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# Migratory class-making in global Asian cities: the European mobile middle negotiating ambivalent privilege in Tokyo, Singapore, and Dubai

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the fraught status paradoxes and settlement impediments of European migrants in Asian cities like Tokyo, Singapore, and Dubai. Global European emigration is predominantly imagined as professional ‘expatriation’, framed as temporary if not steeped in linear career pathways of manifest privilege. The implied bifurcation between voluntary European *mobilities* and economic *migrations* from the Global South is complicated here by foregrounding the existential aspirations of middling European emigrants who are anxious about their future class position in Europe and therefore resettle along a wider trans-Asian economic corridor. While this European mobile middle retains global advantages in terms of transnational circulation and entry by virtue of their European citizenship capital, they face under-documented legal hurdles and social precarities in their quest for overseas permanence. We conceptualise this transcontinental process, marked by a complex set of mobility ambivalences over time, as ‘migratory class-making’, the distinctive aspirations of which elucidate that structural socioeconomic incentives are equally bound up with contemporary forms of European migration. Enmeshed in this global process of migratory class-making lays a European predicament that speaks of blighted existential hopes about middle-class stability imagined to be the ideal result of multi-year investments in class-making across Europe and Asia.

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EU mobile middle; Asian global cities; migratory class-making; status ambivalences; middle-class aspirations

## Introduction: leaving Europe, exiting stasis

In trying to explain her reasons for permanently leaving Belgium 10 years ago, Nora, an architect by training, would repeatedly stress the maxim that ‘We all have roots, but we’re not trees. If you don’t like it somewhere, just move’. The ease with which Nora framed the

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instance of migration betrayed, among others, that she had personally made such a ‘move’ in her early 20s, not long after graduating from university while single and childless. That said, Nora had lived up to her expression rather consistently, not only in the mid-2000s when she had left her native Brussels in search of a job in Dubai, but also by moving onward to Australia rather than back to Europe after a decade in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Nora had managed to build up a stellar career in the Emirates, gathering enough financial savings to buy a house in the city center of Melbourne, where she still lives together with her family of four, all of whom have become Australian citizens. Over time, Nora’s global itinerary altered according to her changing life priorities. With career credentials and income no longer a pressing issue after a decade in the Emirates, basic professional and economic mobility was achieved, after which she became more concerned instead with attaining *permanent* settlement rights overseas as well as a minimum guarantee of access to pension schemes. As Nora now strongly associated upward social mobility with transcontinental migration, she no longer sought to return to Europe. However, with no large-scale Permanent Resident program in place in the UAE (Lori 2019), nor any (Golden Visa) pathways to Emirati citizenship available to Nora specifically, the Emirates got reconfigured over time as a primary stepping stone within an expanding migration project rather than the endpoint she had first imagined it to be.

This article demonstrates how European nationals deploy out-migration to neoliberal financial centers (Harvey 2005) in Asia and the Middle East as a visceral strategy to either cement their (pending) upward class mobility after tertiary education – for those from a working-class, and often immigrant, background in Europe – or, for maintaining of a middle-class status – for those inheriting it from more established middle-class families. Hence, this sort of transcontinental migration of young and ‘middling’ Europeans (Baas 2017) is foregrounded here as an intimate strategy by which specific European cohorts pursue ‘ideal’ modes of social mobility or class maintenance (Bourdieu 1984), thus indicative of an agentic process of classed future-making that is transposed globally, and which we conceptualise here as ‘migratory class-making’. We describe these class-making practices as intimate because we seek to expand the analysis of class (reproduction) beyond economic variables of financial income (wages) or material assets (and wealth transfers), thus also including migrants’ deep anxieties around ‘existential movements’ (Hage 2005, 470), not least their overall concerns about future class viabilities, and the risks that may derive from leaving Europe in pursuit of a more favourable recognition of their symbolic capital in global Asian cities.

Our bottom-up focus on European out-migration as being a classed technique for aspired future-making lays bare the fact that Europe continues to be studied largely as an attractive haven for one-dimensional (racialised) immigration from the Global South (e.g. Nieswand 2014) rather than as an equally contentious space spurring (disillusioned) European emigration too. We thereby gauge not only the extent to which ‘the [global] position of Europe, as a place and as an idea [is] undergoing considerable relocation’ (Green 2013, 345), but also how newly emerging European mobility trends may now be mirroring alarmist discourses claiming that the ‘future is Asian’ (Khanna 2019). The massive developmental strides in both Singapore and Dubai over the last three decades demonstrate not only how new centers of global finance are emerging across Asia – even morphing into appealing settlement destinations for European middle-

class migrants – but also how established epistemic notions of what constitutes the ‘Global South’ may now be shifting.

We first discuss the emerging scholarship about class mobilities in transnational migration, followed by our empirical case materials about Tokyo, Singapore, and Dubai along three key thematic axes: (1) professional opportunities in alternative migration destinations beyond the West, (2) the under-documented ambivalences surrounding ‘expatriate’ status accrual in global Asia, and (3) the seemingly paradoxical condition of an existential lingering (in legal limbo) in what largely remain temporary residence regimes. We thereby exhibit that while European citizens retain considerable (neo-colonial) advantages in terms of global professional circulation and legalised residencies in general, the ‘illiberal’ citizenship regimes found along a wider (East, South, and West) Asian economic corridor do engender a series of profound setbacks over time, at least among a specific cohort of middling European migrants who seek to make these global Asian cities their *permanent* home. It is here that our analytical concept of ‘migratory class-making’ will shed practical light on the recently developed notion of ‘citizenship capital’ (Kalm 2020, 529), especially in rendering more legible, if not nuanced, the (neo-colonial) continuities in (racialised) Western status privilege overseas, as well as the transformative tensions specifically endowed by European citizenship in Asia.

### Reconsidering class in transnational migration

Contemporary Europe tends to be treated as a zone of permanent stability, if not a teleological endpoint for global mobilities. This paper, however, contends that Europe equally remains a staging ground for contentious departures. In 2020, the World Economic Forum estimated two billion Asians to be middle class, accompanied by a steep increase in the Middle East, too (Buchholz 2020). European middle classes by contrast have expanded much more slowly (Piketty 2017), and ‘native’ offspring of the more established middle class have seen viable patterns of class reproduction diminish because of the 2009 Eurozone ‘crisis’ and its ensuing neoliberal policy effects on society (De Genova and Tazzioli 2016). Consequently, large numbers of university-educated professionals migrated *within* the European Union in search of employment opportunities (Lafleur and Stanek 2017), whereas others left the Schengen zone to South America or Asia (Hof 2022).

Next to Tokyo and Hong Kong as global financial centers in Asia, continuous economic growth has spurred contending hubs, such as Singapore in Southeast Asia and Dubai at the Western fringe of the continent – both former British colonial dominions with the ambition ‘to become premier “smart cities” and cultural hubs on the global stage’ (Pagès-El Karoui and Yeoh 2020, 120). More so, with Singapore and Dubai now listed by the World Bank as ‘high income’ economies based on gross national income (GNI) per capita, ‘migration beyond the West’ (Kathiravelu 2022) is fast becoming a reality, not only for regional migrants from rural and politically volatile peripheries across continental Asia (Akinci 2023), but equally for *a whole range* of global labourers from across the class spectrum, *including* from Europe, also aspiring some of the class-based status yields that a burgeoning global Asia has on offer.

Overseas Europeans tend to be epistemically pre-configured as an international elite of ‘highly skilled’ workers (Farrer 2011), transient ‘globetrotters’ (Salazar 2018, 113), or

'lifestyle' migrants (Lundstrom 2014), who – unlike racialised 'immigrants' from the Global South – are imagined as driven primarily by individual and therefore more 'voluntary', if not serendipitous, mobility considerations. The 'expatriate' remains a household term to denote Western nationals abroad, usually differentiated from the allegedly permanent figure of the 'migrant' by means of their implied 'return' to a supposedly natural Western home, following their 'voluntary' professional circulation as high-end knowledge workers (Cranston 2017). Yet, when scrutinised more closely, overseas Europeans are characterised by ample intra-sample divergence (Bielweska 2018), both in terms of formal training as well as class background, including many mid-dling-skilled workers with (emerging) middle-class sensibilities, some of whom faced the prospect of downward social mobility or stagnation back home. Next to the continuities of European expatriates' (racialised) privileges in postcolonial settings (Alloul 2020; Lundstrom 2014), critical scholarship has also discussed how these migrants' class positions are increasingly challenged and their expatriate packages reduced (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Farrer 2011). Notably, such work discloses an under-documented class hierarchy *among* overseas Western expatriates (Fechter and Walsh 2012). The multi-sited data assembled below conjures that complexity by reporting on a more middling group of Europeans – neither intra-corporate expats nor lifestyle travellers – who envision more opportunities for maintaining, or (finally) cementing, a middle-class status in Asian financial centers than in Europe. In so doing, this paper demonstrates that middling Europeans, who have been socialised in similar academic milieus across Europe, seem to entertain bleaker outlooks on a potential return home than often portrayed (or admitted) in academic debates on Western out-migration.

This paper explores subjective experiences of class membership and class mobility in transnational migrations (Stock 2023) with the specific aim of mapping empirically the more existential aspects of class (reproduction) beyond its economic dimensions (Cederberg 2017). Our study of globally transposed class mobilities among EU citizens in Tokyo, Singapore, and Dubai reveals the complex (re)constitution and (re)negotiation of intimate class identifications over time, as well as the dynamic interplay between legal regimes, economic factors, and cultural aspirations in global migrations. Often downplayed in qualitative social science research, we redress the urgent analytical relevance of class analysis to migration studies (Van Hear 2014) and use Pierre Bourdieu's (1987, 6) conceptualisation of social class as comprising of 'sets of agents who, by virtue of the fact that they occupy similar positions in social space [...], are endowed with similar dispositions which prompt them to develop similar practices'. Consequently, the process of 'class mobility' can be understood as 'the evolution in time of the volume and composition' of various forms of capital 'according to their *trajectory* in social space' (Bourdieu, 1987, 4).

In approximating the notion of middle-class culture in contemporary Europe, Stearns and McBride (2008) conceptualise 'middle-classness' as consisting of a (multi-national) *plurality* of European middle classes, which, nevertheless, have lost some of their (national) distinctiveness based on *common* normative values, especially regarding investments in higher education, professional orientations, certain spending behaviours, and a (well-traveled) taste in lifestyle, which altogether serve as modes of cultural distinction indicative of a middle-class habitus. Hence, when focusing on the situated and lived migratory experiences of the European nationals under discussion, the category of

analysis of ‘middle class’ enables a co-induction of relational meaning from migrants’ seemingly individual professional endeavours, everyday behaviours, arrival narratives, and intimate aspirations as part and parcel of broader ‘class-making projects’ (Coe and Pauli 2020) for future-making in Asia.

Cross-border variations in people’s class position, gradually unfolding *throughout* their resettlement process in the form of a ‘traveling habitus’ (Alloul 2021), can reveal how migrants move through geographical places and potentially in between class locations too. This interpretive gaze, grounded on a ‘capital-mobility framework’ (Tan, Li, and Tsuda 2022), allows us to gauge the extent to which transnational class mobilities take place, forcing some agents downward after migration, others to stagnate or maintain their former class positions, while allowing yet others to gravitate upwards socially. Indeed, it is precisely by interrogating the aspired ‘interconversions’ of Bourdieusian (1986) ‘forms of capital’ of those moving between dissimilar national fields (Carruthers 2002, 428) that we may arrive at a novel understanding of the class implications that lay enmeshed in the spatial conversion work of capital forms in European migration to global Asian cities.

We adopt Michiel Baas’s (2017) concept of the ‘mobile middle’ to illustrate the grounds by which European migrants-turned-global have come to perceive Europe as ‘static’ when comparing it to an imagined future in other global hubs. In Baas’s (2017, 50) case study on skilled Indian migrants in Singapore, the mobile middle, more than being defined by ‘education/skills and associated income [only] are an innately mobile group that actively engages with the constraints and opportunities inherent to their position’. Therefore, adopting the prism of the mobile middle may shed further light on uncertain ‘life circumstances more generally’ rather than explicitly precarious employment conditions in educated migrants’ early career only (Dewey and Fozdar 2023, 2), especially for those anxious of downwards class mobility in relatively affluent yet stagnating market economies (Kawashima 2021; Tseng 2022). Clearly, fraught economic and sociocultural status aspirations are not solely the predicament of (racialised) immigrants from the Global South attempting to settle in Europe (Nieswand 2014) but equally bound up with European migrations.

This prism of the ‘mobile middle’ also allows us to better capture the ongoing complexification of ambivalent status formation among ‘Western’ labour migrants in non-Western migration regimes (Yang 2022). Here we shall demonstrate that the potential professional benefits of European ‘racial capital’ (Alloul 2020, 10–11) or ‘passive whiteness’ (Hof 2022, 142) remain very much in flux in a fast-transforming inter-Asian region. In the long-term they cannot entirely resolve the sociocultural status anxieties that mid-dling Europeans transpose onto Asia, precisely because of the legal impediments in restrictive Asian citizenship regimes. We theorise such migration processes, marked by a series of global mobility ambivalences over time, as agentive efforts at classed future-making, or ‘migratory class-making’.

## Methodology and data

This article relies on qualitative data from two research projects based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations of EU citizens in Tokyo, Singapore, and Dubai. One project (Hof) involved interviews and repeated follow-ups with 70 European participants in Tokyo and Singapore between 2014 and 2021, thus assembling a substantial

longitudinal migration perspective, while the other project (Alloul) featured 80 interviews of 70 participants, including 10 focused follow-up interviews with key interlocutors between 2015 and 2021. These core data were supplemented by a new research project on migrant entrepreneurs in Singapore and Tokyo, for which 12 European participants were selected out of the larger multi-ethnic/multinational sample. The geographical and gender breakdown of the overall multi-sited interview sample is as follows: 39 (21 men/18 women) in Tokyo; 43 in Singapore (22 men/21 women); and 70 in Dubai (29 men/41 women); all in their mid-20s to mid-30s at the time of the first interview, the majority of who were unmarried when migrating to Asia.

Furthermore, the two authors' long-term field immersion in Japan (since 2014) and repeated field trips to Singapore and the UAE since 2015 involved modes of participant observation such as co-housing with interlocutors, a regular presence at migrants' leisure activities and networking events, and yearly open-ended questionnaires with in-depth follow-up questions to establish *longitudinal* discernments from key interlocutors in the UAE, all of which provided profound ethnographic insights into dominant concerns and patterned rationales across participant clusters. Through a core focus on the migration experience of participants, the micro-sociological research questions formed an entry point into life histories and their relationship with subjective perceptions of class mobilities throughout time and space. It is precisely by such an embedded and sustained engagement with interlocutors over the years – complementing the analysis of the formalised interviews – that allowed for a descriptive ethnography about intimate anxieties in altering migratory strategies to come about over time, resulting ultimately in our theorisation of the concept of migratory class-making.

All but a handful of participants held university degrees, working in such fields as marketing, engineering, IT, finance, tourism, architecture, real estate, and corporate law. Sample inclusion criteria were citizenship from an EU member state or Schengen state; the major part of their upbringing and schooling spent in European educational institutions; migrated to Asian cities independently with little or no professional experience and working as employees on more localised contracts or as self-employed consultants; that they were themselves either working in Tokyo, Singapore, or Dubai when meeting them, had returned (temporarily) to Europe after doing so, or were about to depart (again). Participants were identified through our academic, collegial, and friendship networks, online job-hunting platforms, hobby circles, followed by snowball sampling. We obtained oral or written informed consent from the interviewees, after having explained the research objectives. All names in this paper are pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in English, French, German, Dutch, and Arabic. We tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed the interviews first with open codes and then higher-level codes.

Participants self-identified as 'middle class' or 'professionals' and were all bent on migrating as 'skilled migrants' which would allow them to achieve upward mobility (in the case of those from working class, often immigrant, backgrounds) or to maintain their inherited middle-class positioning precisely by going abroad. While their social positioning in their home countries varied slightly in terms of the larger household class characteristics, they all had obtained higher education in Europe and had thereby attained a middle-class habitus (formative educational socialisation), values, and judgments of taste, which shaped their aspirations to exercise professional migration to

booming Asia in the first place. Given the absence of in-depth studies on the fraught status complexities of (aspiring) middling Europeans going overseas our focus on the general characteristics and aspirations that are shared among the participants provides qualitative insights of theoretical relevance.

## The European mobile middle in global Asia

### *Professional opportunities in alternative migration destinations*

Konstantinos is Greek and uttered the following words during our third interview in Tokyo in 2020, after having lived in the Japanese capital city for over ten years: ‘Japan is still a sea of opportunities. The premium is getting smaller, but it is still there for someone who speaks English and Japanese’. Konstantinos’ description of the Japanese – or rather, Tokyo’s – labor market as a ‘sea of opportunities’ for multilingual foreigners is an apt statement about the array of jobs available for internationally trained graduates at a time when the Japanese market strives to open itself up to the world.

Konstantinos moved to Tokyo out of an interest in Japanese culture and due to the constrained career opportunities in Greece around the 2010s. After a master’s degree in economics at a Tokyo university, his high proficiency in English and Japanese enabled him to pursue a career in foreign financial companies, an educationally channelled migratory trajectory that an increasing number of the European mobile middle have pursued in Japan (Hof 2022). Konstantinos’ career path differs from expat-like banking careers, though. He started with a modest salary and the same job conditions as Japanese hires, and thus without the prospect of moving internally to the company’s European headquarters. The reason he stayed in Japan is shared by other European migrants. What they ‘get’, despite everyday frustrations about fighting for recognition as a foreigner in the Japanese labour market (Hof and Tseng 2021), remains considerably more than compared to an imagined return home, where their multilingual skills are less out of the ordinary and therefore less valued. Over the years, Konstantinos slowly moved up the career ladder, which enabled him to take out a loan for a house on the outskirts of Tokyo and thus enjoy something akin to a typical Japanese middle-class lifestyle.

In Singapore and Dubai too, most European interlocutors spoke about a dynamic sense of professional opportunity in contrast to their home countries in Europe. Farida grew up in Brussels and moved to Dubai for three years (2006–2009), before migrating onward to Australia for additional studies – paid for by the savings she accumulated in the UAE. She then moved onward again to New Zealand, where she continues to live to this day. I first met Farida in Brussels in 2015 and have ever since kept in touch. Her reflections during a follow-up interview in 2019 still aptly capture the earlier thrill that Dubai had symbolised in her mid-twenties:

After moving to Dubai, I remember thinking ‘People don’t even know about it. My friends really need to know that they *can actually move here and have a totally different life*; already just by moving here, making some money, and feeling valued in the marketplace’. I don’t think it’s about the money itself, it’s about the fact that when you go to Dubai [...] you suddenly feel valued, which gives you this feeling that if you work on something, you can achieve it. [...] I think it was worth the experience just for that, to gain self-confidence [...] learning that, with hard work, you can actually build something.



Farida's emphasis on the words 'can actually move' refers to her sudden realisation that going global as an EU citizen comes with certain privileges that facilitate professional mobility, not least the right of entry to the UAE on a 3-month tourist visa – renewable indefinitely – and which allows for on-site job hunting, a strategy most of our interlocutors across the three cities had engaged in. This, in turn, demonstrates not only the practical utility of European citizenship globally, but also its amplifying potential concerning social and economic forms of capital. Indeed, Farida's favourable 'European' encounter with specific 'migration regimes' around the world (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) renders visible a hidden value form recently conceptualised as 'citizenship capital' (Kalm 2020, 529), a form of capital, which becomes legible within 'a transnational system of inequalities, which stratifies individuals along the dimension of citizenship, and of which the audience is expected to be on some level aware'. Importantly, some agents, especially those hailing from lower socio-economic strata in the West, only become aware of the practical significance and economic implications of their formal citizenship when they themselves engage in the embodied process of global migration, carrying the symbolic national token (passport) of their state along with them. This may indeed explain the degree of awe and empowerment in Farida's narrative ('totally different life', 'can actually build something').

Moreover, it is precisely this sort of middle-class affect, permeated not only by neoliberal tropes about the self-help merits of labouring 'hard' (Bourdieu 2005, 10–11), but equally by an emancipatory sense of broader sociocultural class progression ('feeling valued in the marketplace'). Farida is explicit in saying that it is not just 'about the money itself', but equally the existential feeling of 'going somewhere' ('achieve it', 'build something') in terms of intimate hopes and future-making. The latter implies a juxtaposition to an almost tangible, if not lethargic, stagnation. This diverging sense of future-making, before and after migration, was equally emphasised by Nora (see introduction). When meeting her in Brussels in 2015 (on a short family visit from the UAE), Nora – in her early thirties then – disclosed to me that she was making threefold the net wage in the UAE than she would in Belgium, now working as a senior manager at a major architectural firm servicing the urban boom of a sprawling financial center like Dubai. She thus insisted of being

very happy I made the choice [to leave Europe]. I couldn't have known beforehand, but emigration definitely paid off. My life really got upgraded; my CV got upgraded. [...] For my age, I hold huge responsibilities and accountabilities at work. I would not have similar professional opportunities in Belgium before the age of fifty!

Equating a quality of life (and class positionality) to a 'CV upgrade' in her narrative demonstrates the extent to which middle-classes self-identify (status crafting) with their vocation as 'skilled professionals' (architect). She emphasises repeatedly ('for my age') how fast career progression went in Dubai while juxtaposing this sense of biographical time to an ossified norm in Europe (not 'before the age of fifty'), which signals how migration was a way out of the disciplinary process of 'social aging', that is, the dialectic 'throughout a lifetime between dispositions [training] and [available] positions, aspirations and achievements' (Bourdieu 1984, 105); which meant that staying put would have meant a timely self-disciplining of professional aspirations. For Nora, career and class progression seem to have accelerated significantly through migration to Asia.

In broadly comparing the European narratives of middling professionals across Asian field sites, this paper also demonstrates that sociocultural anxieties about one's class location are not solely the trepidation of European professionals with a 'minority' or 'second-generation' immigrant background. Rather, a whole generation of tertiary-educated youths on the continent struggled to enter the labour market in the aftermath of the 2009 global financial crisis, shrinking the available 'opportunities structures' (Crul, Keskiner, and Lelie 2017, 211) not only for the upwardly mobile fractions (hailing from more working-class households), but equally for some of the more established middle-class youths seeking to sustain their position in the social hierarchy amidst a protracted stagnation that renders more acute the specter of potential downward mobility. Indeed, the feeling of being 'stuck' in a certain geographical place and social space (Hage 2005, 470) is equally, if not more explicit in the narratives of those from more established middle-class households in Europe. Enrico, an Italian civil engineer, graduated in 2011, right after the economic crisis and thus at a time of shrinking job opportunities in Europe. He still recalled vividly what seemed the 'worst period that you could graduate. I didn't get much in Italy. I sent my CV in Europe to pretty much anywhere, the UK, France, whatever'. In Asia, by contrast, Enrico first landed a job in Kuala Lumpur, which later turned into a position in the Singaporean headquarters of the same firm. However, his move was not merely driven by the bare need of finding a job but also by his undergraduate experience of studying abroad in France:

[I] got a couple of [job] offers but nothing really exciting. So, I could have stayed in my comfort zone, Italy or France, the UK pretty much is the same thing. But I wasn't really happy with that, so I looked beyond, sending CVs to Asia, Australia et cetera. I had an interview with my current company. [...] The founder of the firm found my profile interesting.

The Iranian founder of the company held a doctorate from London, and another degree from Enrico's alma mater in Italy, the country's top university in his field. Enrico's institutionalised cultural capital – facilitated by a degree from his well-known university, and the company founder's acquaintance with the same professional and class circles in Europe – rendered him an interesting candidate for the job and was eventually decisive for his hire. Besides European migrants' status accrual in their Asian destination cities, the presented cases demonstrate the class-centric meaning attached to stepwise migration. Enrico's notion of leaving his 'comfort zone' in pursuit of professional growth somewhat mirrors Farida's narrative, where migration symbolises an auto-didactic 'learning' process by which a critical degree of 'self-confidence' was accrued. What gradually unfolded in both cases was a mode of 'being-in-the-world' characterised by a decreasing sense of control and stability after graduation, that is, deeply held forms of affect that traditionally feature in middle-class formation processes, marked by status anxieties about the future. Indeed, 'casual' self-confidence is usually a predisposed trait most visible among the upper class, especially among established bourgeois families which tend to hand it 'down to their offspring as if it were an heirloom' (Bourdieu 1984, 59). Hence, it is no coincidence that both interlocutors sought to move into the comfort of gradually embodying such behavioural traits, not least by professionally exposing themselves globally.

Dimensions of learning and self-development thus also become a motive to stay put rather than return to Europe, which is often the natural endpoint for corporate

expatriates (Cranston 2017). Samir, a 32-year-old French-Algerian male working in marketing when I interviewed him in mid-2016, was explicit in sharing how, over time, he had started envisioning Dubai as a long-term home precisely because its ‘cosmopolitan mix’ perfectly suited to his profile:

I want to stay here long-term, even more than the 3–5-year expat average. [...] Dubai is where I feel best. It really fits me perfectly: some of my roots are Arab [...] and in France, I got great education; learned everything about dining etiquette and such. And, by working in London prior to Dubai, I picked up some British features relevant for the Anglo-Saxon business culture here, so it all fits together well.

Samir lists here some of the ‘cultural competences’ in his embodied ‘asset structure’ (Bourdieu 1984, 457), which have revealed themselves as key to his professional career-building in Dubai as well as in the formation of a beneficial social status in the Emirates, all of which make him feel extraordinarily at ease in Gulf modernity. His *transnational* effort at mobilising his professional ‘skills’ was co-facilitated by the fact that, in the UAE, he can bank on considerable ‘French’ cultural and scientific-industrial prestige: today, a French educational infrastructure is fast emerging in the Gulf Arab states (e.g. Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi), alongside many British and US-American institutions (e.g. Dubai Harvard Foundation for Medical Research). Most interlocutors in Dubai would echo Samir’s global sentiment of ‘feeling really at ease’ in migrant Dubai. Paradoxically, however, the dynamic life of professional *migrancy* which these Europeans celebrate – privileged mobile nomadism increasingly associated with Western middle-class workers in the new (digital) economy – contrasts with a latent but practical desire to become sedentary again (e.g. invested in rites of career stability, and hinging towards property ownership and permanent settlement), an aspiration that remains hard to fulfil in Asian restrictive citizenship regimes. While the inability to settle pushes some out and onwards again, others linger on in the condition of being ‘permanently temporary’ (Lori 2019). In both instances, however, the mobile middle nevertheless clearly engages in actualising their ‘ideal’ (*petit bourgeois*) class location (Bourdieu 1984, 117–118), by transposing the deeply-held biographical longings thereof even during their transcontinental migration project, a mobility process that we construe as ‘migratory class-making’.

### *The ambivalence of expatriate status accrual in global Asia*

It was Mustapha, a 29-year-old Belgian citizen with an MA degree in International Economics from the prestigious SciencesPo in Paris, who first introduced me to local Emirati perceptions about ‘European expats’ in Dubai. When interviewing him in 2015 he had lived in Dubai for four years and shared his impressions about ‘expatriate’ rapport with locals in the UAE:

In fact, most of the Emiratis I met didn’t consider themselves as wealthy; they often don’t realize it. [...] Emiratis usually think that *all Europeans* are rich. Some can’t imagine that there is poverty in Europe. So that’s why, when you say that you’re from Europe, it usually has a positive connotation in terms of status.

Up until 1971, the UAE was a British colonial dominion, as was Singapore until 1958 and Japan, while never colonised, was occupied by US military forces until 1952. The neo-

colonial ‘inheritance status’ (Cohen 1977, 19–20) of the ‘European expat’, a form of ‘racial capital’ (Alloul 2020, 11–12) with which Mustapha would relatively easily get associated in the Emirati marketplace given his Belgian passport, did open the way for him towards harnessing over time a more stable middle-class status overseas. Indeed, the colonial-like metaphor (‘all Europeans are rich’) that Mustapha deployed in his above narrative conjures, among others, the sustainment of colonial-like hierarchies in Dubai in relation to European ‘citizenship capital’ (Kalm 2020). Today, Dubai’s population is made up of a staggering 92 percent ratio of foreign residents to Emirati nationals (Dubai Statistics Center 2022), and the emirate is trying to position itself, almost overnight, as a global financial hub in West Asia, and as an economic leader in the wider Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, and East Africa region. In this configuration, the historical hierarchies of the recent British colonial past in the UAE (Jamal 2015) still matter in shaping the ability of a diverse set of EU nationals to accrue overseas a degree of ‘passive whiteness’ (Hof 2022, 142), an economically beneficial (legacy) status facilitating their deeply held efforts at classed future-making.

Dubai’s aggressive state-led development agenda has been markedly influenced by Asian ‘tiger’ examples, not least Singapore (Pagès-El Karoui and Yeoh 2020). Mustapha’s narrative about Dubai as a dynamic place to rapidly build a middle-class career thus mirrors state-led development discourses in Singapore, a city which likewise evokes feelings about career opportunities and a sense of ‘moving forward’ among our European interviewees. As propellers for careers and social self-worth, in all three cities, the European nationals could observe that after having started as young middling migrants in Asia their salaries allowed them to build a life on par with, or even better off than, their friends in Europe. Michal, a Polish man in his thirties, who, disillusioned by the meager job opportunities in Poland and most of his friends leaving, first moved to Ireland himself right after graduation from university in 2007. Michal worked his way up in the same company for 10 years, after which he was offered a position on a local contract in a Singaporean subsidiary. Michal and his Polish girlfriend decided that ‘the quality of life [seemed] different and better, a new and attractive territory to check out.’

When meeting Michal in 2017, after five years in Singapore and including a six-month stint in Tokyo, the couple’s friends and professional networks were now all clustered in Singapore. The assumed prospect of a downgrade in quality of life should they return to Poland was what kept them in place for now, which again highlights how the European mobile middle accrues much more through their kinetic move than professional or monetary opportunities only. As Michal put it,

Today, we would be coming back with different positions. But what puts us off is that we remember something we don’t want to move to: that bureaucracy, that tough job market, we don’t want that. I designed a life so that I can live more flexible.

For Michal as for others, the job market was one driver to migrate. Yet, having established middle-class lives in the cosmopolitan settings of their current cities of residence – far from the rigid conventions they now associated with their home countries (‘more flexible life’), not even to speak of their lack of networks in Europe – a potential return became unattractive. Hence, many of our interlocutors preferred to stay put in what they saw was still a ‘cosmopolitan’ setting that, while not granting them legal inclusion, remained attuned to their newly found and internalised middle-class ‘dispositions’

(Bourdieu 1986, 47), a set of cultural sensibilities they greatly valued, even to the extent of it now co-determining their migratory calculus and middling idea(l)s about future-making.

*Cultural* instances of cosmopolitan self-development turned out to be of intrinsic importance for the European mobile middle and differentiated them from high-end intra-corporate expatriates, who tend to move inside company structures for an average of 3–5 years. Hence, the mobile middle appears to be on-the-move partly because they do not have a clear geographical endpoint to their migratory journeys, in contrast to intra-corporate expatriates. Their more modest salaries and the lack of additional expat benefits exclude them from the expensive clubs and circles, which form the basis of socialisation for many Western intra-corporate expatriates (Cranston 2017). Hence, their ‘destination’ is at once mental and cultural (rather than strictly, geographical, economical, or financial only), insofar as it is girded upon relational dispositions – in this case, classed aspirations – given that they are after an ‘ideal’ class position and lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984, 244), deemed attainable over time by investing themselves in Asian global cities. In short, they appear engaged in visceral self-making projects across transnational space, that is, ‘migratory class-making’.

The European migrants *have to* navigate diversity and socialise in wider (multiethnic, multinational) circles if they want to establish themselves professionally and socially in Asia. This reveals itself in Enrico’s account (introduced earlier), who started on a tight budget with his first job as a civil engineer and the only non-Asian foreigner in the Kuala Lumpur entity of his Singaporean firm, echoed by the experience of many interlocutors in Tokyo, including Konstantinos (see above).

The salary was pretty low, for a local lunch it was fine but of course no good salad or pasta. [It] was also probably good in the sense that it forced me to adapt. Rather than having another Westerner and creating your own group.

Offered a transfer to the London entity of the company 15 months later Enrico was conflicted. ‘I had a circle of friends, life was great, I was traveling a lot, it was good in KL’. Anticipating professional opportunities in London Enrico eventually accepted the offer but asked for a return to the Singaporean headquarters one year later despite being offered a permanent position in London. He emphatically narrated his calculus both in a professional sense and in terms of lifestyle aspirations:

I was looking forward to returning and having what Asia offered. [...] [Asia] was attractive, cool, [for] civil engineering and designing buildings et cetera. You cannot find any of that in Europe. I [...] could have done residential four-story buildings in Milan. But this [Singaporean] company with lots of high rises, it was exciting.

Enrico’s account foregrounds the non-monetary ‘perks’ that both work and life in any of the three cities held in store for these young European adults and resembles others’ narratives of Tokyo and Dubai. Not even London, as the financial and business center of Europe, nor the existential security coming with a permanent position could hold Enrico in Europe. The mobile middle still seems drawn to Asian global cities to attain the ‘ideal’ professional dynamism and class lifestyles they are after, both for the scope of the job rewards they find in Asia but even more so for the expat-like status this move confers (Fechter and Walsh 2012). While they are not ‘expatriates’ in the practical

sense of an intra-corporate posting overseas, the Europeans in these three Asian business hubs celebrate a career dynamism and ‘cosmopolitan’ lifestyle they deem out of reach in Europe.

### *Lingering in limbo: leaving, returning, staying on*

Our long-term immersion in the three field sites revealed migrants’ medium-term desires for legal stability and formal inclusion. While some long-term participants in the Emirates, like Nora (see introduction, now in Melbourne holding Australian citizenship) or Farida (see above, now in New Zealand as a Permanent Resident) opted over time to move onward to a third destination further afield in Australasia, others would linger on in Dubai, Singapore, and Tokyo. Nevertheless, they share with those who have migrated onwards a deeply held, albeit sometimes discreet, aversion to the idea of returning to Europe, a site where they fear that their lack of local professional networks, or ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu 1986, 51), would again imply class stagnation or downward mobility. This conundrum makes people either perpetuate their overseas settlement in Asia or move onward again.

Others stay put nevertheless in their ‘global city’ (Sassen 2001) over time because of its ‘cosmopolitan’ rank that travels in the cultural imagination of the broader public, and which in turn condones them, by proxy, with an elevating status marker of distinction, not only globally when they travel (back home to European localities during family visits), but also when they circulate regionally for work. This class-based process of status accrual in reference to the symbolic prestige of one’s global place of residence thus renders it more legible why European migrants in general, and the (status pursuing) mobile middle in particular, start viscerally self-identifying with (the cosmopolitan esteem of) their Asian global cities over time, demonstrating the classed effects of ‘social gravity’ (Bourdieu, as cited in Hage 2011, 81, 85, 87) and its everyday cultural reproduction.

For instance, a French industrial engineer fed up with the high cost of living in Dubai *tried* to move to Saudi Arabia after a few years. Yet he quickly moved back to the UAE learning that ‘Dubai’ had become a veritable brand name in the region, indeed a spatial ‘seal’ of symbolic modernity at the forefront of a capitalist development process fast transforming the Gulf region:

When I was in Saudi again for work last week, I remember saying ‘Listen, I will get some extra technicians from Dubai to fix this’. Suddenly, things change with my local clients. For them, Dubai is associated with excellence. It’s the best in the region. When they know that I’m visiting them from headquarters in Dubai, I get received differently, with more respect. ‘He came from Dubai!’ then implies that things will be taken care of from that moment onward. ‘Dubai’ is a sign of relief; a sign of quality.

The distinction of living in a key ‘metropole’ of the Arabian Peninsula, however, also comes with a downside, namely an ever-present notion of transience. The same is true for Singapore, known as *the* professional-yet-transient place to be among migrants. While those who are granted a ‘skilled’ visa in Singapore can technically obtain permanent residence (PR) or citizenship, the narrative of transience produces the image of Singapore as a hub of *temporary* residence, churning foreign professionals on their global or regional trajectories up the career ladder (Yang 2022). That said, with migrants’ networks

back home weakening over the years, or a return professionally undesirable, many Europeans stayed on and hoped to settle. However, despite their labour market inclusion and at least partial inclusion into newfound social networks, the mobile middle lacks a clear-cut outlook for a long-term stay. While a secure permanent legal status seems almost out of reach in Dubai, and more likely to be attainable in Tokyo, several interlocutors in Singapore hoped to secure PR to remedy the more manifest insecurities and nuisances that come with short-term work visas.

Richard lived in Singapore for twelve years, during which he obtained an MBA from a Singaporean university to solidify his professional credentials in Asia. He pursued this strategy of building up more regional cultural capital because he found Singapore to be ‘peaceful, safe, and vibrant’ for business. After several jobs in domestic and foreign IT companies followed by venturing his own business, Richard finally applied for PR. However, he was rejected, as was his wife, who tried on their behalf after his denial. During our fourth conversation in Singapore in 2022, he confided:

So [permanent] integration of the people is absolutely not an objective. [...] At the time [of our application for PR] I had been in Singapore for a very long time. Still, I was not that surprised [...]. In fact, it was just a confirmation that you’re a long-term visitor or guest here. It’s not that I was badly treated, I’m not complaining. I mean, my career is better here than it would have been in France, to be honest. But the key word is transaction, it’s just a transaction [for them].

For migrants like Richard, there is a disjuncture between what they consider to be their contribution to their host cities – the work they provide, the taxes they pay, as well as their participation in communal activities – and the denial they experience when pursuing a more permanent resident status. Richard’s case exemplifies how migration to global Asian cities may pay off in the short-to-mid-term but also that the inability to secure a permanent residence status forecloses the imaginary of a contingent future, not least of fostering an entrenched belonging that would allow them to sustain the more tangible (yet evanescent) privileges they worked hard to attain. Richard and his wife have grappled with their application for PR being rejected twice and have therefore sought to distance themselves emotionally from the idea of staying, contemplating alternatives. This, in turn, demonstrates the limits of European ‘citizenship capital’ in an increasingly multi-polar capitalist world system, characterised by a rising conglomerate of Asian economies no longer subservient entirely to European domination, not even in the neo-colonial sense. Hence, for all the talk of ‘eternal’ Western privilege overseas, (expatriate) status-making remains co-dependent on (inherently dynamic) negotiation on the ground, contingent always on larger geopolitical trends and shifts, as well as profound and competing sociocultural transformations, particularly so in the case of a mobile middle that is otherwise conflated with the quick-fix ideological category of the professional (intra-corporate) ‘expatriate’.

That said, this ‘transactional’ relationship with the Singaporean state, even if forced upon migrants like Richard, still yields as a baseline for their migratory status-making: they were able to save up, and now enjoy a high standard of living and dynamic career opportunities. Their vision of the future, however, remains vague, and attempts to plan long-term are necessarily full of existential insecurities and fraught ambivalence. While Dubai and Singapore present legal barriers to the Europeans who want to stay,

Tokyo awaits with other challenges. Despite years of intensive study of the Japanese language, many are constrained by the need to master Japanese at a very high level. Moreover, interlocutors' intimate narratives speak of a desire to belong to a place and community of which the local citizens' common questions readily remain 'When do you plan to go home?', or 'How long will you stay?', thereby clearly signalling to them (in racialising terms) that Europeans are still considered 'short-term guests' (Debnár 2016).

The attempt to realise the profoundly middle-class dream of career progression, a culture- and leisure-oriented lifestyle, maybe a house and someday children often proves more difficult if not nearly impossible for Europeans within relatively restrictive Asian migration and citizenship regimes. Over time, quite a few of the mobile middle move on, mostly to yet other global cities, including Hong Kong, London, New York, or hubs in Australasia. Others, like Richard, linger on in a state of limbo, defying the odds, neither willing to give up on the baseline status achieved in Asia nor able to secure PR. The fact that only very few return permanently to their European country of origin underlines the precarious effects of their migratory class-making in Asia: the existential fear of losing their real and perceived mobility yields should they reverse their transcontinental class itinerary. While most of European migration beyond the West has been labelled as so-called 'expatriation' in a quick-fix ideological categorisation, we discern differentiation insofar that a specific middling group is tactically adopting the self-gratifying symbolism of such (Western) discourses to strategically accrue a more stable or privileged social status overseas. On the ground, this process of discursive status appropriation is marked by a profound *ambivalence*, however, as many do not entirely succeed in establishing secure permanence in the long term, thus disclosing the aspirational process we discern as 'migratory class-making'.

It is also here that we note a deep ambivalence about ongoing mobility, which underlines migrants' longing to ground themselves, an empirical fact all-too-often ignored in accounts about European migrants abroad, harbouring a theoretical proposition concerning the temporal dimension of European privilege in a changing world, which altogether adds weight to the processual nature of migratory class-making. Protracted lingering on in a city that denies legal inclusion but offers economic inclusion, accentuates the precariousness of the European mobile middle in Asia despite a degree of symbolic status accrual in the local privilege hierarchy overseas. The temporary nature of their stay makes migrants feel that they are losing direction, again, as they did back in Europe, or in other words that they become 'stuck' again (Hage 2005). This foregrounds the parallels to other middling migrants in the Asia-Pacific whose subjectivity as mobile agents is compounded by their practical inability to imagine a future in their current destinations (Robertson 2014) and – despite the social (i.e. classed) gravitation to do so – leaving them in a state of 'ontological insecurity' (Dewey and Fozdar 2023, 12), rendering even more complex (on the ground) the yields of their transcontinental efforts at 'migratory class-making'.

## **Migratory class-making among the European mobile middle in global Asia**

This paper expands migration studies debates about social class, and, by delving into the drivers, pathways, and variegated effects of transcontinental migration, argues for a more



intersectional conceptualisation of the interplay between migration and class. In so doing, it has developed the notion of ‘migratory class-making’, that is, the agentic transposition of mobility aspirations beyond the national state through a process of transnational migration, in this case with specific regard to middling EU citizens in global Asian cities. The concept of migratory class-making encompasses a mobility technique clearly applied by middling European cohorts in pursuit of ‘ideal’ lifestyles across a wider Asian economic corridor. The European professionals featured in this paper, analyzed as a ‘mobile middle’ (Baas 2017), all departed out of an innate belief that alternative destinations outside of Europe, like Tokyo, Singapore, and Dubai, would yield more satisfactory middle-class lives, no longer deemed easily on offer in a perceived European context of shrinking opportunity structures and institutional, economic, and social crises. We have discussed how these young European professionals sense a profound existential immobility at home, and act-by-moving across space to climb up, or to secure their position on, the socioeconomic ladder in pursuit of a more stable middle-class status.

By demonstrating that (aspiring) European middle classes equally engage in socioeconomically fraught emigrations around the world, we highlight that Europe features not solely as a one-dimensional endpoint for (coloured) working-class migrations from the Global South. Instead, our paper foregrounds how transcontinental migration constitutes an intimate strategy in European social reproduction strategies too. This agentic mobility process of classed future-making, coined here as ‘migratory class-making’, is made easier (and thus less visible) for middling Europeans precisely by resorting to their ‘citizenship capital’ (Kalm 2020), which facilitates and smoothes their circulation and resettlement globally. Hence, they are more able to turn to highly classed and raced pathways in satisfying their ‘cosmopolitan’ longings for self-realisation. Yet, despite their favourable (neo-colonial) positioning in uneven migration and mobility regimes globally, many middling European professionals remained hard-pressed in their everyday efforts at negotiating their position in the local hierarchy over time, unable in most cases to overcome the structural limbo of their temporal (legal) residency by means of (sociocultural) acts of (racialised) distinction. Ultimately, their white-collar labour (and residence) remains expendable too, thwarting their desire for permanence in global Asia.

We demonstrate how the European mobile middle diverges from the more linear career pathways usually associated with Western ‘expats’ in Asian cities. First, their *self-initiated* migrations outside of intra-corporate career channels result more often in the cultivation of a strong sense of belonging to their destination cities, to the extent of envisioning a long-term future. Second, while their quest for overseas permanence distinguishes them, their settlement efforts are largely thwarted by legal hurdles and social precarities that signal the contextual limits of their citizenship capital (as legal privilege) in Asian migration and citizenship regimes.

The European cohort under discussion inevitably blur supposedly clear-cut status positionings along the so-called North–South divide. Indeed, the normative connotations of who is a ‘migrant’ and of what constitutes the category of Global South are shifting, rendering more visible that Europeans equally engage in out-migrations necessitated by existential proclivities towards desired self-actualisation. These attempts at migratory class-making in Tokyo, Singapore, and Dubai showcase not only the global emergence of newly imagined overseas zones for an ‘ideal’ future-making among European citizens aspiring to cement or maintain a middle-class lifestyle, but equally signal the under-

reported condition that some European ‘expats’ struggle in negotiating this practical outcome in the long run despite their symbolic ‘racial capital’ (Alloul 2020) or ‘passive whiteness’ (Hof 2022). Clearly, the post-colonial assertiveness of restrictive Asian citizenship regimes has also produced an ambivalent stuckness-despite-privilege that sits uncomfortable not only with those experiencing it on the ground, but equally for the field of migration studies that still grapples with a profound epistemic Eurocentrism.

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