

**Migration trajectories of 'highly skilled' middling transnationals:
Singaporean transmigrants in London**

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Abstract: The role played by the state in regulating population movements has been the subject of study in migration scholarship. Immigration regimes manage migration through visa restrictions stipulating the type of work migrants perform and their entitlement to rights. However, studying migration only in terms of visas or occupational categories limit a full understanding of the breadth and changing episodes making up migrant experiences. Based on a case study of 'highly skilled' Singaporean transmigrants in London, this paper investigates, first, the way such migrants utilise changing visa strategies to incrementally extend their stay in London. Second, the paper contextualises their migrant subjectivities and identities within the immigration and emigration regimes in which they are embedded. In so doing, the paper argues for a trajectory perspective of migration recognising the changing strategies and practical and emotional challenges experienced by 'highly skilled' middling transnationals.

Introduction

The role played by the state in regulating population movements has been the focus of recent literature on migration (Flynn, 2005; Kofman, 2005; Yeoh, 2006; Neumeyer, 2006). Immigration states regulate migration through visa restrictions stipulating the type of work migrants perform and the rights to which they are entitled. However, studying migration only in terms of visa or occupational categories limit a full understanding of the breadth and changing episodes making up migrant experiences. Instead, this paper proposes a trajectory perspective of migration. Such a perspective draws attention not only to changes in migrant statuses and their subjectivities over time, but also emplaces these within policy discourses and frameworks in both the immigration and emigration contexts.

Based on a case study of highly skilled Singaporean transmigrants in London, this paper critically examines the transfer of highly skilled labour and their migration experiences.

The paper, first, investigates the way highly skilled migrants utilise changing visa strategies to extend their stay in London. In so doing, it questions the extent to which highly skilled migrants actually take up occupations corresponding with their skills set when they move to a new country. Second, the paper develops an analysis contextualising their migration subjectivities and identities within the immigration and emigration regimes in which they are embedded. This analysis highlights the practical and emotional issues these highly skilled middling transnationals face, and underscores the significance of social ties in shaping their migration decisions and experiences. More importantly, the paper advocates a trajectories perspective foregrounding the need to study the migration experience in terms of policy developments and personal events unfolding as a continuum between the emigration and immigration contexts.

The next section reviews the extant literature on migration regimes in relation to highly skilled migration. Following that, the paper situates the Singaporean transmigrants in my study within the British immigration visa system alongside the Singaporean emigration discourse. The paper subsequently analyses the changing migration strategies practised by two types of Singaporean transmigrants: self-initiated global careerists and accidental navigators. The conclusion then discusses the theoretical and methodological implications of studying migration from a trajectories perspective that anchors migrants in their respective immigration and emigration contexts.

Embedding highly skilled migrants in migration regimes

In managing the complex trade-off between facilitating economic and political interests and maintaining controls over immigration, nation-states utilise visas to regulate foreign access to their national borders in a globalised world (Flynn 2005; Neumeyer 2006). Visa categories regulate not only the number but also the profile of migrants crossing the border into the nation-state. Whilst some visa restrictions are meant to contain large-scale immigration, particularly by migrants in the poor and low-skilled category, other visa categories encourage the selective inflow of highly skilled migrants (Kofman, 2005; Yeoh, 2006). In the latter case, a number of countries are engaging in a 'talent-for-citizenship exchange' (Shachar, 2006:159). These countries offer citizenship status as an

incentive for highly skilled migrants to settle in the host country. Popular immigration destinations, such as Singapore, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, have created stratified visa programmes selecting applicants based on their potential ability to contribute to the receiving country's knowledge-based economy. Additionally, a number of emigration countries, such as New Zealand (Larner, 2007) and China (Biao, 2007), are implementing new initiatives to lure back overseas citizens with globalised work competencies. In some portrayals of these immigration and emigration regimes, the migrant is seen to have an unprecedented number of choices for migration (Ong, 1999; Shachar, 2006).

However, Nonini (2004) argues that visa categories in immigration regimes have to be situated within the discursive economy of neoliberal governmentality. The global competition for skilled labour, changing migration regulations and the points allocation system (practised in countries like Canada, Australia and the UK) affect the way migrants are viewed by immigration officials and the host society. For instance, business migrants are portrayed as 'risk-taking' capital-endowed subjects while workers embodying skills and educational credentials are viewed as economic agents with potential contributions to the national economy. Yet, studies of the Australian and Canadian business migrant experience indicate that they face immense difficulties adhering to the requirements of the visa and some engage in fraudulent practices instead (Nonini, 2004; Ley, 2004). Jordan and Brown (2007) also report that work permit-holders in British public service professions are prone to tolerate work exploitation for fear of ending up as an irregular migrant should they leave their jobs. The process of assessing an applicant's eligibility, the legal provisions governing each visa category and the extent of migrant rights provided under different categories thus shapes migrant subjectivities and identities in specific ways.

Additionally, discourses and policies in neoliberal emigration regimes actively constitute migrant subjectivities and identities too. In an analysis of Cambodian refugees' negotiations with the American immigration and citizenship regime, Ong (2003) argues that newcomers learn to become citizen-subjects through their contact with American

immigration and social institutions. Similarly, expatriate citizens acquire an awareness of their role in relation to the countries they have left behind through state rhetoric, policies and institutional interactions. For instance, some sending states with large populations of low-skilled citizens working abroad deliberately construct emigrants as an asset to national development and encourage them to channel their remittances towards investment and development in the countries of origin (Levitt and de la Dehesa, 2003). Drawing on the example of Mexico, Smith (2003) further argues that state power brokers use the ‘family’ as a discourse to channel migrant remittances into state-sponsored projects and ideologies that promote traditional extended family structures and specific family, cultural and social values. The nuances of such state-directed persuasions are different in emigration regimes experiencing an outflow of highly skilled citizens, but the underlying logic remains the same. China, for example, provides resettlement packages to encourage the return of foreign-trained scientists and academics in order to improve science and technology in China (Zweig, 2006). Extrapolating from the New Zealand example, Lerner (2008) argues that diaspora strategies are now integral to neoliberal emigration regimes seeking to harness the capital and skills of their citizens abroad.

The literature on highly skilled mobility was for a time focused on the experiences of the inter- and intra-company expatriates who seemed to enjoy unfettered mobility (Findlay *et al* 1996; Findlay and Li 1998; Beaverstock and Boardwell 2000). A more critical arena of work now explores two distinct but inter-related research offshoots. First, the embodied and spatial embeddedness of transnational elite migration have been highlighted by scholars studying the adjustment difficulties faced by expatriates (Beaverstock 2005), their spouses (Purkayastha, 2005; Yeoh and Willis, 2005a) and business investors (Nonini, 2004). These studies focus on the ways in which migration flows and experiences take place in historically mediated contexts (Smith, 2005), and are embodied in classed, gendered, socially and culturally embedded ways (Beaverstock, 2005; Yeoh and Willis, 2005b). By valorising the emplaced corporealities of movement, these studies underscore the continued significance of place and locality while eschewing narratives of a frictionless world (Conradson and Latham, 2005a).

Second, new scholarly interventions now address the diverse forms of highly skilled migration that had been hitherto neglected in the literature. Kofman and Raghuram (2006) address this with respect to the invisibility of women in skilled migration flows. Kennedy (2004) and Favell (2008) have, in turn, studied the migration of young professionals as a way of investigating the lives of those embedded in informal and small-scale occupational and professional networks. Conradson and Latham (2005a) further introduce a new lexicon, ‘middling transnationalism’ to describe those who make up the transnational ecumene, but do not necessarily belong to the categories of the transnational elite or the developing-world migrants. Smith (2005:8) defines such ‘middling transnational actors’ as those who ‘[occupy] more or less middle class or status positions’ in both their countries of origin and their host destinations. Some examples of middling transnationals include young people on ‘gap years’ or study exchange programmes, and persons taking career sabbaticals overseas (Conradson and Latham 2005a). While not all middling transnationals are highly skilled migrants, this paper will consider the experiences of highly skilled migrants who belong to the middling spectrum of transnational migration.

Despite the abovementioned scholarly advances, much of this literature is prone to portray transnational migration as an isolated process, emplaced only either in the immigration or emigration context (Grillo, 2007). To an extent, Ley and Kobayashi (2005) have addressed this concern by advocating a life cycle approach towards the study of migration. They observe that Hong Kong migrants from Canada are embarking upon a ‘transnational sojourn’ from one country to another. However, what I foreground in this paper is the way highly skilled individuals, as agents whose subjectivities are shaped by emigration regimes, undertake a variety of migration strategies by transferring – not without difficulty – from one immigration visa type to another. Within immigration contexts, the boundaries for academy inquiry is often limited to the route (i.e. visa type) by which migrants enter a country or the occupations and concomitant lifestyles of migrants (i.e. already in highly skilled jobs). This approach sets the categories and subjects for analysis, thus eliding shifts in their visa status and accompanying social positionings. Such analytical perspectives capture only a passing snapshot of migrant

subjectivities and identities. They furthermore slice the migration experience into periods instead of looking at migration as a continuum consisting of multiple gradually realised trajectories, embedded in both the emigration and immigration regimes.

Scott (2007) has suggested in his six-part typology of British migrants that such migrants move between types over the course of their stay in Paris, but the right to mobility within the European Union (EU) conferred by British citizenship means that intra-EU migrants do not experience visa barriers in the same way as non-EU migrants. For instance, British employers who intend to employ a non-EU migrant are obligated to prove to the British Home Office that the job vacancy cannot be suitably filled by a British citizen. Besides that, non-EU migrants on work visas only have the right to work for the sponsoring British employer. While the HSMP allows qualifying migrants greater employment flexibility, it does not offer migrants the freedom to work in other European countries. In other words, non-EU migrants have to negotiate with distinct work and visa barriers set up by national immigration regulations.

In this regard, Nagel's (2005) work helps draw attention to changing episodes of migration and visa transfers in her analysis of the 'particular ways that migration paths unfold' for Arab migrants in London, and its impact on their social and cultural identities. I extend this line of inquiry by investigating how migrants engage with immigration regulations, emigration discourses and other social actors during migration. The manner in which they utilise a range of migration strategies and changing trajectories in order to work and live in London sometimes belie their 'highly skilled' status. The changes that occur over the course of their migration trajectories call for attentiveness to the way that they experience migration over time and space, and their concomitant strategies, identities and subjectivities.

This paper draws on discourse analysis and field research conducted amongst Singaporean transmigrants in London, in particular semi-structured in-depth interviews with forty-three individuals between May 2004 and October 2005. I recruited these interviewees through participation in Singaporean community clubs and other personal

networks. The interviews revolved around their reasons for migrating, strategies for moving to London, the extent to which the respondents felt settled in London and their future migration or settlement intentions. All the respondents had lived in London for at least approximately a year and planned on settling for a longer period of time. Three quarters of them were in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties. The majority of the respondents were of Chinese ethnicity but I also interviewed Singaporeans from other ethnic backgrounds (Indian, Malay and Eurasian).

Immigration and emigration regimes: a continuum

Both Singapore and the UK situate themselves in the global economy and one of the top priorities of these governments is to ensure the global competitiveness of their countries. Such countries capitalise on managed labour migration to resolve demographic and labour shortfalls. In the case of Singapore, controlled new immigration flows feature prominently in the state's economic strategy. At the same time, Singaporean emigration trends are on the rise as young, educated Singaporeans leave the country for an overseas experience, partly at the behest of the state. Analysing the Singaporean emigration discourse alongside British immigration policies illuminates migration policy as a continuum. The motivating role of the Singaporean state in promoting emigration is met by opportunities for immigration enabled by the British state.

In recent years, the Singaporean state has actively encouraged an outflow of Singaporean citizens to other parts of the world. This approach can be contrasted with an earlier stance in which Singaporean emigrants who left in the 1950s and 1960s were admonished by Singaporean politicians as those who 'now want to return after contributing nothing to the welfare of the state' (The Globe and Mail, 31 August 1985). However, the present generation of Singaporean politicians believe that the internationalisation of Singaporeans would benefit Singapore's global competitiveness as these Singaporeans accumulate international experience and cross-cultural work experience (Yeoh and Willis, 1999). Highlighting the importance of overseas Singaporeans to the Singaporean economy, former Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (now Prime Minister) said:

The diaspora of overseas Singaporeans is growing. We need to maintain links with them, make them feel part of the Singapore family, tap them for their contacts, their networks, their knowledge of the countries they live and work in. (Lee, 2002)

The overseas experience is portrayed as a critical component of becoming a globally marketable Singaporean, and Singaporeans are encouraged to take risks to achieve this goal. Such discourses contain an implicit idea that people should seek to become more 'boundaryless' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) by acquiring relevant, portable, career competencies. However, the Singaporean state is keen to simultaneously remind overseas Singaporeans of the attachments they should have with Singapore and the need for them to contribute to national development. A high-level government agency known as the Overseas Singaporeans Unit (OSU) was established in 2006 to focus on reaching out to Singaporeans abroad and address the issues faced by this group of citizens. The state has implemented a number of initiatives to keep in touch with its overseas citizenry, such as networking events, cultural festivities and ministerial dialogues. The neoliberal globalisation project is thus harnessed for nation-building goals.

There are about 100 000 to 150 000 Singaporeans studying, working and living abroad relative to the country's domestic population of approximately three million citizens (Today 14 March 2006). Although the largest population of overseas Singaporeans can be found in Australia, the United States and China (including Hong Kong), the UK – especially London – is a popular destination for them too. It is estimated that there are about 10 000 Singaporeans in the UK (Migration Research Unit and Home Office, personal communication in 2004), of which more than a quarter are in London (The Straits Times 21 April 2007)¹.

¹ Figures released by the BBC immigration map in 2005 reveal a far larger number of Singaporeans in Britain. The estimated number of Singaporeans in the British census for 2001 was estimated at 40 000, of which almost a quarter were located in London (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/born_abroad/countries/html/singapore.stm). This is because the BBC estimates are of Singapore-born persons living in Britain whereas my figures are based on those with Singaporean citizenship status in Britain.

Unlike earlier immigration policies that severely restricted all forms of immigration to the UK (Favell, 2001), the contemporary managed migration approach seeks ‘to facilitate movement across frontiers in a way that would produce the maximum benefit for British interests’ (Flynn 2005:464). Recent changes to British immigration policy consolidates previously separate visa schemes into a five-tiered points-based framework. Under the old schema, the Business Visa promoted migrant entrepreneurship and foreign capital investment in the British economy while the work permits system sought to achieve stipulated economic outcomes from labour migration. There were four elements in the work permits system: the main scheme (including work permits, first permission, training permits and work experience); the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP); the sector-based scheme and the seasonal agricultural worker scheme (Clarke and Salt 2003). The latter two schemes targeted less-skilled labour shortages in particular industries while the main scheme and the HSMP aimed to attract professionals and highly skilled migrants to the UK. Under the main work permit scheme, employers would provide sponsorship for the worker who then applies for a visa to live and work in the country. Applicants for the HSMP qualify under a points-based system in which points are awarded for criteria such as educational qualifications, age, past income and spouse/partner’s skills.

The current five-tiered points-based framework notably creates new barriers for the mobility of migrants from non-EU countries. The stricter criteria regulating the suitability of migrant skills and qualifications under Tiers 1 and 2 (for highly skilled and skilled work respectively) suggests that a narrower scope of qualifications and professional experience will be required of migrants applying to work and live in the UK. A greater onus is also put upon employers to provide sponsorship and higher potential salaries for workers in the Tier 2 category who do not belong to a skills shortage occupation. The policy focus on quantifying skills sets reflects an ongoing tendency amongst policymakers to slice migration into cross-sections, neglecting the way that migrants enter and remain in a country through different visa routes over a given period of time.

The more fundamental question that remains to be addressed is who qualifies as a ‘highly skilled’ worker? This issue has been the subject of much debate in the academic literature. Iredale (2001:8) argues that a highly skilled worker is normally defined as an individual with a university degree or extensive/equivalent experience in a given field. However, as Koser and Salt (1997:287) contest, there is no simple way to define who is a highly skilled migrant in terms of skills, qualification, experience or the length of stay. Millar and Salt (2008) add that the concept of ‘skill’ may have been too narrowly defined in the present literature. Highly skilled migrants may not take up full-time employment in sectors classified as ‘highly skilled’, or they may be employed in occupations that are not categorically classified as ‘highly skilled’ (Kofman and Raghuram, 2005). For example, it is not uncommon for migrant Filipino domestic workers to possess tertiary-level qualifications but still perform low-paid work in the household (Parreñas 2001). Jordan and Brown (2007) also highlight the trend of degree-holders from European Union member-states taking up unskilled jobs in Britain. Significantly, even countries like Australia and Canada that use the points based system have been challenged by instances of ‘skills wastage’ amongst migrants who enter as skilled workers (Iredale, 2001:889; Man, 2004).

When carrying out this research in 2004, I began my fieldwork with the intention to only interview ‘highly skilled’ migrants (i.e. individuals in professional jobs), but as the study developed, I became aware of the breadth of ‘highly-skilled’ Singaporean transnational migration. I decided to expand my study to the community-level to capture a broader sample that would allow me to critically examine the notion and categorisation of ‘skills’. Hence instead of merely recruiting visa holders from the work permit scheme or the HSMP, my study recruited Singaporean transmigrants from a spectrum of visa categories. The common denominator in my sample, which concurs with Iredale’s (2001:8) definition of the ‘highly skilled’, is that the Singaporean transmigrants I interviewed in London possessed tertiary-level qualifications, or at least extensive experience in their given fields.

Singaporean citizens enter the UK through a variety of visa categories and some gain residency or citizenship rights this way. Almost half of my respondents (21) belonged to the work permit category. Work permits are issued for specific jobs and allow employers in the UK to recruit from outside the European Economic Area. The work permit scheme features as an integral tool of the British state's strategy to enhance its global economic competitiveness by employing highly skilled workers to meet industry needs. I also interviewed eight Singaporean transmigrants with permanent residency status in the UK. At least three of these respondents (all women) had transferred from spousal permits to this status after marrying a British citizen and fulfilling the required two-year residency criteria. The others applied for permanent residency in the UK either after being employed on the work permit for four years or by fulfilling the requisite ten-year legal residency criteria (as was the policy at that time).

Four of my respondents belonged to the spousal visa category (all women). This visa grants them the legal right to live and work in the UK. Two of them were married to spouses with work permits in the UK; the other two women had been married to British citizens for less than two years and thus were not yet eligible to apply for British permanent residency. In contrast, none of the Singaporean men interviewed had spousal visas. Another four of the respondents held working holidaymaker visas category. This scheme allows young Commonwealth citizens to live in the UK for up to two years and they may work for an aggregate period of twelve months². The visa is not extendable but working holidaymakers may apply to stay in the UK under other visa categories, such as the work permit or the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme³. Although the proportion of Singaporeans on this visa is negligible relative to the overall number of working holidaymakers in the UK, the working holidaymaker visa is a popular migration strategy

² This is unless the visa was issued before 8 February 2005 when this stipulation was not yet in place.

³ The Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP) was implemented in 2002. The programme was not yet in place when many of my respondents decided to move to the UK. Others said that they did not know of the HSMP because the scheme has not been widely publicised in Singapore. However, by the time I was engaging in the fieldwork process, word about the HSMP had spread. The HSMP grants successful applicants the right to work in the UK under flexible employment initially for a year. The permit-holder may then renew the visa for a longer period of time, which would eventually enable the individual to apply for permanent residency.

amongst young Singaporeans who intend to live in the UK, but do not qualify for work permits or other visas⁴. The remaining six respondents in my interview sample had the right to live in the UK through other schemes, such as British citizenship, the ancestry visa, European Union membership or postgraduate student visas.

However, the information presented here is arguably only a snapshot of their migration trajectories. Many of their interview narratives revealed that they had lived in London for a long period of time by capitalising upon a range of visa categories; others indicated their intention to change to another visa category upon the expiry of their existing visa status. These observations suggest that a more nuanced analysis of their migration strategies and trajectories is necessary in order to fully understand the dynamics of their mobility.

Self-initiated 'global careerists' mediating migration strategies

The literature on inter- and intra-company transfers within and amongst transnational corporations highlights the way transnational corporations utilise international employees to share human capital and intellectual knowledge (Findlay and Li 1998; Beaverstock and Boardwell 2000). Company-related transfers were indeed one of the routes used by the Singaporean transmigrants in my study to move to London. However, only five of them belonged to this migration category. Their narratives of migration emphasised that they had been deployed to work in London so as to maximise the interests of their employers. Nonetheless, they were also aware of the benefits of an overseas posting for their personal career progression. As Beaverstock (2005:256) found in his study of highly skilled British inter-company transferees in New York, transnational experiences benefit the career of these workers in terms of promotions within the firm as well as the intellectual and social capital that they accumulate through international business interactions.

⁴ In 2003 there were approximately 50 000 working holidaymakers in the UK, of which the primary source countries were Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. There are, however, growing numbers of working holidaymakers from India, Malaysia and Sri Lanka (Migration Research Unit and Home Office, personal communication in 2004).

However, the majority of the Singaporean transmigrants I encountered during my fieldwork had not been transferred to work in London by a parent company. Instead, many had made a personal and independent decision to migrate to London. Global cities, such as London, draw large numbers of relatively young and well-educated migrants from other affluent countries, including Singaporeans. These Singaporean transmigrants are likely to undertake a range of strategies outside of the intra- or inter-company transfer category in order to live in London. Thomas et al (2005) argue that compared to the traditional academic interest in expatriate managers on company assignment, the phenomenon of self-initiated migration has been neglected in the literature as a significant aspect of global careers. In fact, most of the Singaporean transmigrants that I encountered can be categorised as self-initiated work migrants in the sense that they had looked for suitable employment *after* arriving in London on visas that restricted their right to work in the country. Yet in their quest to develop a boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), they purposefully negotiate the visa regulations guarding national borders.

One common strategy employed by Singaporean transmigrants intending to work in the UK is to first study in the country, and while doing so, seek out employment opportunities. Felix (early thirties; financial services) had been working in the civil service in Singapore for a number of years before he decided to have ‘a career switch’. He registered at a business school in London for the purpose of obtaining a job in the UK:

My intention is to work overseas and it is not that easy to get a job overseas unless you have experience in that country... After working for a few years in Singapore I found that [...] a bit small. I'd done quite well but to progress further I believe you have to go overseas... If you want to reach senior level in the multinationals they expect you to have overseas experience... People who have done the MBA and worked in more than one country tend to get a job compared to those who have not... It's only when you start looking for work overseas that you realise how competitive it is, especially in countries [sic] like London and New York. You are

competing against the world. It is not like in Singapore. In Singapore you send out one CV and you get one interview; here you send out ten CVs and you are lucky if you get one [interview].

The way that Felix puts emphasis on the necessity of accruing an overseas education and international exposure to improve his career prospects resonates with the findings of Waters (2006) in her study of Hong Kong students from Canada. She proposes that international education is regarded as a specific means of accruing the cultural capital and social networks that would facilitate future employment prospects. Building on this idea, I further argue that international educational *and* work exposure is increasingly regarded as an essential spatial strategy for acquiring the portable career competencies to build a boundaryless career and become a global careerist.

These global careerists envision a geographical advantage by having lived and studied in key global city nodes, like London and New York, so as to facilitate their entry into the labour market. They mobilise this spatial strategy with an expectation that migration would reap potential career benefits. At the same time, the spatial limitations of Singapore (640 km sq) is used to rationalise the migrant decision to go overseas ‘in order to progress further’ career-wise. Significantly, these beliefs resonate with the Singaporean emigration discourse encouraging highly skilled mobility in order to further Singapore’s Darwinian struggle for global competitiveness. Migration and global careers are thus a deliberate representation of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism that is mobilised by the state and adopted by these Singaporeans.

Such self-initiated migrants transfer from visa to visa to achieve their aims of building a global career. Nevertheless, as Felix’s anecdote reveals, these migrants face challenges applying for a job and accompanying visa status because of the international competition in London (‘you are competing against the world’). The difficulties faced by self-initiated highly skilled migrants to break into the labour market have thus far received limited mention in the highly skilled migration literature (except with reference to gendered identities). I address this with the example of Oscar, one of the self-initiated global

careerists in my study. At the start of the interview, Oscar (early thirties; building and architecture) qualified that he did not migrate ‘the normal way’, by which he meant company-sponsored international work transfers. This suggests that in the popular imagination, company-sponsored transfers are still regarded as the norm and a preferable migration route. Oscar had studied in the UK for his bachelor’s degree and returned to work in Singapore after his graduation. However, he came back to London a few years later on a tourist visa with the intention of finding paid employment in the city. He explained his decision to me:

I was sick and tired of working in Singapore so one day I packed my bags and came over here. I told my mum that I would give myself six months to find a job here and if I can’t find anything I would go back to Singapore... I went for a few interviews but it wasn’t easy because [...] they would have to apply for [a] work permit [for me]. A lot of companies [were] not that keen because it [would mean] extra trouble for them. To employ me they would have to go through the trouble of informing immigration, arranging for a work permit and proving why me and not a local. It wasn't easy at all. A lot of times I thought that the interview went well, but the moment they heard that I needed a work permit they would just switch off...

Oscar’s experience illustrates the distinctive practical and emotional challenges faced by self-initiated work migrants. He highlights the reluctance of companies to undertake the extra costs and trouble of applying for work permits for those lacking the legal right to work in the UK, thereby creating barriers to entry for non-EU citizens. During the interview, Oscar also revealed that he would never forget the experience of being ‘literally down to [his] last penny’ during the months it took him to secure a job in London. This revelation runs counter to Kennedy’s (2004, 163) depiction of non-company sponsored transnational professionals who purportedly enjoy ‘freedom of movement with respect to employers, personal relationships, lifestyle and legal rights’.

Eventually Oscar was offered a work position through the recommendation of a former university friend:

I think I was lucky because one of my university classmates was working in this company and she had been here for three years. She was homesick and the company was desperate for people [...] so I could start almost immediately. It was like being at the right place in the right time... I was quite all right during the interview and they could see that I was keen. My friend had done a good job so maybe they [thought], 'Chinese more hardworking'. Also, they were desperate for people so two weeks after that I got it.

Rather than skills or qualifications, Oscar attributes his eventual job success to luck ('being at the right place at the right time'), his friendship networks from having previously studied in the UK and his ethnicity ('maybe they think, "Chinese more hardworking"'). This underlines the significance of social networks – professional, educational and ethnic – as a pivotal factor enabling migrants to successfully secure employment (Purkayastha 2005).

But why did Oscar feel 'sick and tired' of working in Singapore in the first place? Initially, he explained that he felt underpaid in his job and he wanted a more challenging experience. However, as the conversation progressed, it became clear that his migration was partly triggered by resentment towards the foreign talent strategy in Singapore.

The approach the government has taken is to make it very attractive for foreigners to come in. That causes a lot of problem and citizens feel that, 'I am a citizen you know so why is he getting as much benefits as I am? You don't treasure me then I walk away *lah*' ... I don't think Singaporeans are any less talented.

The Singaporean state encourages the inflow of highly skilled labour for industry needs through preferential policies for foreigners who meet the visa criteria. This foreign talent strategy has incurred the ire of middle-class Singaporean citizens who regard such foreigners as competitors for jobs and living space. Now this immigration policy has generated additional complexities for the state's management of Singaporean emigration.

As much as the political rhetoric on the spatial constraints of Singapore, global competition and the value of internationalised work competencies may compel emigration (such as in Felix's case), Oscar's narrative shows that Singaporeans leave as a way of expressing their personal frustrations with state immigration policies too. The Singaporean state's new emphasis on building a sense of community amongst overseas Singaporeans further fuels the discontent of individuals who feel strongly against privileges granted to highly skilled non-citizens in Singapore. The immigration-cum-emigration regime in Singapore poses an uneasy tension for the management of Singaporean nationhood, particularly under extraterritorial conditions.

Career-minded migrants, such as Felix and Oscar, undertake independent migration decisions to move to work and live in London. Such migrants are mobilising a spatial strategy to create global careers for themselves, but at the same time, they also encounter spatial barriers to entry through the restrictions and regulations of the visa system. Thus it was not unusual to find that their migration trajectories usually capitalise upon two or more visa strategies in order to remain in London (e.g. student visa to work permit or tourist to work permit). Despite their qualifications and professional credentials, these migrants encounter distinct practical and emotional challenges to find work in the global city and extend their legal stay. They negotiate a range of immigration visa stipulations and emigration discourses alongside interactions with potential employers, colleagues and other social actors, thus producing a distinctive set of subjectivities and identities in this quest.

Migration strategies and unfolding trajectories of 'accidental navigators'

In this section, I examine another spectrum of highly skilled migration experiences. Compared to the global careerists who purposefully mediate their migration trajectory, these individuals incrementally extend their stay in London through trajectories that only become apparent to them over time. Even though they possess high levels of educational qualifications, the initial work they take up in London may not be commensurate with their credentials. They are the 'accidental navigators' who prolong their migration trajectories through chance strategies. Michelle's (late twenties) experience exemplifies

such an instance. She had graduated with undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in art from a London university. After graduation, she wanted to remain in London but ‘do something different’. She applied for the working holidaymaker visa and obtained a low-skilled job in a sandwich chain:

[At that time] I was quite open to anything that stepped my way [because] I would be sad [if I had] to leave London. If I were using [the working holidaymaker visa] as a stepping stone I would be actively looking for jobs, which I wasn’t.

An attitude of being ‘open to anything’ exemplifies the multiple possibilities that accidental navigators, like Michelle, may encounter as a result of unanticipated circumstances. Several months later she was presented with an opportunity to apply for an administrative job in the same conglomerate. Her successful application led her to be transferred to a five-year work permit, but she stressed that she obtained the job only ‘by accident’. Her original intention as a working holidaymaker was simply to extend her stay in London after the completion of her studies. Her migration trajectory – from student to working holidaymaker (in a low-skilled job) and eventually work permit holder – illustrates the way that some migrants incrementally extend their overseas stay in London by employing a range of migration strategies.

Unlike the Arab migrants that Nagel (2005) had studied, few of these Singaporeans found jobs through class-related family connections. Instead the social networks they accrue from their earlier educational experiences facilitate their migration by providing temporary accommodation help, job recruitment information and emotional support. As Irene, a working holidaymaker who was in the process of applying for an employer-sponsored work permit, told me:

I thought that London was the best place to find a different more creative job. So I tried a lot of different industries, anything really! Finally I decided, well, cash was running low and this is a very comfortable kind of job and something that I enjoy – to an extent. So this is what I am doing for the time being... London was easy

because I had friends. My friends from college are working in the City. Obviously if I am broke and I have nowhere to stay they are going to take me in, take me out, buy me cocktails to cheer me up when I can't find a job.

More than half (26) of my sample had undertaken tertiary education in the UK. Due to the high costs of an overseas education (particularly in London), Singaporeans in the UK tend to come from upper middle- and high-income families. The emigration of Singaporean transmigrants to London is constituted by class factors related to the migrant's family background and household income-level. Their narratives emphasised the importance of London-based friendship networks cultivated during their time in British universities. Their spatial strategy for migration is to appropriate the social networks already embedded in place through earlier migration.

Like Irene, many of these 'accidental navigators' take on contract jobs in a variety of industries. As contract workers, these individuals expand the skilled labour pool in the UK by providing flexible and disposable labour for employers while holding limited working rights and privileges. Even though they are highly skilled migrants, the skills set that they capitalise upon in their initial jobs may not be commensurate with their educational or professional credentials. Just as with the self-initiated global careerists, when these working holidaymakers move to London they usually live frugally because their relatively modest personal income levels have to accommodate the higher costs of living compared to Singapore. Despite their educational qualifications and professional credentials, these individuals encounter a period of difficulty finding suitable and stable employment in London. Furthermore, their jobs may not command incomes equivalent to their earning potential in Singapore. As such, they belong to the middling social and economic spectrum of migration.

The process of finding suitable employment and the contingency of their work contracts and visa status may lead to distinct forms of emotional stress for these highly skilled middling transnationals. I illustrate this argument through Hannah's trajectory. Hannah (late twenties) had moved to the UK using the working holidaymaker visa as a means to

live in the UK with her boyfriend (now her husband) who had been studying in the country. Although Hannah graduated with a social sciences degree in Singapore, she had difficulty finding employment in the UK that was commensurate with her qualifications because of her visa status:

I was trying to do anything and everything. There weren't that many alternatives... I think initially there was a poor understanding of the visa. In Singapore they tell you that there are quite stringent visa restrictions on the working hours and where you work. When I came to the UK I had reservations about applying for jobs because I didn't know if legally I could apply for full-time jobs. What the Commonwealth office tells you is you shouldn't apply for jobs that are trying to further your career. You can do bar work and that sort of thing as long it gives you [the] cash flow to sustain your lifestyle, but not really to further your career. When I rang the Home Office here and I told them about my visa, they said you can work in any type of environment as long as your employer knows what kind of visa you have... When I first started applying I was wary and I didn't quite know what to tell my employer. After I [had] checked it out, my fears were allayed – but at the same time, there was some nervousness about the grey areas... especially because you are worried about your status to remain in the country.

As Hannah's narrative illustrates, the working holidaymaker's visa scheme is regarded as an alternative and temporary migration strategy to the UK for migrants who do not qualify for an employment-sponsored work permit and would rather not commit to a costly educational route. However, limited publicity about the working holidaymaker visa and frequent changes to its rules and regulations lead to a poor understanding of the visa conditions. This hinders migrants like Hannah from capitalising on their full employment potential (Kofman and Raghuram 2005; Purkayashita 2005). Such persons also have to cope with the anxiety that they may unknowingly flout their visa regulations and risk deportation or being granted re-entry when they leave the country.

In Hannah's case, she eventually found a temporary job as a telemarketer and later transferred from the two-year working holidaymaker visa to a spousal visa that allows her the right to full-time employment in the UK. She admits that the impending expiry of her working holidaymaker visa expedited the decision to get married. She adds that managing the spousal visa process herself, compared to a company-sponsored visa, made the migration process seem more difficult amidst her wedding preparations. Nonetheless, her new visa status enabled her to be employed in an accountancy firm that later sponsored her professional training to become an accredited accountant, a career path that she had not expected when she first migrated to the UK. The changing episodes in her unfolding migration trajectory constitute the production of her migrant subjectivities and identities as a wife and as a professional.

The accidental navigators are involved in a process of self-realisation and self-fashioning (Conradson and Latham, 2005:300) that embeds them as highly skilled migrants in the host society in differential ways (Nagel, 2005:203). However, part of the reason why these Singaporeans are deliberately migrating as a lifestyle choice arises out of a desire to escape from the politics of comfort and control in Singaporean society. George (2003) uses the metaphor of the 'Air-conditioned Nation' to describe the centralised management of the Singaporean nation-state in order to produce a comfortable quality of life for the Singaporean population. As discussed earlier, Singaporean migration is brokered by the Singaporean state in its pursuit of economic internationalisation. However, I argue that migration also provides a means of breaking out of the zone of comfort for Singaporean transmigrants who have grown weary of being socially engineered by the Singaporean polity. For instance, Irene, explains her migration rationale in this way:

I would rather live in England than in Singapore... I really liked my time in university here... There is more variety of people and they have a different outlook from the people you have grown up with, especially if you grew up in Singapore... Everyone knows everyone. After a while it seems like a little village!... It is really cosy, but for me, it makes my skin crawl. I never felt that I really fit in with

Singapore even when I was younger but then I wasn't really given any real alternative.

Like the New Zealanders in Conradson and Latham's (2005b) study, Singaporean migration to London is motivated by the possibilities and anonymity offered in the global city. However, in the Singaporean case the desire to migrate is also compelled by a desire to resist social conformity in Singaporean society. This propensity for conformity arises from a societal culture emphasising social discipline, academic achievements and monetary success ('I wasn't really given any real alternative'), which is in turn constituted by the paternal Singaporean state bent on developmental goals. Singaporeans who feel that they do not 'fit in' with this way of life thus capitalise upon migration as an escape valve from the Air-conditioned Nation. The Singaporean case study illustrates in particular the role emigration regimes play in shaping migration decisions and experiences. While some migrants move in compliance with the ongoing neoliberal capitalism discourse in Singapore, others do so as a way of expressing their dissatisfaction with Singaporean policies and societal rules. Yet significantly, even those who spoke of migration as a form of escape tend to express intentions for future return. This is in the belief that they will eventually encounter racial barriers at work and societal integration in the UK, but also on account of family ties anchored in Singapore (Ho, 2008).

Grillo (2007:200) describes an instance of transmigration as 'a cross-section through time of an evolving phenomenon, though it may not be obvious towards what it is evolving'. The migration trajectories of the accidental navigators presented here personifies such an argument. The paths these individuals tread at particular points in time lead to outcomes they did not expect when they started out on that episode of their sojourning. Turning the analytical lens to migration strategies and trajectories reveals a breadth of migrant experiences exceeding the optic of studying migration only in terms of visa types, occupational statuses or life-stage snapshots. Instead a trajectory perspective illuminates the way that migrants negotiate societal contexts in the sending country, visa regulations in the receiving country, perform work that may not correspond to their initial skills set,

and in some instances, end up accumulating new skills. In the process, they develop subjectivities and identities shaping and shaped by their careers, personal lives and households. In making this argument, I am mindful that the global careerists are also navigating their migration trajectories though they may be purposefully mediating their visa strategies with a clearer end point in mind. Both sets of migration strategies and trajectories are part of exploring personal and professional possibilities as agents who are simultaneously embedded in the immigration and emigration contexts.

Conclusion

This paper provides a different optic on highly skilled migration, emphasising migration trajectories by studying the experiences of middling transnationals who sought out a variety of visa strategies to extend their migration experience. At the time of the interviews, these individuals held visas testifying to their highly valued skills. However, their biographies revealed practical difficulties, emotional vulnerabilities and a period of employment that was not commensurate with their skills. The experiences of the highly skilled middling transnationals presented here show that their status at the point of entry may be different from what they actually *do* in the country. In so doing, they also become embedded in and engage with both the immigration and emigration regimes in distinct ways. The self-initiated global careerists and accidental navigators described here may have different economic goals for migration, but they share the common experience of circumventing the constraints of one visa to capitalise upon the opportunities provided by another visa. The social ties mediating and facilitating such strategies emerged as a common theme in many of these migration trajectories. Friendship networks from an earlier British educational experience helped cement decisions to return to or remain in the UK. These social networks are deployed as spatial strategies in that social ties accrued from earlier geographical relocation act as a resource for new migration, helping in the further accumulation of human, financial and cultural capital through successful migration and career development.

Turning the analytical lens to a trajectories perspective calls attention to the significance of the intersections between evolving policy developments and migrant subjectivities.

Some migration scholars (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Findlay and Li, 1997) have previously mooted the biographical method, namely the study of individual life histories, as a means for understanding how migration decisions are established over long time spans. Ley and Kobayashi's (2005) more recent study emphasising the circularity of migration flows over the life course resonates with the approach of the biographical method too. This paper supports such standpoints but further urges researchers to be attentive to how policy discourses and controls within an immigration-cum-emigration framework influence the way migrants gradually realise their trajectories over time. For instance, the Cambodian refugees in Ong's (2003) study learn to adapt to and navigate the policy and institutional parameters governing their new lives as citizen-subjects of the United States. However, they are simultaneously reconstructing their lives as American citizens in relation to their past subjugation to policies of the violent Khmer Rouge regime. Studies of other highly skilled and capital-bearing migrants who have experienced accentuated class and status demotions in immigration regimes due to institutional (e.g. accreditation difficulties) and/or cultural (e.g. language) barriers (see Ley, 2004; Nonini, 2004; Aranda, 2007) demonstrate that such migrants continuously construct and reconstruct their identities in relation to events in emigration regimes too.

A trajectories perspective paying attention to the policy and migrant subjectivity nexus calls for a rethink of future intellectual and policy debates regarding migration entry points and visa statuses, multiple state memberships, migrant integration in immigration contexts and even reintegration in emigration contexts. To answer such questions, more cross-national research systematically comparing experiences amongst different nationalities need to be conducted. Additionally, a longitudinal approach underpinning such studies would help illuminate the barriers and opportunities in the immigration and emigration contexts that these migrants encounter at different stages of the lifecourse. This undertaking would enable researchers and policymakers to develop a fuller understanding of the way migrants from different cultural and national backgrounds engage with the immigration and emigration regimes in which they are variously embedded.

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