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JUNJIA YE

Labour recruitment practices and its  
class implications: comparing workers in  
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MPI zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften  
MPI for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen  
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, 37073 Göttingen, Germany  
Tel.: +49 (551) 4956 - 0  
Fax: +49 (551) 4956 - 170

[www.mmg.mpg.de](http://www.mmg.mpg.de)

[info@mmg.mpg.de](mailto:info@mmg.mpg.de)

## 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 also by their social and cultural capital as well. Through the analyses of the mesogeography of labour assembly, recruitment methods become crucial channels to the realms of economic production and social reproduction, which 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.

## Author

JUNJIA YE is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Urban Geography with The Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic as part of the GLOBALDIVER-CITIES project. She is also a Visiting Research Fellow at the Asia Research Institute at NUS. She received my PhD in Geography at The University Of British Columbia in 2011 with her dissertation entitled *Class in the Global Labour Force: The Case of Singapore's Division of Labour*. Her research addresses themes of social inequalities and exclusion as well as everyday encounters and co-existence within a context of transnational urban processes.



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## 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<sup>1</sup>. 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 examining 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 (eg, 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

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<sup>1</sup> Population.sg website: <http://population.sg/resources/workforce-composition/#.UZhjr4LHQnU>. Date accessed 18th May 2013.

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.

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; Espiritu, 2003; 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; 2008; Schoenberger, 1997; Ye et al, 2011). There is considerably less, although an increasing interest in the discussions of labour recruitment as a crucial part of migration (Lindquist, 2010; 2012; Xiang, 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, 1994; 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). 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).

## 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 (Bourdieu, 1991). 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 (Weininger, 2004).

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; 2008; Wright, 1999; 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 (2008: 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, 2008). At the lower end of the labour market where workers are increasingly cheapened, much of the transnational work brokerage is based on local relations, often where workers are recruited by agents working on an individual, private basis (Wright, 1997; McDowell, 2008). 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 cir-

cuits 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 differentiation that perpetuate transnational linkages, marginalizations and inequalities as well. I seek to problematize the recruitment process rather than placing the blame solely on individual recruiters so enable a more complicated discussion on the class implications of transnational labour migration.

The analysis presented in this paper draws upon some of the findings of my masters and doctoral research where fieldwork was conducted in Singapore from May to August, 2005 and again between 2008 and 2009. Aside from analyzing labour migration policies from the English language national newspaper, *The Straits Times*, and government websites, I also employed ethnographic methods. I conducted participant-observation, guided conversations and semi-structured interviews with respondents from the two cases presented here. The primary data within this paper are based on interview transcripts and fieldnotes gathered through these methods. I had forty-five respondents in total that comprised of fifteen financial workers and twenty-five Bangladeshi men. I gained access to a larger pool of Bangladeshi male migrants through my volunteer work with a Singapore-based NGO called Transient Workers Count Two (TWC2). I recruited the financial workers as respondents through snowball-sampling. While I encountered much difficulty in accessing human resources personnel in the financial sector, I nonetheless have included the ethnographic data that I was able to attain. The rhetoric in the recruitment postings on websites of financial firms I analyze here was also reflected in the interviews I conducted with Human Resource personnel.

## Filtering workers through Singapore's division of labour

I now turn to the issue of incorporating foreign labour within Singaporean space in recent years. The turn of century saw an increasing share of non-citizen population – a direct consequence of the city-state's restructuring policies to attract and rely on foreign labour (Yeoh, 2004). The deliberate and strategic reliance on “foreign manpower” is part and parcel of the dominant neoliberal discourse of globalization as an

“inevitable and virtuous growth dynamic” (Coe and Kelly, 2002:348). As elsewhere, the transmigrant population grows in tandem with restructuring processes to render labour more “flexible” in relation to capital (Yeoh, 2004). The workforce was strategically and rigorously configured to incorporate a significantly large foreign labour pool. Different strands of workers are brought into Singaporean space strategically and they are administered very differently (Yeoh, 2006). To paraphrase Silvey, the borders of labour migration into Singapore are unequal (2007).

Foreigners’ access to work and the privileges and rights that come with work mainly differentiated by skills status and by the perceived desirability of these skills to the achievement of national goals (there is no space here to do a thorough review of the literature on migration policy in Singapore but see for example, Lian and Tong, 2008; Yeoh, B.S.A., 2004). Differentiated access is institutionalized by the issuance of a range of work passes and permits that fall broadly into the employment pass and the work permit categories (Yeoh, 2004). Migrant workers fill a gap in the labour market where physically demanding, yet low-paying jobs are rejected by locals. Work permit holders earn less than \$2,000 a month. The permits are valid for either one or two years and, depending on the availability of work, can be renewed for up to two years (Ministry of Manpower website). They take on jobs that require manual labour or shift work in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, shipbuilding, personal services as well as domestic work (*The Straits Times*, Dec 2009). There are presently 931, 200 work permit holders in Singapore (*The Straits Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> Oct, 2012). The hard, physical work in shipyard and construction is labored by foreign men. 70 percent of the workforce in construction, for example, is made up of foreign men (*The Straits Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2009). Foreign workers are further filtered by nationalities in the division of labour, where workers from certain countries are only allowed to work in specific sectors. Malaysians form the exception and are eligible to be hired for work in any sector (see for eg, Rahman, 2000; Ye, 2013). This high demand for foreign workers reflects the low wages accepted by these workers, the low chances of them quitting and their skill sets – all of which are conditions already set in place by the work permit regulations (*The Straits Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2009). Also regulated by the work permit and emphasized in official discourse, foreign workers have no opportunities for social advancement within Singapore. They are positioned as “...workers are here on a temporary basis and will likely leave when the projects are over” (*The Straits Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> Oct, 2012). The smaller, “in-between” group of foreign labour are the S-Pass holders of which there are 128,100 (*The Straits Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> Oct, 2012). These are mostly technicians or specialists such as carpenters, senior assis-

tants, shipyard supervisors. They earn at least \$2,000 and are eligible for dependency passes if they earn above \$4,000.

At the same time, building a nation in the image of a “cosmopolis” requires selectively inclusionary projects to entice “foreign talent” – highly skilled professional workers, entrepreneurs and investors who are part of the face of cosmopolitanism in Singapore (Yeoh, 2004). This group of migrants hold a form of the employment pass<sup>2</sup> that enables them to apply for dependents’ passes and access to greater job mobility. Since June 2012, there are approximately 174, 700 foreigners holding employment passes (*The Straits Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> Oct, 2012). The government’s principal rationale for encouraging foreign talent is to drive its economic regionalization in competition with other top cities. The government has followed a policy of “gathering global talent” and “making Singapore a cosmopolitan city” since the late 1990s (the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, quoted in Yeoh and Chang, 2001). Although skilled transnational workers are wooed by the state, mainly to fuel economic activities, they are not only situated as economic actors for the new economy in the official discourse – indeed, “international talent infuse (Singaporean) society as they bring a spirit and vigour which will motivate Singaporeans to scale even greater heights” (Manpower 21, 1999: 34). Their presence is also, hence, constructed as bringing a desirable *joie de vivre* to Singapore. The state continues to play a strong role in classifying processes that reproduce class categories and lived experiences of class (Burrows and Gane, 2006).

### *Sourcing, moving and placing Bangladeshi men*

By tracing how these men are recruited, I illustrate that even at this stage of recruitment, Bangladeshi migrant workers start off in a severely disenfranchised, precarious position. As McDowell pointed out, there is an important connection between the global growth of labour markets and the mobility of workers. Further, this correlates with the rise of various forms of temporary, precarious or insecure work of which agency work is an important element (2008). In her work on the export of Filipino labour migrants, Rodriguez argues that labour brokerage is a “neoliberal strategy that is comprised of institutional and discursive practices through which the

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2 My objective now is to illustrate how these institutionalized categories classify individuals according to their work, skills and income, reproducing a type of class structure within Singapore. I will discuss the social consequences of these passes and permits as well as the different trajectories of workers in other chapters.

Philippine state mobilizes its citizens and sends them abroad to work for employers throughout the world while generating a “profit” from the remittances that migrants send back to their families...” (2010: x).

I would also argue that the geographical connection between the growth of labour markets and the movement of workers is strongly facilitated by the state. While Bangladesh does not have a state-based, centralized overseas employment institution such as the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), its neoliberal strategies in actively sending labour migrants abroad is arguably characterized by its lack of state-based labour brokerage. These strategies continue to be legitimized by the remittances that are sent back from its overseas migrants. Remittances from Singapore, as mentioned earlier, were estimated to be some USD\$130.11 million between 2007 to 2008, with Bangladeshis lauded as playing an “important role in national development” (Bangladesh High Commission, Singapore website).<sup>3</sup> Aside from only allowing men to work in manual labour, Singapore’s Traditional/Non-traditional Source policy on low-waged foreign labour further defines the spatial contours of its segmented labour market. It should be noted that the recruitment of higher-paid foreigners is not subjected to such state policy, as I illustrate later. It is these policies that both encourages and limits Bangladeshi men to labour in the low-waged rungs of Singapore’s construction and shipyard industries. The growth of Singapore’s migrant work force, through the low wages paid to these workers, is a way in which its economy has managed to maintain growth while preventing inflation. Yet, Bangladeshi men are not only valued for their cheapness. As the human resource manager of ABC shipyard tells me,

Singaporeans don’t want to do construction. Hot sun all day, carry things that are so bloody heavy so we get foreigner workers to do... Banglas are paid less because they cannot do the work as well as workers from China! Sure, China workers can talk back to their foreman but they can at least do the job in less time. Sometimes I have to tell the Bangla three, four times before he understands what I want him to do. And sometimes they pretend to do work! I know they only work when they see me or their foreman approaching. They are more fragile also. They are just softer men, but at least they don’t complain so much like China workers who will always ask for higher pay. We also need the more experienced Bangladeshi workers to make sure the new ones understand the work ...

Bangladeshi men are therefore valued for their perceived meekness at work where their apparent fragility and acceptance of the low wage compensate for their “job

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3 [http://bangladesh.org.sg/cms/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=57](http://bangladesh.org.sg/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=57), date accessed 18th Dec, 2010.



less well-done”. Indeed, through this glimpse of diversity within this class of workers, it also appears that Bangladeshi men are strategically hired for their exploitative value that is reproduced through their silence which here, is interpreted as a type of masculinity which is different from Chinese nationals. This bears coherence to more traditionally feminized traits of docility and obedience as reflected in the literature (Wright, 2006). This hiring for their perceived characteristics beyond technical skill is similar the recruitment of financial professionals, as I shall discuss later.

To mobilize a ready pool of cheap labour to take on jobs that local Singaporeans reject, firms turn to recruitment agencies in Singapore with connections in Bangladesh (Ye, forthcoming). This transnational assemblage of workers through agents not only reproduces the divisions of labour by reinforcing state policies on labour restrictions for Bangladeshi men in Singapore, but also, through its lack of accountability to its recruits and heavy fees becomes an active process of engulfing migrants and their households in financial turmoil.

There are labour suppliers in Singapore that work as agencies, such as FirstCare which acts as a direct recruiter of foreign workers to companies in Singapore and as administrators (i.e. middle-party) (<http://www.firstcare.com.sg/package.php>).<sup>4</sup> Employers pay a fee for the agency to carry out the necessary paperwork required to administer workers. These services range from the more straightforward such as applying for the In-Principal Approval (IPA)<sup>5</sup>, arranging transportation of the worker from Changi Airport to company dorms, as well as arranging for medical check-up for the workers. There are also murkier services such as “assist(ing) in repatriation of workers upon expiry or termination of the employment agreement, arrang(ing) for free replacement of workers if required” (<http://www.firstcare.com.sg/services.php>). From the website, it appears there are no additional fees that the employer needs to pay should they require the agency to source for workers on their behalf. It also becomes evident from the information provided on the website that employers have little to no contact with its labour source before the individuals become hired as workers. In other words, it appears that the agency makes it convenient for the capitalist to access a ready labour pool – this orchestration by specialized labour providers enhancing the separation of relations *of* production from relations *in* production, mystifying the former while effectively subordinating workers to the latter (Burawoy, 1985). The Bangladeshi is tied to his agent as an individual, even though in principle,

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4 Efforts to speak directly with agency managers were unanswered.

5 This is a pass which is issued to the worker before he arrives in Singapore. Upon the medical body check up in Singapore, he will be issued a Work Permit.

he is free to choose between different agencies. Similar to the labour migrants from Lombok in Lindquist's work, migrants almost never approach any agencies directly (2010).

Instead, an informal labour recruiter approaches – and to a lesser extent, is approached by – the migrant directly either in the area where the migrant lives or through other forms of social relations such as friends, family or local figure of authority (Lindquist, 2010). My research data reveals that it is common for agents in Bangladesh to operate individually and proactively on the search for men to work in Singapore. The data revealed just how mystified the process of recruiting is the closer it reaches the source of labour. There is no information on the webpage of FirstCare to indicate the recruitment process in Bangladesh. My interviews with NGO directors also shed little light on the actual steps taken to source workers in the sending country. There does appear, however, to be a process of social networking for agents to get in touch with potential clients. Like Karim and Babu, the rest of the Bangladeshis I interviewed all told me that they knew the agents who first approached them about work in Singapore. For most of the men, these recruiters are other men they knew from their village. This transnational recruiting process hence takes on a very local dimension and depends on social relationships. As Alamgir told me,

Agent say Singapore many money can make. No need to sell chickens anymore in my life after I go work in Singapore. Salary from Singapore can support my whole family – agent tell me like this. I am a man so I must support.

This was also reflected in Ismail's decision to come to Singapore to work in a shipyard,

My agent (told) me many of his relatives go to Singapore to work. He also knows that my brother-in-law also go for many years and he send money back. Everybody say he is good son. Next time my wife also happy. Job maybe hard but no problem. We are men. Agent (told) me that I can be like that also. I can make money and have good job ...

As McDowell argues, “ungendered class analysis is no longer appropriate but then nor is unclassed gender analysis, as women's lives diverge on class lines” (2006: 842). Indeed, from these telling quotes, it appears that recruitment for work in Singapore also intersects with pre-existing notions of masculinity. Bangladeshi workers that continue to be readily accommodated within patriarchal structures, confirming their resilience and versatility rather than signaling any major shift in the sexual balance of power (Bourdieu, 1998). Bearing the responsibility of providing for their families



is tied to Ismail and Alamgir's gender identity. In believing in the primacy granted to masculinity, they become further entrenched within masculine domination themselves at the point of recruitment where they reconcile potential vulnerabilities and hard work with the morality of being a good son and husband. The gendered discourses embedded within recruitment practices thus are constitutive, rather than a preceding fixity or result of, the labour migrant experience. The contradiction of how Bangladeshi men migrate for work due to their masculine bread winner identities while the employers in Singapore value them precisely for their docile and soft feminine character that Chinese workers lack point to one of the ways in which gender is deployed in the movement of the Bangladeshi as a global working subject. Masculinity here cannot simply be reduced to patriarchy but becomes a crucial cultural means for the reproduction of class position through recruitment.

This endeavor of accessing work in Singapore comes at a high price: each worker pays between SGD\$7000 to SGD\$10,000 to their agents for a work permit job even before they leave Bangladesh. The roundtrip air tickets cost about \$700, passport fees cost \$100 and job training usually cost about \$1,500 (personal interview with director of HOME) – the remaining balance is unaccounted for. The NGO personnel I interviewed believe the rest of the money goes to the employer to offset government-imposed levies, to paying for the upkeep of the worker and also to the agent's personal profit. If it is true that part of the "agent fees" goes towards paying for the workers' levies and maintenance, this serves the employer by cheapening labour costs while at the same time creating an atomized and vulnerable worker who, in order to access work, is already in debt even before earning any wages. In this way, the worker is sucked into the exploitative social relations by material circumstances. Almost all the Bangladeshis I interviewed sold off various assets – land, homes, jewelry, savings – and took out loans from banks, relatives and/or loansharks to pay for the agent fees. As Hossein says,

My father sell his land and we borrow some from his brother to pay agent money. \$9,000 Singaporean money is very big money for us! If we don't borrow, if we don't sell, I cannot get job in Singapore.

To become workers in the global economy, the men must first sell off their other means of livelihood to pay the large fee, putting up only their labour power for sale in return for wages (Burawoy, 1985). This burden borne by the low-waged migrant and his family is not one shared by the highly-paid migrant. Further, accessing work requires the mobilization of one's social networks in order to access funds. These

networks become the social capital of the migrant, that is crucial to his entry into work. For these men, their exploitation and subordination begins during the recruitment process. Aside from the high cost of the fees, I also argue that it is in this very ambiguity, this mystery shrouding the agent fee, that one can detect a form of worker subordination through the continued lack of accountability on the part of the agents. Alamgir's belief in the promise of a job was converted into a livelihood of fragility and precariousness. alienate

The individualistic operations taken on by the agents serve to isolate the worker – there is no knowledge of other co-workers until the job training, which only takes place after the agent fees have been paid. My interview data reveals that workers who keep their jobs have a typical debt-repayment period of about one year. It is also the debts incurred from paying the agent that keeps a lot of workers in their jobs, no matter how dissatisfied they are with the work. At present, although the Singaporean state provides some guidelines for employers to hire foreign workers from licensed agencies in Singapore, it does not impose laws on labour recruitment methods in Bangladesh as long as workers enter Singapore on valid IPAs ([http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/others/employment\\_agencies.html](http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/others/employment_agencies.html)). The process of recruitment for Bangladeshi migrants, therefore, is not only complicated but also entails more risk borne by the worker because it costs more in terms of economic and social capital than for the follow group of employees.

### *Recruiting the Desirable Employee: Financial workers*

Part of it is not only qualifications but also your personality: how well you can fit into the corporate environment (Human Resource Manager, Bank A)

In this section, I discuss the recruitment practices of transnational financial professionals. I will demonstrate how the recruitment process itself – in terms of interviews, tests, assessment techniques and selection criteria – is embedded with particular understandings of what an ideal cosmopolitan employee should be. The surface observation that accessing financial work does not require much economic capital from the job-seeker disguises the significant amount and careful consideration of social and cultural capital that is required. The basis of recruitment that makes entry into this line of work possible, then, is distinct from how Bangladeshi male migrants are granted access to work in Singapore. Similar to the low-waged migrants, how-

ever, the barriers to enter the professional financial class here also screens for socio-cultural markers beyond technical skills. I show that the organization's perception of what constitutes a desirable individual befitting of hire is embedded within the interviews and other selection procedures. Aside from work and academic qualifications, the research also reveals that the cultural and social backgrounds of recruits play a vital role throughout the selection process. By examining these issues, we can begin to understand how recruitment strategies not only provide a springboard for particular social norms and values that shape social relations within the workplace but more crucially, marginalizes certain groups of people.

As mentioned above, state policy towards incorporating higher paid foreigners are distinct from those towards low-waged migrants. Aside from the absence of the Traditional/Non-traditional source policy, this class of workers can directly apply for work after they have entered Singapore and are not tied to the employer stated on their Employment Pass which hold further implications for the geography of recruiting these financial workers. Indeed, this accounts for the greater diversity, in terms of nationality of workers in high-income financial work as compared to the Bangladeshi migrants.

Firms are keen to promote their work environment as diverse and peopled with talented individuals. For example, the first two lines on Credit Suisse First Boston's Singapore website reads,

We're an extremely diverse business, with equally diverse needs in terms of skills and experience. Our diversity recruitment strategy is focused on "casting a wider net" as we continue to build a pipeline of exceptional talent.

The career webpage of Singaporean-owned United Overseas Bank (UOB) says, "We believe in investing in the best people and providing a team environment that encourages and rewards superior performance and enterprise". This initial observation already suggests that employees in the financial sector must be able to deliver on job productivity in a dynamic and diverse environment. The cultural nature of financial work was also revealed further down the Singapore website of Barclays bank where it was stated, "our values – or guiding principles – are the glue that binds our organization together and shape everything we do"(Barclays Bank homepage<sup>6</sup>). These attributes are not only addressing the technical skills of the desired Barclays worker but

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6 Barclays Bank, [http://www.barclays.co.uk/careers/car\\_2\\_1\\_culture.htm](http://www.barclays.co.uk/careers/car_2_1_culture.htm), date accessed 4th December 2009.

[http://www.barclays.co.uk/careers/car\\_2\\_1\\_culture.htm](http://www.barclays.co.uk/careers/car_2_1_culture.htm), date accessed 3rd Dec 2009.

also suggests that a type of social interaction is expected so that “teamwork” can flourish and “respect and trust” can be established. These are hence attempts to create a set of standards not only to show what recruiters look out for but also to guide the social and professional interactions within the bank (Schoenberger, 1997; Thrift, 2000; 2001). From this point, it becomes clear that the imaginary of teamwork and diversity are part of the cultural ways in which potential employees are addressed, reproducing particular work-based class identities that are significantly different from the Bangladeshi male migrant. The corporate discourses of ideal Barclays and UOB employees, however, tell us less about the technical skills required and instead, with greater focus on the importance of presentation of self and social interaction at work. This becomes a commonality with the Bangladeshi male migrant who is also valued for his perceived meekness more than his technical ability. While there is much precarity in accessing work for low-waged migrants, financial professionals also encounter uncertainty in being recruited for more than their technical knowledge.

Indeed, a closer observation reveals that fitting into the firm’s overall strategy is just as, if not more, important than simply job productivity and skill delivery. I would argue that calculation of an employee’s non-technical skills is even more stringent than that of the Bangladeshi man. As Schoenberger argues, the relationship between culture and strategy is largely instrumental (1997). In my interview with Kaitlyn, a human resources manager from Bank A, she says their organization hires people who “know they are working with a team to help get the job done” and that the ideal employee at the firm would be a “strong team player” because “it is so important to have that to be successful here”. Rosalie Chan, director of XYZ Human Resources group’s Asia Pacific branch, also says, “I would still go through the interviews of what you want to do, rather than what I want you to do. Then I would try to see if your values, your expectations would be in line with what I am looking for”. It is thus reasonable to argue that self identity construction, social interaction and work success are inter-connected to the extent that the professional self must be narrated in ways that are consistent with, if not subordinate to, the organization’s cultural identity in order to gain membership into the firm. The people who gain entry into this sector must demonstrate that they are symbolically fitting with the corporation’s culture. Indeed, this suggests that there is a pre-supposed cultural context of the firm and it is within the firm’s objectives to hire people who can re-produce and/or enhance that culture with their entrance.

The attempt to institutionalize “diversity” at work also comes through the ways in which different peoples are constructed as suitable for different work niches and cultures in the bank itself. Barclays, for instance, states,

our culture varies between areas – the atmosphere on a trading floor, for instance, is quite different to that of a retail bank. The advantage of these differences is that they allow us to attract people with all kinds of skills and ambitions and offer many different career paths.<sup>7</sup>

While this suggests an institutionalized recognition of difference – different skills in different people – it also serves to limit people’s mobility into different work areas by constructing a type of “suitability” for particular cultural geographies at the firm. Further along the selection process, however, firms sift candidates with a finer-toothed cultural comb. Talking to Rosalie, it was revealed that, during the first interview for a middle to upper level management position in a bank,

as much as 30% (of the decision-making) will go into how you fit into the corporate image, 30% goes to the impression, another 30% will be how you talk, your gestures, your posture, your dressing. Less than 10% is your qualifications. I don’t stress so much on the qualifications because if you get to this stage, chances are those things are already taken for granted.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Bangladeshi male migrants I spoke with did not experience any such recruitment procedure. Even though the Bangladeshis were chosen for their assumed characteristics such as docility, they were not interviewed to check if they did indeed possess those characteristics. It becomes clear in this quote that technical skills are secondary in employment at this stage of the recruitment of financial workers. Aside from being able to fit into corporate strategies and images, there is also a strong performative element to the recruiters’ assessment of the interviewee. Rosalie elaborates,

If I were to short-list ten people now...you look at the person once they walk in through the door, confident and professionally dressed, hair nicely done up, little to no makeup for girls, you form an impression. Chunky jewellery might be ok for the advertising industry but banks deal with professionalism and hence we are more knowledge-based and conservative so you cannot have somebody giving off the impression that you are a young

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7 Barclays Bank, [http://www.barclays.co.uk/careers/car\\_2\\_1\\_culture.htm](http://www.barclays.co.uk/careers/car_2_1_culture.htm), date accessed 3rd Dec 2009.

rocker, punk. You want somebody out there who exudes professionalism and addresses the values of a bank!

An individual's dress at the interview is therefore already a signifier of his or her perceived "fit" into the firm's corporate culture. The literal fashioning of an individual's identity and assessment of their presentation begins once the person enters the interview room to the extent that assumptions are made about the person's prior identity assemblage which then, further, leads the interviewer to make assumptions about the potential employee's future work performance. The narration of the self via dressing is hence directly connected to the individual's perceived ability to manage tasks successfully in the financial industry, where initial approval is based on the individual's ability to convey "conservatism" and "knowledge" through his or her dress during recruitment. The final sentence in the quote also reinforces the importance placed on how the employee should be representing and embodying the cumulative shared learning experiences of the firm. Part of the cultural work of the firm then, is to make actual practices (choosing whom to recruit) appear to be consistent with the announced values (in the case of Bank A, the recruited must be a "team player" or the "recognition of difference") (Schoenberger, 1997: 129).

Candidates who make it to the later parts of the recruitment process are assessed more on the intangible, "soft" qualities that allude to a certain type of cultural capital. Rosalie points out,

If there is a Japanese firm in Singapore, most of the clients would be Japanese...you would most likely have a Japanese national, not because the Singaporean is not capable but because the Singaporean may not have had the exposure to the Japanese culture, especially if you are a service provider...

From this above quote, there appears to be a pragmatic and strategic side to hiring certain people with particular social backgrounds. The decision to employ an individual, thus, relies partly on the clientele and efficiency towards service delivery. From the point of view of the firm, pre-organizational cultural capital and access to social networks are important because they could fulfill wider corporate objectives. This also draws a similarity to Bangladeshi male migrants where their nationality becomes a cultural resource for their access to work as docility and meekness become associated with being Bangladeshi.

Similar to McDowell's findings, I found that the embodiment of "natural" gendered attributes is often used as a rationalization for women's work positions (1994: 1997). As Andrew, a white Scottish man in his 40s, told me, "HR is very, very strong



these days” in trying to prevent overt gender discrimination and outright derogatory comments at work. At the same time, however, there continues to be a gendered interpretation of the rationales for identity negotiations and task assignments at work. With reference to the quotes below, it can be argued that a woman’s position in the bank, and at a larger scale, across the financial sector, is “naturalized” by notions of female attributes. Kelvin says,

I work in a private bank and private banks tend to hire more ladies...probably 60% women...it’s just the way it is, the front end. You look at all the private banks, chances are they are all women and not only secretaries because they are meticulous, you know! It is because you are selling a product, people tend to feel more comfortable talking to a female than a man.

Gerald also says,

There is a new guy in accounts. Most of the people in accounts at my company are girls because usually HR hires girls for that sort of job. But he is there now and everyone calls him *Ah Kua*<sup>8</sup>! To be fair, he is really quite girlie.

From the above quote, it can be understood that women are perceived as more suitable for some work than others not because they may have technical qualifications that render them more capable as a secretary, but because their gender identity ties them to particular attributes – such as paying attention to detail, and patience – that are constructed as natural. What may be overlooked however is that men, in both cases discussed here also remain trapped in the social and are overdetermined by traditional social obligations and by discursive gendered identities. As Keith tells me in the following,

We do have a guy who is a vice-president (of a department). Very feminine guy. In fact, he’s gay. But he is very assertive. And he really puts his foot down. He can get things done... He is seen still as a team player, even though he is faggish. So he is well-liked. As long as the person is like, ‘ok, there is a job I need to get done whether easy or not’, then that person can go up for promotion. He would get the job. This guy is like a statesman. When we have get-togethers, he is always the one making the toast and stuff like that. Everyone is friendly with him, even though he is a fag.

The existing normativities in the financial workplace that affect and in some ways, limit women, however, also keep men out of certain tasks from the point of recruitment. It does become clear, however, that men in middle-class financial work are valued more so for their masculinity and can be singled out not only for their feminin-

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8 This term refers to effeminate men.

ity but for their sexuality as well, as the above quote demonstrates. These gendered and sexualized valuations are in contrast to the Bangladeshi male migrants. While labour policies state that only men are eligible to carry out hard, physical labour in the construction and shipyard industries, the Bangladeshi respondents I spoke with also themselves felt the obligation to work, in spite of its risks and costs because of their gendered identities. Just as the Bangladeshi male migrant's belief in the primacy of masculinity motivates him to incur the costs of migration, the masculinization of the middle-class financial worker also sets up a form of symbolic violence through its reproduction where effeminate masculinity is singled out. While Bourdieu views material forces such as the division of labour and segregation within the work force as central to gender oppression, he also regards the internalization of symbolic gender norms within physical dispositions as the most important element in the reproduction of sexual division (McNay, 2006). It would be inaccurate to think that Bourdieu sees an antithesis between the material vs the symbolic. I would argue that through the choices one makes and the way in which one carries out his/her identity – indeed, the experience of gender, as with any other social category – is shaped by their habitus which, in turn, is shaped by both discursive and material power relations. Through comparison then, we see how recruitment of the global working subject is gendered in different ways for different classes.

## Conclusion

An examination of the labour recruitment process highlights some of the main problems confronting many seeking employment and inclusion in the global economy. I demonstrated the interconnections between both groups of workers, characterized by similarities and distinctions between the groups. I reveal that in spite of their commonalities, the process of creating the global working subject is embedded with gender that is deployed in differing ways for both groups. Most straightforwardly, my comparative empirical analysis discusses the differentiated costs of entry into the global economy. My main argument is that access to work for both low-waged and middle-income migrants requires more than simply technical skills as demonstrated through Bourdieu's notions of capital and their intersections with gender. I demonstrated that constituted by multi-level processes, recruitment practices do not only lead workers to different jobs but also require uneven configurations of capital from



different workers. Through a discussion of state policies towards foreign labour, it becomes clear that the geography of recruitment for both groups of workers is structured through such institutionalized measures.

While recruiters do not screen for social capital in Bangladeshi male migrants to the same extent as they do with financial professionals, the existing division of labour, the unregulated and highly localized methods of recruitment and the high agent fees nonetheless require the migrant to mobilize his social networks for a job in Singapore. Similar to the financial professional, however, low-waged Bangladeshi men are also hired for perceived qualities tied to their masculinity that are beyond their technical capabilities.

While it may be tempting to dismiss financial professionals as having a “better bargain”, careful expressions of forms of cultural and symbolic capital emerge as a more pronounced indication of an individual’s value at work as seen through recruitment practices. In spite of the banks’ articulation of policies and values that emphasize “diversity” and “inclusion”, there is a very specific type of individual that gains entry into the professional classes in financial work and after initial access, there are also specific task allocations for particular types of people within the sector. Indeed, the notion of “diversity” is used as a screening tool as well as a culmination of processes that select particular groups of people to be included in the social networks and knowledge-transfer – elements that contribute to work success. The performance of the ideal employee at the point of recruitment hence serves to produce and reproduce the power inequalities to the extent that there are specific displays of employees’ gendered selves that are constructed as “fitting” with the organization’s supposed cosmopolitan values and task allocation. It becomes reasonable to think that the on-going performance of a professional cosmopolitan identity is much more fragmented when we take these historical and social backgrounds of employees into consideration.

The variability in recruitment practices of the two case studies presented here is significant in not just illustrating the differences in recruitment practices for different workers but also in articulating the different configurations of capital required of laboring bodies. At the same time, however, there are commonalities to be drawn from these practices as well. The comparative perspective presented here sheds light not only on the precarities faced by low-waged migrants but also by financial professionals where gender intersects with various forms of capital, reproducing class through recruitment. The workers in this study emerged as subjects through the nexus of structures and power relations that not only located certain groups of people in particular positions within the division of labour in Singapore but also produced

certain ways of being. Class inequality exists beyond its theoretical representations: it is entirely central to the lives of the workers, consciously or pre-reflexively. Further, these are reproduced through recruitment practices at various levels, from the state, to the recruiters, to the firm, to the workers themselves. Within this form of economic organization, each group of workers is incorporated and valued differently and had differentiated access to resources. Class, in these terms, is structural – in that the division of labour organizes what economic opportunities are available to them. Class is also operated through a myriad of capital transformations – culturally, symbolically, economically – which are more available to some workers than others. Related to this, class is also dispositional, reproduced by one's habitus. As I have demonstrated with two case studies in this paper, the deployment of gender within each group is not only about creating their lived experiences as men or as women but plays a crucial role in recreating them as global working subjects.

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