



Labour recruitment practices and its class implications: A comparative analyses of constructing Singapore's segmented labour market



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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the literature on labour migration by considering the class commonalities and differences as refracted through gender that are embedded within recruitment practices of different workers. Recent writings on the recruitment of labour migrants often distinguish between low-waged and middle-income workers without clearly addressing the linkages between recruitment practices of both. By adopting a comparative framework between Bangladeshi male migrants and transnational financial professionals, I draw out the varied configurations of gender and class that are deployed in recruitment processes that contour the existing division of labour in Singapore. For both groups of workers, their access to work is conditioned not only by technical skills but by their social and cultural capital as well. Through the analyses of the mesogeography of labour assembly, recruitment methods become crucial channels the realms of economic production and social reproduction are intertwined. This accounts for the segmented social space that is the labour market by demonstrating that recruitment processes are themselves embedded with specific class intersections as deployed through varied gender constructions.

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1. Introduction

My agent to come Singapore last time also worker in Singapore. So much money must pay agent so I borrow from my relatives and my father sold his land.

Sujan, a 23 year old Bangladeshi man working in a shipyard.
I think one of the most important things that anybody who is offered a position is the way you think that person would fit in to the group, to the corporate image.

Gwen, a 42 year old British-Indian woman working as the vice president of sales at a foreign bank.

Sujan, and Gwen are part of the foreign workforce in Singapore, making up about 33% of its total workforce.¹ This is, however, a highly differentiated workforce where Sujan and Gwen have been incorporated in very different ways. This paper takes as a starting point labour recruitment practices to analyze inequality and precarity. More specifically, this paper contributes to the existing literature on labour migration by considering the class commonalities and differences embedded within recruitment practices of different workers' livelihoods. I show that recruitment processes shape and are shaped by the existing division of labour in Singapore by exam-

ining the interconnections of two groups of workers in Singapore. I draw on my work with Bangladeshi male migrants and transnational financial professionals to show that the assembling of a transnational labour force, such as Singapore's, is embedded with class and its intersections with gender. When analyzed as such, labour recruitment methods become a way through which we can read the intertwining realms of economic production and social reproduction. Existing literature on recruitment of labour migrants often distinguish between low-waged and highly-paid workers without clearly addressing the similarities between recruitment practices of both (e.g., Sassen, 1991). Fewer still have compared the ways in which gender is deployed through recruitment practices. Here, I offer a critique of these forms of labour assemblage practices by illustrating both the commonalities as well as distinctions of class between the two groups through recruitment. I argue that while the costs of recruitment are borne more heavily by the low-waged Bangladeshi male migrants, financial professionals are also subjected to tensions and uncertainties through the recruitment process. For both groups of workers, their access to work is conditioned not only by technical skills but by their social and cultural capital as well. This not only accounts for a segmented social space that is the labour market but shows how recruitment is embedded with specific class discourses and practices that, in turn, reproduce the classed lives of potential employees. I further argue that gender is reproduced in complex ways through recruitment processes that in turn, create particular classes of global working subjects.

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¹ Population.sg website: <http://population.sg/resources/workforce-composition/#.UZHjr4LHQnU>. Date accessed 18th May 2013.

Much has been written about the gendered experiences and movements of labour migrants, in particular low-waged female, with a growing interest in male labour migrants from the Third World (Datta et al., 2009; Elmhirst, 2007; Jackson, 1991; Parrenas, 2001; Pratt, 2004; Silvey, 2006; Tyner, 1996; Wright, 2006). The experiences of highly-skilled, highly-paid workers have also been documented, albeit to a smaller extent (see for example McDowell, 1997, 2008a,b; Schoenberger, 1997; Ye and Kelly, 2011). There is considerably less, although an increasing interest in the discussions of labour recruitment as a crucial part of migration (Lindquist, 2010, 2012). Fewer still have employed comparative analyses of labour recruitment and its implications of class intersections with gender. In the remainder of the paper, I first discuss ways in which recruitment has been conceptualized in the context of migration before moving on to highlight what I mean by class. The empirical scope of the paper then examines the role of the Singaporean state in creating the geographical space for specific recruitment practices. This does not only contextualize the argument but given the unique capacity and power of the Singaporean state in shaping the spatial contours of its labour regime for economic development (Olds and Yeung, 2004; Perry et al., 1997; Wong, 1997), this section reinforces that the assembly of a transnational labour force is localized and also a multi-level process. This is followed by an examination of the two groups of workers used as comparative case studies who, while differentiated through their work, experience similar social and cultural filters that conditions their access to work.

Existing research indicates that migration brokerage is “nearly universal – and often transnational in nature – it is at the same time, highly local and patterns of operation are specific to local societies, particularly occupations or recruited populations” (Lindquist et al., 2012: 15; Biao (2007, 2012); Chee et al. (2012); Grieco (1996)). Further, it has also been pointed out how political-economy powerfully shapes recruitment processes. Forming the backdrop, or perhaps even as a key actor in these processes would be the neoliberal attempts at deregulating the labour market (Peck, 1996). Along with the commodification of labour have come the weakening of labour unions, the erosion of social protection in the labour market, withdrawal of welfare entitlements and the widening of inequalities (Peck, 1996). Indeed, McDowell et al. argued that the British legal system has been unwilling to legislate to control the triangular relationship between workers, employment agencies and employers, leaving workers in the dark about their rights and excluded from forms of labour protection (2008). Xiang has also illustrated how labour recruitment agencies are not a sign of incomplete centralization of Chinese state power but rather as a result of hypercentralization. In this sense, agents function as an integral part of a complex structure of governance rather than undermining state authority, market order and migrant rights (Xiang, 2012). Thus, labour market allocation processes themselves need to be questioned. I argue that recruitment processes are not simply the *result* of existing labour market policies but are *part and parcel* of the labour market complex to the extent that it can perform social regulation within the division of labour.

The social networks that form social capital becomes integral channels facilitating the recruitment process. Holiday, for instance, points out that Cambodian migrants to Malaysia usually access work through well-known and trusted members of their community (2012). This is in spite of the potential employee being duped at the point of recruitment through empty promises of a “good job” that comes with a high brokerage price tag. Indeed, Lindquist shows that the informal broker of Indonesian migrants also function as cultural brokers, where the process of moving workers from one place to another requires also localized knowledge to navigate bureaucracy (2012).

2. Class and recruitment

Aside from technical skill, potential employees’ dispositions, attitudes, social networks and access to wealth can become resources for access into particular social groups, not least of which, access to particular jobs. Bourdieu’s ideas of class show that differentiation is pervasive in spite of broad economic sameness by systematically theorizing the unequal distribution of power that is social and symbolic, rather than merely economic and tangible. Here, class is not restricted to a system of simply ownership of and/or control over the means of production but rather is reproduced by an intertwined system of cultural, social and economic capital.

Geographers, in particular feminist geographers, have argued that corporate decision makers often correlate technical skills with other social identities such as gender, nationality, race/ethnicity and language (Gibson-Graham, 1996; McDowell, 1997, 2008a,b; Wright, 2006; Schoenberger, 1997), thus encouraging both geographic relocation and feminization of labor. They highlight that performance of work is not independent of one’s performance as a gendered, sexualized and raced subject as the value of one’s work emerges through lenses that interpret the value of one’s other social identities. As McDowell argued, “class not as categorical positions but as active, ongoing and negotiable sets of practices that vary across time and space” and accepts that class relations must include social relations that are gendered (2008a,b: 21). In this sense, class difference does not simply lie at the root of economic exploitation and social marginalization within this form of capital accumulation and production. It is also about what sorts of challenges different people must overcome to access work that is perceived to better their lives. Because it is about social relations, class cannot solely be understood through the analysis of structural conditions either, although as I show these will powerfully shape and to some extent, coerce people towards certain economic lives. Class is also a form of subjectivity that is inhabited through other categories such as race, nationality and, as I highlight here, gender, are embedded within recruitment processes.

Much of the existing work on recruitment describes either low-waged migrants or, to a lesser extent highly-paid professional with little comparative analyses. Indeed, it has been documented that labour brokerage operates within and reproduces a space of polarization, between bottom-end, low-status, “warm bodies” and high status, highly-skilled workers for professional positions (McDowell et al., 2008: 751; see also Parker, 1994 and Osterman, 1999). At the higher end of the labour market, there are agencies and human resource departments of companies that operate across a wide spatial scale, connecting potential workers and vacancies in expanding and lacking sectors, engaging in activities such as going to both local and foreign universities to set up job fair booths. In the UK, for example, short term vacancies in high status law firms source for workers via professional recruitment agencies at an international scale (McDowell, 2008a,b). 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 (McDowell, 2008a,b). Useful as this dichotomy might be in conceptualizing inequality, I shift the focus away from this polarization by arguing that each group contends with their own constellations of class tensions and circuits of capital through the recruitment process in ways that regenerate gendered and classed precarities for all. Indeed, the new global working subject – regardless of whether they are lowly or highly paid – is increasingly complex and diverse in the ways they are brought into being. Labour recruitment practices are not independent from race, gender and class. Rather, these practices intersect with various modes of social

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