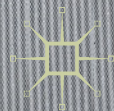


GLOBAL
DIVERSITIES

Class Inequality in the Global City

*Migrants, Workers
and Cosmopolitanism
in Singapore*

JUNJIA YE



Global Diversities

In collaboration with the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Ethnic and Religious Diversity

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* * *

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Introduction: Globalizing Class, Migration and Divisions of Labour in the City-State

This book examines the nature of inequality as experienced through class and cosmopolitanism in the lives of different workers, both migrants and non-migrants, in a global city. It is about how aspirations, expressed through the hopes, desires, goals and will of workers as well as those of actors and organizations of the Singaporean state, bring the politics of cosmopolitanism to bear in a changing labour market. I explain how processes of cosmopolitanism, class and self-hood are intertwined and configured through the model of development in the city-state, which continues to rely strongly and strategically on migrants in its segmented workforce. While distinctive in its national development processes, Singapore is similar to many other globally connected cities in that its labour market configurations result from particular trends of economic development that are dominant in the global political economy. Through various forms of economic restructuring and management known as neoliberalism, wages and conditions of work – such as those in care and construction industries – have been depressed. The impact of these trends has also travelled beyond the borders of the global city, motivating people elsewhere to move into the city for work. Many of the least desirable jobs are now carried out by these new arrivals. I reject ideas of neoliberal conspiracy and migrant worker victimization. While much of the literature on global cities discusses the polarization of incomes and occupations, this case study expands this perspective by highlighting the fragmented socio-economic continuum that results from Singapore's quest to maintain its status as a global city. The impacts of these changes are experienced by

employees in different sectors, including those who are most readily thought of as included within the cosmopolitan imaginary, but it bears remembering that it is migrants who are taking on the most precarious jobs in the city-state. Through an empirically driven analysis, this book shows that while immigration and labour market change may have been led by capitalist logic and may have been at the expense of many, it is also animated by the motivations and strategies of many workers and their communities as a response to economic restructuring. In this sense, the dynamics of class and cosmopolitanism reproduced through Singapore's labour market stretch beyond its national boundaries and are connected to much wider processes and geographies.

By many accounts, recent changes in Singapore fit understandings of what a successful global city is. The city-state's aspirations as a global financial centre are focused on expanding its influence over the organization and management of global capital flows (Henderson et al., 2002). Measures in line with Singapore's development towards becoming a "liveable and sustainable city" with a "high quality of environment to live, work and play" have been enviously studied by different city planners around the world. The Fraser Institute lists Singapore, with an annual GDP of \$54,101 in 2013, as the second freest economy in the world, right behind Hong Kong (Fraser Institute Economic Freedom of the World Report, 2014: 148;¹ World Bank²). At the 2014 World Cities Summit, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted that "efforts have gained Singapore recognition internationally – rankings, different measures have gone up."³ Its cosmopolitanism and its rapid development have also been widely celebrated and studied around the world. By developing its inward and outward-reaching geographies, its aspirations have been spatialized to be highly conducive to capital accumulation. Aside from developing a high level of control and servicing functions within its boundaries, Singapore has further developed its extra-territorial reach to disperse its sites of production. Its population is also rapidly internationalizing, with Singaporeans moving abroad for work and education and, as this book will show, newcomers moving in.

On this side of the twenty-first century, Singapore has again been transformed by immigration. An unprecedented number of newcomers have, with the largest increase being in the labour migrants

sustain its workforce. The hidden story of the glimmering, exemplary city, even when dressed in the discourse of “liveability”, however, is also the story of a segmented labour force that keeps the global city working.

Beneath, or indeed as part of, the celebration of hybrid coexistence through the discourses and practices of cosmopolitanism and multiracialism lurks another form of difference that is, as in many other global cities, all too often unmentioned in Singapore. Besides neither having a minimum wage nor an official poverty line, Singapore has one of the world’s highest Gini coefficients – a measure of the income distribution of a nation’s residents where 0 reflects complete equality and 1 indicates complete inequality. It was logged at 0.478 in 2014 (*Straits Times*, 2014⁴). For all its successes, Singapore demonstrates staggering contrasts of wealth, poverty and power. It also relies on increasing numbers of foreign-born workers to do the jobs that locals cannot be persuaded to do.

Neil Smith asked in 2000, “What happened to class?” (2000: 1). In the context of capitalism-led forms of multiculturalism and various increasingly vocal strands of identity politics, class difference, it seems, still remains the great unmentionable form of inequality amongst people in global cities. In Singapore, class is thickly written across a segmented socio-economic landscape peopled not only by Singaporeans but also by a large and growing number of migrant workers. Who does what work and to what ends are questions that must continue to be asked, especially in a place where discourses of meritocracy and cosmopolitanism are so frequently touted as banners of success and growth.

A common element of conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism is the emphasis on openness to other cultures, although there is much debate on how this openness is understood (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002). There are several problems with the conventional depiction of cosmopolitanism: it assumes the cosmopolitan is part of an elite; it configures cosmopolitanism as a series of personal attributes; it prescribes a moralistic discourse of coexistence; and it does not deal with the everyday practices that produce this openness (Noble, 2009). I address these issues by looking at how state, corporate and individual imaginations of inclusion and exclusion through the labour market reproduce particular vernaculars of cosmopolitanism. As Sassen argues, “cosmopolitanism” often disguises

the exercise of power which is compounded in the reproduction of global cities, whose workforces are fortified by a finely tuned selection of migrant workers in various sectors (2001). Indeed, the movement of migrant workers with diverse backgrounds into a global city such as Singapore means its population must work, live and play in a heterogeneous, yet often exclusionary, setting. In this book I examine what class in this setting means. There are two key objectives I set out to address. Firstly, I highlight the underpinnings of the development model of Singapore, which has, in many respects, been regarded as a successful one. I explore the politics of its labour market, which includes a significant proportion of migrants, both nationally and in the workplace. I do so by developing a cultural analysis of class at different scales, through an in-depth qualitative approach based on 14 months of fieldwork. Data collection was conducted through ethnographic processes of repeated interviews, conversations and participant-observations involving employees, NGO staff and volunteers, and hiring personnel at different companies. This data allowed me to achieve the second objective of this book which is to demonstrate that the ways in which class inequality, as differentiated positioning in the labour process, as identity and as aspiration, is intimately connected with politics of citizenship, gender and race. Rather than assuming exclusions are imposed on both local and migrant workers, I address the myriad ways in which workers themselves are integral to the reinvention and narrative strategies employed by city leaders in line with neoliberal restructuring.

Migration and the growing diversity that follows necessarily present multidimensional challenges and possibilities within the wide-ranging landscapes of Southeast Asia. While such flows of people, goods and ideas are not new, the sheer pace and scale of economic, political, social and demographic change in the region in recent decades has brought about an increase in levels of population mobility, the complexity of their spatial patterning and the diversity of the groups involved (Collins et al., 2013; Castles and Miller, 2014). It can be argued that this dynamism is not only a result of uneven development but also contributes to this unevenness with implications across different scales. The trends within these flows point towards labour migration to and within Southeast Asia and, more broadly, offer an important perspective into the geography of production in the global economy. At one level, work

migrants from developed economies are entering the region as highly paid, highly skilled workers, recruited mainly to facilitate knowledge-transfer to local skilled workers (Beaverstock, 2002). At another level, work migrants move from less developed economies with surplus labour to fast-growing, export-oriented economies in the region with labour shortages, particularly taking on jobs in sectors that locals reject. Within this context, Singapore illustrates the case of an aspiring global city with a high dependency on – and an unusually high degree of control over – labour migrants in various sectors of its labour force to maintain its position in the world economy. Indeed, one cannot convincingly discuss the division of labour in Singapore without also discussing its linkages with migrants and migration, given its strong reliance on large numbers of foreign-born workers to do the jobs that locals cannot be persuaded to do.

The corresponding growth of prevalent casualized employment in many post-industrialist societies is associated with changing economic landscapes, intensifying trajectories of neoliberalism, globalization and increased mobility (Peck and Tickell, 1994; Waite, 2009). As the older forms of Fordist work become replaced by a more fragmented employment system made up of highly flexibilized and spatially decentralized forms of deregulated paid labour, questions must not only be asked about how this transformation impacts production but, crucially, how it impacts the different groups of workers within the division of labour. The labour market conditions specific to the contexts within these advanced capitalist economies are arguably “producing more precarious work that is characterized by instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability” (Waite, 2009: 416).

Advanced, knowledge-based capitalist economies such as Singapore are strategically built upon a segmented labour force. Its division of labour creates a mobile, cosmopolitan labour force of highly skilled, individualized workers who are able to take risks, willing and able to embrace social and career mobilities while less skilled workers become increasingly exchangeable, replaceable and, most vitally, cheapened (McDowell, 2003; Yeoh, 2006). These international movements result in particular groups at the forefront of those experiencing precarious lives as a consequence of their labour conditions. Existing employment conditions reinforce greater degrees of precarity for some workers than others in Singapore. Indeed, these processes

place the worker at the centre of the contemporary labour process. This is a process that sets up a graduated continuum, where some workers, in particular some migrant workers, are made more vulnerable to exploitation, risk and uncertainty than others. The reality of uncertainty, however, extends beyond low-waged migrant workers. I show that even those workers who are typically considered “included” in the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism are subjected to various forms of identity-based exclusions and careful navigation in the financial workplace.

The official rhetoric and policies I examine here are not exclusively Singaporean in origin. Rather, the contemporary challenges brought about by current economic and urban change manifest in a highly globalized labour market such as Singapore’s. In this regard, the puzzles presented in the Singapore case expand the ways in which we understand migration and work in the global economy through the intertwined notions of aspirations, class and cosmopolitanism. As with other places, the size of the transmigrant worker population grows alongside neoliberal restructuring processes designed to render labour more flexible in relation to capital. The deliberate and strategic reliance on foreign manpower is central to the nation-state’s economic prosperity plans, as is the deregulation of various economic sectors (Coe and Kelly, 2002). At the same time though, as Peck observes, geography matters in the construction of a local labour market that is also characterized by a unique set of processes of labour production, reproduction and regulation (Peck, 1996; Coe and Kelly, 2002). Local labour policies in Singapore are organized upon selectively inclusionist and exclusionist measures to keep Singapore in the global race.

This book is about the reproduction of class inequality within the realm of economic production and social reproduction. I analyse how class is accounted for through global development processes that not only contour people’s mobilities and work lives within a strategic division of labour but, further, profoundly shape their aspirations as individuals negotiating multiple subjectivities. Specifically, I look at workers from different positions within the segmented labour force: Bangladeshi migrants who had been working in either construction or marine industries until employment disputes rendered them effectively jobless and homeless; Johorean commuters who work in low-paid service sector work and who cross the international border

between Singapore and Malaysia daily; and finally, middle-class financial workers who are often seen as the skilled, cosmopolitan faces of Singapore's economy.

Underpinning this examination of class is an integrated reading of Marxist and Bourdieusian notions of class. I take a step back from these classificatory systems and examine the mechanisms that maintain and reproduce such class differences. Indeed, an argument for the continued importance of class as an analytical tool and as a lived reality would remain limited at best, and obsolete at worst, should it only be framed in terms of economic production. Class is expressed through other concepts – in particular, “the self” – and it is crucial to consider how certain concepts of personhood and subjectivity intersect with and constitute class. While much about class identity remains tied to the division of labour, it is also generated through processes by which some individuals are denied access to economic and cultural resources because they are not recognized as being worthy recipients. These material and symbolic processes become more complex when they become intimately linked to aspiration, creating much indeterminacy, ambiguity and ambivalence along the way. It is my aim here to capture and unpack the ambiguities produced through this struggle of classed bodies – desires, hopes, choices and values alongside hyper-exploitative work conditions and symbolic violence – through which identities are formed in the larger social world. Class reproduction is dynamic and conflictual, with some people bearing its wrath more than others. Keeping this last point in mind, I would argue that no matter how ambivalent it appears, class and its reproduction are never free from power-laden processes. Class is also a relational concept. Classifications and positionings of class are understood and lived through the division of labour, which is in a constant state of reproduction and reconfiguration because it represents the interests of particular groups in their relation with others. Much of this class relationality is expressed through aspiration and intersects with gender, race, nationality and sexuality.

Situated within the context of the changing and highly uneven terrain of global political economy are two processes that are deeply intertwined in the assembling of this labour force. These are the processes that form the local labour structure in Singapore, comprising state measures that frame the policies which organize and manage its workforce as well as the migration processes that are experienced by

workers. To ground and territorialize the transnationalization of the labour force, I maintain that we need to pay attention to local labour policies, which are part of state power; that is, the exertion of control, surveillance and regulation over its working bodies. While I do not wish to reconstruct a state-centric understanding of migration processes, I would argue that the power of the Singapore state bears attention, with emphasis on its labour market restructuring measures. Its inclinations towards developmentalist policies and capacities not only inform the context of my analysis but, conceptually, also suggest a state with particular aspirations.

At the same time, the migration process driving economic production and social reproduction also differs greatly for different workers – motivations, desires, pre-existing social relations and current working conditions vary. Low wages, long commutes, dangerous working conditions, inadequate legal protection and arbitrary forms of labour discipline are lived realities for many of the city's migrant workers. Singapore is a much more hospitable place, however, to a smaller, but no less important group of workers who are often exhorted to be its face of cosmopolitanism (Ye and Kelly, 2011). It is worth repeating that these categories are neither ready-made nor static but require ongoing maintenance. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 also empirically illustrate that these categories are not stable. I problematize each group of workers by analysing the process by which they “come to be”, both at the policy level and at the individual level. Further, I demonstrate the relationality of these categories by showing that they are not discrete and one shapes the other.

Also crucial to understanding the creation of this transnational labour force is the recruitment processes of different workers. The labour recruitment process reproduces divisions amongst different groups of workers. I illustrate that workers are already subjected to work segmentation through the different practices that connect workers to jobs. At the higher end of the labour market, there are agencies and HR departments of companies that operate across a wide spatial scale, connecting potential workers and vacancies, and engaging in activities such as going to both local and foreign universities to set up job fair booths. As McDowell demonstrated in the UK, for example, short term vacancies in high-status law firms are filled via professional recruitment agencies at an international scale (2008). At the lower end of the labour market where workers are

increasingly cheapened, much of the transnational work brokerage is based on local relations, often where workers are recruited by agents working on an individual, private basis (Wright, 1997; McDowell, 2008). In Singapore, foreign workers who are work permit holders, aside from Malaysians, are eligible only for specific positions within the job market and must return to their home country once their permits expire. Thus, although the segment of low-paid work in the global city is more stringently constituted by localized labour policies as transient, the people working in these jobs are assembled across a wide spatial scale and form a key part of Singapore's transnational labour force. Given the enforced repatriation, existing policies also position them globally. Through my ethnography of migrant workers, I address this form of institutionalized circular migration which constitutes them as vulnerable, precarious labour.

I also examine the evolving identities of workers themselves vis-à-vis their aspirations as intimately tied to their movements and experiences occupying particular positions within the division of labour in Singapore. Labour migration, however, cannot simply be explained as an economic response to uneven development across and within national boundaries, although this is not an irrelevant factor. For many of these migrant workers, their mobility is also a powerful vehicle and expression of profound social and personal agencies. These are, just as importantly, dynamic fields of social practice and cultural production through which people realize, rework and in many cases, reinforce pre-existing aspirations for themselves, their relationships with others and their places in the wider world (Mills, 1999). In Appadurai's view, it is this capacity to aspire that intimately bridges culture and development. It allows us to critically engage with the human driving force of urban change and continuity. Yet, the capacity to aspire is not a romantic one. Indeed, as much as the desire for and the practice of mobility can free people from previous class, gender and ethnic moorings, it can also further reinforce these subjectivities. It is precisely the confluences and conflicts of aspirations which I will discuss through the lens of cosmopolitanism and class.

Even though economic diversification is an important aspect of labour mobility, it is by no means the only, or even the key, consideration. Labour mobility at different scales – from peri-urban Johor to its industrial core and/or from Dhaka to Singapore – also reflects

people's desires for acquiring the personal status associated with the lifestyles on display in "modern" centres. As Mills illustrated with her ethnography of Thai women who move to Bangkok for work, cash wages and social opportunities allow migrants to participate in new experiences and to acquire commodity emblems that represent claims to modernity and sophistication (1999). Hence, there are very complex social goals, needs and wants which migrant workers hold and that cannot be explained solely by the larger processes in the global economy driving these structural changes. These structural changes, moreover, are often accompanied by the reconfiguration of complex cultural politics upon the migrants' return home, including reconfigurations of gender which may produce household tensions. As Elmhirst demonstrates, young Indonesian women returning to their village after their sojourn in the city for work exhibit certain attributes that transform their identities in the eyes of fellow villagers, including new clothes, some savings and above all "a body politics (speech and disposition) that speaks of experience of modernity and a shrugging off of the label *orang kampung*" (2007: 232). It is through examining such cultural nuances lived through the aspirational that we can begin to make sense of why Johoreans endure long, stressful commutes; why Bangladeshi male migrants pay hefty agent fees and why middle-class Singaporeans put up with salient discrimination at the financial workplace.

Aspirations can also be shaped and appropriated by the powerful, such as policy makers, planners, developers and recruitment agencies, as much as it enables people to pursue (Bunnell and Goh, 2012). The Singaporean state, in its adherence to the developmental state model, has played a strong role in the cultivation and management of aspirations through its urban and economic restructuring. There are a plethora of state-directed institutions, policies, programmes and projects that have emerged to spur outward investment. The Economic Development Board (EDB) was created to harness developmental resources along with the Development Bank of Singapore, a government-linked company that provides loans with lower interest rates for particular types of companies that are in line with the EDB's policies. In 1968, the government also created INTRACO (which took over the export wing of the EDB) as a public limited company, to develop overseas markets for Singapore-made products and to source cheaper raw materials for local industries through bulk

buying (Perry et al., 1997). Jurong Town Corporation was created in 1968 under the Ministry of Finance to take over responsibilities for industrial land use and estates – something previously under the EDB. Other statutory boards created were the National Productivity Center and the Singapore Institute for Standards and Industrial Research in 1969 (Perry et al., 1997). Arguably, even the provision of near universal housing in Singapore through the Housing Development Board (HDB) is in line with both developmentalism and actually existing neoliberalism. Whereas subsidized housing in some countries is a form of welfare for those who cannot afford shelter otherwise, public housing in Singapore is a key source of middle-class aspirations. This approach to housing precludes the need to deal with homelessness amongst its citizenry and the associated welfare provisions, all of which have little place in the city-state, where the ideology of meritocracy and pragmatism is deeply entrenched. Instead, policies and discourses surrounding state-subsidized housing in Singapore encourage citizenship-based home-ownership. Migrant workers are not allowed to purchase flats from the HDB – a policy which serves to disenfranchise migrants. A new quota was also introduced in early 2014 to cap the subletting of HDB flats to non-citizens (HDB website⁵). In line with my findings, the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Singapore continues to be embedded within its national development strategies as channelled through the (non)provision of the basic necessity of housing.

Singapore has the power to control immigration and its borders to facilitate its own labour-market restructuring with a capacity unlike that of any other global city (Olds and Yeung, 2004). As Singapore strives towards becoming a high-technology, highly skilled global node in the world economy, collective bargaining for workers remains weak – a trend since independence. Indeed, the incorporation of the National Trade Union Council (NTUC) into the state apparatus further reinforces the power and cohesion of the state. This is also how neoliberalism operates – couched within the developmental state model in Singapore. The state is increasingly incorporating free market forces for urban and economic renewal. The size of the transmigrant worker population grows in tandem with neoliberal restructuring processes designed to render labour more “flexible” in relation to capital. The developmental state model – this well-integrated web of political and bureaucratic influences that

structure economic life in much of Asia – illustrates how states continue to play a key role in directing their economic developments. It is within this macro-context then that we can make sense of how the Singaporean state has the power and capacity to structure and flexibilize its transnational labour market to fit and transform the direction of its economic development, the result of which is a deeply entrenched institutionalization of class difference amongst different working bodies.

My objective is to explain class-based inequalities that emerge from processes that drive change in the labour market in a global city that has cosmopolitan aspirations. My ethnography of workers in a labour market that relies heavily and strategically on migrants underscores these inequalities. I analyse how class and cosmopolitanism are mutually constituted in Singapore's development model by addressing both the material realities and the aspirational dimensions of class and cosmopolitanism in the work lives of three different groups of workers. By developing an integrated reading of Marx's and Bourdieu's notions of class, I draw out the differentiated positions, dispositions and challenges that different groups of workers experience materially and culturally. What are the motivations for these three groups of workers to work in their respective jobs? How are their different class experiences generated and maintained through work in Singapore? In other words, what are the mechanisms involved that explain the persistence of these class differences within and across different groups of workers? How do the connections between class and other forms of identity politics unfold?

The following chapter discusses my research methodology, beginning with a brief discussion of the global city. To demonstrate the fragmentation of class in the global city, I chose to focus on three distinct groups of workers. Data collection was primarily through participant-observation and semi-structured interview techniques with all three groups of workers over 14 months in Singapore and Southern Malaysia. Cosmopolitanism in the global city with a strong labour migrant presence is not only based upon class stratification in the realm of work but also within social reproduction. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the dynamics of social reproduction are animated by the realization of and limitations to class-based aspirations, which are experienced differently for these three different groups of workers. The latter point also illustrates the relationality of