supplemented by an increasing number of regionally specific, but largely piecemeal, regulations which were tailored to the specific locations of employers in rural and urban areas and their production needs, as the migrant population grew throughout the 1990s. Since 2019 (see Table 1), the federal government has increasingly moved towards centralising the regulation of migrant housing.

Today, to recruit a migrant worker, employers must first seek permission from the relevant local authority regarding the use of housing. This permission must be submitted to the federal Ministry of Human Resources before employers can embark on the recruitment process, and employers must adhere to living conditions regarding space, hygiene and ventilation, and provide women migrant workers with sex-specific space. Unlike the dormitories in 1980s China (Pun and Smith, 2007), the Malaysian state historically has not played any role in the direct provision of migrant housing. Instead, employers are required to construct or rent their own buildings to house their workforces, and rent is deducted from migrants' salaries at source (Khor, 2021). The rent that they are allowed to legally charge to migrants is limited (Table 1), which has enabled the relatively low-cost institutionalisation of company housing.

To facilitate the expansion of worker housing commensurate with the growth in migrant populations throughout Malaysia, the government has also permitted

Table 1: Regulations regarding employers' provision of housing in Malaysia

Year	Regulation	Key provisions
1966	The Workers (Minimum Standards of Housing) Act 1966	Consolidate and update all housing legislations under the Labour Code and other enactments, one of the improvements under the proposed act, for example, all housing to workers must include bathrooms
1990	The Workers Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Amendment to 446	Required employers owning more than 20 acres in mining, agriculture, plantations, to provide housing for workers
	Guidelines for Temporary Dormitory of Workers in High-Rise Buildings on Construction Sites (Kuala Lumpur)	Permitted common shared living quarters ('kongsi') for construction workers
2015	Strict Liability Principle	Employers were accountable for their recruits from the point of application, control in Malaysia, until departure, including for housing, medical benefits and insurance
2015	Employers' Mandatory Commitment	

(Continued)

Table 1: Continued

Year	Regulation	Key provisions
2019	Amendment to 446: Certificate for Accommodation	Expand coverage to manufacturing and services and improve existing rules in the construction sector Employers/accommodation providers are obligated to get housing approval as a compliance step to hire migrant workers
2020	Maximum Rental on Charges for Accommodation Regulation	Maximum of RM100 rent, fines of RM50,000 and three years' jail for non-compliance
2021	Emergency (Employees' Minimum Standards of Housing, Accommodations and Amenities, Amendment) Ordinance	Employers required to improve accommodation not in compliance with Act 446 and to immediately move workers from crowded and uninhabitable housing, fine of RM200,000 or up to three years' jail for non-compliance
2022	Amendments to the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act and the Employment Act	Reinforced employers' responsibility to provide a safe environment for women, including in accommodation

various types of buildings to be utilised for this purpose for the first time. This includes non-residential structures modified for this purpose, subject to specific local government or council approval of the modification and adherence to set standards. Additionally, certain state governments, such as Penang and Negeri Sembilan, have adopted the Singapore Foreign Employee Dormitories model (FEDA), centralising worker housing under their jurisdiction. This indicates ongoing strong regional regulation efforts, as well as an increasing role for the (local) state which moves closer to the China DLR model. The article turns next to outlining the research design.

Research design

As of 2023, approximately 300,000 Nepalis were employed in Malaysia under temporary employment contracts in various sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and security (Yeoh and Ghimire, 2023). The research involved a total of 104 interviews, which included 58 interviews with Nepali men (N= 45) and women (N=13) who were either currently working in Malaysia or who had returned to Nepal within the previous three years. Additionally, 33 interviews were conducted with recruitment agents and policy officials in Nepal, and 13 interviews were conducted with employers, agents, and policy officials in Malaysia. Data collection took place before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, during which travel restrictions often prevented researchers from moving between Nepal and Malaysia, and even within Malaysia, due to strict control orders. Consequently, interviews with migrants, employers, and other informants in Malaysia, were primarily conducted by telephone or online, and interviews in Nepal were conducted in person. All interviews with migrants were conducted in Nepali language, with transcripts initially generated in Nepali and subsequently translated into English. Thematic analysis was conducted collaboratively, allowing for comprehensive understanding and cross-verification of analysis between the Malaysian and Nepali researchers.

As the research team has reported elsewhere, the most common motivations for migration were to use the money earned to build a house, accumulate savings including to pay marriage dowries, provide children with a better quality of life, and escape domestic violence at home (women) (Yeoh and Ghimire, 2023). Two thirds of the male interviewees worked, or had worked, in export-oriented manufacturing and approximately a fifth in service sector jobs, including in security, hospitality, and retail. A smaller minority were working in or had worked in construction, agriculture and on plantations. All the women we interviewed were or had been factory workers. Interviewees lived or had returned home from living in Peninsular Malaysia: two thirds lived in Selangor (including Kuala Lumpur), a fifth in the South (including Melaka), and 11 percent in the North (including Penang), which reflected the location of production sites. Regardless of the specific job, Nepalis commonly reported working long hours, often including overtime that extended their shifts to 12 hours. Many reported working seven days a week without a day off. The interviewees had worked in Malaysia for between three and 15 years, with many having experienced periods of irregular legal status often when their work permits had not been renewed by their employers. In Malaysia almost all interviewees ‘lived in’ housing provided by their employers who deducted monthly rents of between RM50 to RM100 (£8 to £25) (Khor, 2021). The type of housing varied considerably depending on the sector, occupation, and neighbourhood (Table 2).

In the overall research project, our aim was to explore how people lived, worked, and migrated to Malaysia across a broad range of sectors and places (Yeoh and Ghimire, 2023). For this article, rather than focusing solely on specific sectors or workplaces, we sought to investigate the interconnectedness of migrants’ accommodation, from the micro-geographies of their living spaces to national and transnational political and economic contexts. This approach aligns with the concept of labour regimes, which considers the diverse politico-economic and socio-cultural relations that shape the experiences of workers across different spaces and scales (Smith et al, 2018; Baglioni et al, 2022). Although we acknowledge that conditions, including those in employer-provided accommodation, varied between sectors and specific locales, we aimed to explore the commonalities across sectors. We believe that what we potentially sacrifice in depth, we gain in understanding the routine practices and patterns of worker housing deployment in Malaysia. Our contribution is to analyse the role of worker housing in the state’s overall regulation of migrant labour to service the demands of capital. The following sections of the article now draw on insights from data collected

Table 2: Types of worker housing in Malaysia

Type of housing	Typical neighbourhood/ area	Typical occupation and usage
Shop lots, rented or owned by company	Urban	Rooms above retail, salon, restaurants
Rooms provided inside workplace/ on worksite	Urban/ rural	Hotels and rooms on farms
Specially built accommodation blocks, owned by company	Urban/ rural	Plantations (upgraded), construction, manufacturing
Rented apartments, houses, hostels	Urban	Services, manufacturing
‘Kongsi’	Urban	Construction, temporary structures, outlawed in Amended Act 446 (2019)

across different sectors and locations in Malaysia, with a focus on three systemised features which contributed to control of migrant labour and hence extraction of maximum surplus value: segregation, degrading conditions which deliberately aimed to dehumanise migrants, and employer surveillance of the housing.

Housing segregation as a mechanism of labour control

In Czechia, Jordan, and Qatar, company-provided housing serves as a mechanism to visibly segregate migrant workforces from local populations (Bruslé, 2012; Azmeh, 2014; Schling, 2022). In these contexts, the institutionalised housing of migrants is aimed at addressing citizens' unease about the presence of migrant populations while preventing migrants' integration and hence limiting opportunities for potential resistance. Similarly, the new regulations in Malaysia have effectively excluded migrants from the private rental market, furthering their segregation and containment to company housing. In this section we show how, in addition to separating Nepali migrants from citizens, companies in Malaysia additionally utilised housing to segregate their workforces by nationality and gender to maximise labour control. This aspect goes beyond what other authors have documented in other geographic contexts.

As we outline above, all interviewees lived in company housing regardless of the sector they worked in or had lived in prior to returning home. Interviewees emphasised that they understood that living in company allocated housing was required as a condition of their residence in Malaysia. Some reported that they had heard of employers who threatened those who attempted to live independently with deportation. For interviewees, 'living in' was simply a facet of life when one migrated to Malaysia.

As elsewhere, company housing in Malaysia tended to physically segregate migrants from the local population, which, as Low (2017) argues, is precisely what federal regulations intended it to do. Interviewees shared that they had few opportunities to socialise with Malaysians; none reported any friendships beyond what appeared to be cursory acquaintanceships in the workplace. In Malaysia, firms, regardless of sector, organised housing for their employees close to worksites. As migrants in Malaysia routinely worked long hours, including overtime and shift work, the co-location of housing enabled the extension of the working day (Cravey, 1998; Pun and Smith, 2007). Once work finished, migrants returned to their residences and usually mixed only with each other. Experiences of physical segregation from the local Malaysian population were amplified where worksites were geographically isolated, such as plantations, farms and factories located in industrial zones on the outskirts of urban centres.

However, employers in Malaysia additionally and routinely segregated worker housing by both gender and nationality even when workforces were mixed: 'My company have workers from Indonesia, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Malaysia, Tamil, India. We don't stay together. In hostel [there are] only Nepali workers with Nepali workers. Company don't have mixing with other people' (Male factory worker, Kuala Lumpur).

While the prohibition on mixed-gender housing was included in federal legislation, companies were not required by law to segregate their workforces by nationality. In factory housing, interviews suggested that nationality allocations were rigidly

enforced. However, where firms hired smaller workforces and consequently, perhaps only offered a floor of an apartment building rather than the whole building, nationals of other countries who were employees of different companies could often be found living on the floor below in the same house.

Worker dormitories can be spaces which enable the sharing of information on promotion, skills, wages, and strategies for job hopping (Pun, 2007), as well as for the reproduction of home cultures (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). In some contexts, sex-segregated housing has been shown to provide a source of strength for young women grouped together in worker housing away from patriarchal norms at home (Cravey, 1998), enabling the generation of emotional links and feelings of sisterhood (Pun, 2007). Indeed, both male and female interviewees reflected generally positive feelings about being housed with co-nationals. In the residences, men played cards together, some drank alcohol and shared stories about life in Nepal. Young Nepali women also relayed a sense of relative freedom, which, especially for those from rural villages in Nepal, was above what they had experienced at home.

Yet, due to the segregated housing, male and female interviewees struggled to make friendships, extend social networks and to share information with those outside their own nationality group. Pun and Smith (2007) found that in the China DLR employers utilised kinship and 'ethnic networks' to intensify labour control through grouping workers on the production line as well as in the dormitory. Divisions in the latter served to duplicate and hence reinforce divisions in the former. In Malaysia, firms were able to mitigate the risks of their employees being able to share information with those who might have had different experiences, and to deter associational activities. Migrants were not only segregated from Malaysian citizens through their enforced residence in worker housing; they were segregated from each other.

Segregation impacted particularly strongly on women. Interviews revealed that women often undertook their journeys under the weight of stigma and a dual set of restrictions: social constraints from their homes and communities and legal obstacles imposed by the state on female migration. As a result, before leaving Nepal they had often felt compelled to keep their migration plans secret and had consequently been unable to seek information related to the destination country, understand the migration process, or establish support networks, relative to their male counterparts. Therefore, when they faced any challenges in Malaysia, it was typically their male colleagues who were better positioned to assist them. However, due to the segregation of living conditions in Malaysia, they were often unable to access the valuable information and support that their male Nepali counterparts in Malaysia could have provided.

Furthermore, while gender segregation was enshrined in the legal framework in Malaysia, employers also went beyond what was legally required. Employers additionally and commonly instituted rules which prohibited any male visitors to female-designated accommodation, often couching this in terms of 'protecting' women. Similarly, Pun (2007: 252) emphasises how the notion of 'protection' was often used to rationalise control and punishment of women in China's DLR (see also Cravey, 1998; Pearson and Kusakabe, 2012). Pun identifies that the paternalistic concern over women's private time implied prolonged management control in a way which was not possible where there is a separation between home and work.

In Malaysia, companies' policy on gender segregation was additionally driven by broader concerns which were related to the migrant labour regime *in general*. Strict

gender segregation in housing was aimed at preventing intimate relationships between men and women and consequently any resulting pregnancies, which would then lead to the female worker's deportation. In these cases, firms would 'lose' the financial investment they had made in recruiting female employees and their socialisation into the workplace. While young women were sought after as factory workers (Cravey, 1998), their ability to biologically reproduce was not wanted by either employers or by the Malaysian state.

Racialised and gendered differentiation is deeply embedded in low-wage temporary migration in Southeast Asia (Jones, 2021) and plays systemic roles in capitalist exploitation overall (Bhattacharyya, 2018). In Malaysia, such gendered and racialised allocations emulated the highly-gendered and racialised migrant labour regime in general (Schling, 2022), as a way of intensifying labour control at the level of the firm as well as to serve the Malaysian state's interests in policing immigration. Company accommodation mirrored and hence reproduced the production of differentiated legal statuses that construct migrants as 'less than' citizens (Nah, 2012). Overall, through the gendered and racialised segregation of worker housing, companies sought to control the personal, intimate, and everyday lives of migrants, extending their control over migrants' spaces of social reproduction (Pun and Smith, 2007; Fraser, 2018). However, these spaces of social reproduction were not only controlled and segregated, they were also degrading. The following section outlines how degrading housing conditions were utilised as a mechanism of control.

Degrading housing conditions as a mechanism of labour control

Philips (2013) asserts that degrading conditions of employment contribute to the dehumanisation of workers, serving as crucial mechanisms by which coercion and control are maintained rather than only symptoms of exploitation. This section shows how degrading conditions in worker housing in Malaysia exacerbated exploitative conditions in the workplace. We contend that these conditions should be viewed as significant elements of the control mechanisms within the migrant labour regime in Malaysia.

As extensively reported in recent media coverage, much of the housing where interviewees resided was in poor condition (see also Khor, 2021; Verghis, 2023). Overcrowding was widespread, but especially common among those who lived in factory accommodation. Male and female interviewees frequently mentioned being packed into their living spaces, often sharing bedrooms, and being compelled to sleep in bunk beds laid out side by side. One interviewee who had returned to Nepal described having to wear his clothes in bed due to the insufficient space in the cramped room he shared. Overcrowding also posed challenges for residents in terms of accessing sanitation facilities and maintaining personal hygiene: 'I had to share a dormitory with 20–22 colleagues. We would have a problem while using the toilet and bathroom in the morning. There was a single toilet and single bathroom for 20 people' (Male factory worker, returned to Nepal).

Interviewees noted that residents were generally responsible for keeping the accommodation clean and tidy, rather than the employers, which became a far more strictly-enforced rule during the COVID-19 pandemic than before (Verghis, 2023). However, since interviewees worked long hours in their factory jobs, they were usually

unable to clean except on their days off, which, in turn, limited their available time to socialise with friends or to rest. Additionally, overcrowding in the accommodation meant that interviewees often experienced tensions in small, poorly-stocked kitchens. For example, a female interviewee reported having to share a kitchen with 19 other residents, which often led to arguments over access to the cooking facilities.

Understandably, specific conditions varied across the different types of housing utilised by firms, different sectors, and even different employers (see [Table 2](#)) (see also [Tasleem et al, 2019](#)). Overcrowding appeared to be most common for those working in large factories and living in rented apartments, halls, or large housing blocks. On the other hand, overcrowding was less frequently referred to by those who worked in the service sector, including hospitality and retail:

The condition is okay because I work in a food and beverage restaurant. We all (other housemates/workers) eat at the restaurant. There is no TV or fridge provided, [but] the condition is okay with water and electricity. We are staying just on the first floor of the restaurant. It's two persons, ladies sharing the same room. (Female, working in restaurant in Kuala Lumpur)

On the other hand, men housed in the old-fashioned 'kongsi' on or near construction sites did not tend to refer to overcrowding as much as the poor sanitation and lack of windows in these spaces. Broken electrical and plumbing systems also appeared to be common issues. Interviewees who lived on plantations reported facing completely different challenges, such as infestations of mosquitoes and snakes, as well as having to navigate open-air toilets located some distance from their accommodation.

Indeed, while specific experiences varied, the consensus among the 58 Nepali women and men interviewed for this study, who had worked across various sectors, was that they *routinely* experienced poor conditions in their housing, albeit to varying degrees depending on the sector and type of housing. Some interviewees even expressed stronger sentiments about the poor condition of their living spaces in Malaysia than the nature of their jobs. Considering the centrality of such conditions to Nepalis' experiences in Malaysia, it is evident that poor housing conditions should be regarded as systemic to the experience of being a migrant worker in the country.

Moreover, our research found that living in substandard, overcrowded, and often unhygienic company housing routinely affected the mental well-being of Nepali migrant workers, and hindered their ability to live their lives with dignity. The lack of personal privacy and inadequate access to hygiene facilities exacerbated these challenges. Many interviewees reported experiencing sleep disturbances due to noisy and overcrowded living conditions, particularly among those who worked night shifts. Moreover, a significant number expressed feeling unsafe in and around their housing, leading to heightened stress levels. Instances of theft, including robberies at knifepoint, further compounded their sense of insecurity and vulnerability, as this example shows: 'One person with long hair come to our hostel... we could survive just because of [the] knife that I had in my hand...' (Female returnee, factory worker).

However, this experience was not specific to women. Male interviewees who worked night shifts expressed concerns about sleeping in the dormitories during the day due to the risk of burglaries, opting instead to stay awake in the afternoons to

safeguard their belongings. This added to their exhaustion from long work hours. Some shared experiences of locking themselves inside their housing out of fear and feeling unsafe to venture outside due to the threat of attacks or robberies.

Collins and Stringer (2023) illustrate how emotions resulting from exploitative labour practices, such as trauma, helplessness, chronic insomnia, sickness, and even suicidal thoughts, play a significant role in perpetuating exploitative labour relations. Similar to Phillips (2013), they argue that these emotions and traumas are not just outcomes but *integral* components of exploitation. Nevertheless, alongside feelings of dehumanisation, interviewees also expressed a sense of stoicism: they were there to work, and putting up with poor housing conditions was a part of the job and of the experience of migration (see also Bruslé, 2012 who finds similar attitudes among Nepali men living in labour camps in Qatar). In other words, migrants internalised an expectation, a hegemonic ideology, that they *should* be treated in this way (Dauvergne and Marsden, 2014). In the final empirical section, the article turns now to analyse how firms in Malaysia utilised the opportunity presented by their state mandated role to provide housing to monitor their workforces beyond the worksite.

Employers' monitoring of workers in their private spaces

The previous sections showed how employers sought to increase their control over their workers' private lives, as well as their workers' bodies, through gendered and racialised housing allocations. Fundamentally, workers, by virtue of being migrants in Malaysia, were denied the ability to choose where to live, how to live, and with whom to live. The degrading conditions of the housing served to dehumanise, depriving them of personal dignity and reinforcing their status as merely labouring subjects. Employers in Malaysia also sought to invoke more direct forms of surveillance of the workers they were responsible for housing. Company housing involves the fusing of workers' private spaces of social reproduction with those of production (Pun and Smith, 2007; Schling, 2022), and facilitates easy monitoring of workers' movements, consumption, leisure, and associational interactions (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). This section shows how firms in Malaysia utilised housing to extend surveillance over their migrant workforces as an intensified labour control tactic, which served as an additional layer to the already highly securitised state regulation of migrants.

Both male and female interviewees who lived, or who had lived in, Malaysia shared multiple experiences of direct employer surveillance in their accommodation. Interviewees relayed occasions when their employers had visited them in their houses without any notice, and that they felt constantly under their employers' gaze. Interviewees who lived in factory accommodation reported that their companies tended to retain housing supervisors (who lived in), housing managers (who did not), and drivers to monitor their activities and behaviours. Supervisors, managers, and drivers all monitored what was happening in workers' accommodation, including compliance with accommodation rules, often posted on the house walls, and relating to cleaning duties, prohibitions of visitors, and what activities could or could not be conducted there. Drivers additionally were responsible for transporting workers, including collecting them from the airport as well as taking them to and from work:

Next day (after arrival in Malaysia), the same driver [who collected us at the airport] came to our accommodation. He gathered us all together and said he will take us to the company. There was a bus. He put all of us in the bus and took us to the company. He then made us into groups and handed to our line managers. (Female factory worker, now returned to Nepal)

Those who lived in factory accommodation were most likely to refer to the monitoring roles of supervisors, managers, and drivers. Nevertheless, interviewees in other sectors from time to time also mentioned their interactions with people in similar roles, as this quote from a security firm manager shows:

Established companies often have detailed protocols in place to supervise their personnel. For example, an 'Operations Executive' may also serve as the transport driver. To illustrate, they pick up Nepali workers from their hostel and inspect the facilities, ensuring cleanliness, proper mattress arrangement and the allocation of rooms. (Employer in the security sector)

Interviewees shared several experiences in which these appointed agents and drivers had been selected from among the Nepali communities, often those who had been living in Malaysia a long time, perhaps for the same employer initially in another role. This could be seen as another example of the 'divide and rule' tactics which [Pun and Smith \(2007\)](#) found in the China DLR. In this case, factory owners and managers utilised Nepali housing supervisors to socialise their co-nationals. Interviewees relayed that these individuals sought to provide advice to them to 'behave', which was often couched in terms of national pride in Nepal and not disappointing their families while they were away from home. Such narrative disciplinary tactics are commonly observed in low-wage migration systems in the Asia-Pacific ([Jones et al, 2023](#)):

The [Nepali] supervisor took us to the company in the morning. He gathered us all together and said, sisters you have come to work here. Do your work diligently. Think about your family at home. Remember, we have come to another person's country – we should work hard, earn money, and go home. (Returnee migrant, female, Nepal)

Ultimately, the experience of being required to live in accommodation provided by their employer enabled several additional layers of control in the already substantive tapestry of control within the migrant labour regime in Malaysia ([Bastide, 2021](#); [Foley, 2023](#);). Despite this, women and men from Nepal, while being subjected to employer surveillance beyond the worksite, as well as that of the Malaysian state in the form of legalised precarity ([Piper, 2022](#)) and intense policing ([Tedong et al, 2018](#)), did manage to find ways to live their lives. Employers' control over them was not absolute, and both male and female migrants from time to time took risks to ignore company rules to carve out their own spaces to engage in personal relationships.

Conclusion

Dormitory labour regimes constitute a strategy by capital to control and reduce the costs of social reproduction through new regimes of (im)mobilisation and circulation

of labour (Pun and Smith, 2007; Schling, 2022; Goodburn and Mishra, 2023). Worker housing provided, and managed, by employers produces specific sets of exploitative labour relations via the extraction of surplus value (Azme, 2014). Yet, despite recognition of the use of 'dormitories' to house factory workers in Malaysia (Grossman, 1979), and of their extensive use in other temporary labour migration schemes in parts of Asia (Piper, 2022), surprisingly little attention has been paid by researchers to their role in regulating precarious migrant labour in Southeast Asia. This article, intended as a contribution to the recent re-emergent literature on labour regimes (for example, Baglioni et al, 2022), and geographic variations in dormitory labour regimes (for example, Schling, 2022; Goodburn and Mishra, 2023), has addressed this gap through analysis of a case study of Nepali male and female migrants living in worker dormitories in Malaysia. Our case study has shown that worker dormitories are integral components in the regulation of (international) migrant labour by states and by capital. We offer three summary interlinked conclusions to advance theorisation of such dormitories in the context of labour regimes.

Firstly, the state and state-capital relations play a hitherto relatively under-recognised role in producing dormitory labour regimes as an integral contributory mechanism to the regulation of migrant labour to serve the demands of capital. Despite attention of labour regimes literatures to the 'nested scales' (Smith et al, 2018) inherent in the subsumption of labour into production, to date studies of dormitory labour regimes have relatively neglected the role of the state and state-capital relations in relation to the regulation of migrant labour (Goodburn and Mishra, 2023). Our case study showed that both the Malaysian state (including all the state apparatus), for the most part, does not take responsibility for constructing or otherwise managing migrant worker accommodation. This differs from the situation in the China DLR (Pun and Smith, 2007). Nevertheless, the federal Malaysian government has played an increasingly visible and firm role in regulating such housing and, in some regions, there is evidence of increased local state involvement in building migrant accommodation. Through legislatively requiring for the *provision* of worker dormitories, the Malaysian state enables the mass recruitment of migrant workers. This enables the rapid integration of newly-arrived migrants into jobs, thus enabling newcomers to avoid legal and social barriers which migrants ordinarily face when trying to rent housing privately (Pun and Smith, 2007; Schling, 2022).

At the same time, requiring migrants to live in such housing enables the Malaysian state to retain the migrant workforce as forever temporary, unable to settle or integrate more permanently into Malaysian society (Piper, 2022). Migrants are, to all intents and purposes, segregated from the Malaysian population. Worker dormitories have thus enabled the Malaysian state to (at least partially) resolve the tensions derived from public concerns over the scale of immigration. In recent years, containing migrants in employer-controlled accommodation has presented a visibly-securitised mechanism by which the federal (and local) governments can claim to be in control of immigration (Tedong et al, 2018). Increased centralisation of regulation of worker housing has accompanied a parallel legislative track of outsourcing the policing of immigration to employers (Low, 2017).

Secondly, the Malaysian state's regulation of worker housing must be viewed in the context of its wider relationship with capital. Since the 1970s, the provision of a low-paid external workforce has been utilised as a competitive strategy to attract foreign investments and consequently Malaysia's successful integration into the global

economy in sectors such as electronics (Bastide, 2021). Requiring migrants to live in employer housing is therefore part of this overarching economic and industrialisation strategy. Firms – Malaysian and international – have consequently been able to capitalise on the incorporation of dormitories into the organisation of production. While others have documented the role of dormitories in export-oriented production (Pun and Smith, 2007; Azmeh, 2014; Schling, 2022), in this article we adopted a different entry point, seeking to understand the broader use of worker housing across the sectors in which migrants were employed. Our case study has found that worker dormitories were utilised in *all* sectors that employed migrants, not only export-oriented production, although the specific type of housing utilised, and the use of the space in the organisation of specific labour processes, varied across sectors as well as between neighbourhoods and individual employers. In other words, we show that the use of dormitories is a generalised strategy to regulate migrant labour, not only within global production networks.

Thirdly, this article has shown that despite the variations between sectors, we can convincingly argue that worker dormitories serve to intensify and increase the mechanisms of control over migrants by the apparatus of the state and by employers. As others have shown (Bruslé, 2012; Azmeh, 2014; Schling, 2022), the incorporation of dormitories (in whatever form they take), enables firms to maximise the extraction of surplus value through control over migrants' socially reproductive space. Regardless of the sector in which dormitories were utilised, firms organised housing along gendered and racialised lines, reinforcing and thus amplifying pre-existing divisions in the local, national and transnational labour markets generated by recruitment and by states (Jones, 2021). This limited potential organising activity and information sharing, which especially impacted on Nepali women. Furthermore, the state and capital utilised the degrading conditions in dormitories as a strategic tool to dehumanise migrants, limiting individuals' ability to feel a sense of personal dignity, safety, and emotional wellbeing (Phillips, 2013; Collins and Stringer, 2023). Intrusive firm surveillance of migrants' personal space in the dormitories compounded these issues. These activities should, of their own accord, be considered a fundamental component in the production of exploitation alongside the state production of precarity through immigration legislation. As such, we contend that highlighting such conditions, and their position within the regulation of migration, offers opportunities for an alternative socially-reproductive space for new and creative labour resistance strategies.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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