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Transplanting Labor in East Asia

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Most writings about globalization and transnationalism focus on horizontal, spontaneous and ever-expanding “flows” and “links,” but a growing literature also calls attention to states’ power in shaping and constraining mobility. This paper seeks to reconcile the two by demonstrating how labor migration from China to Japan, South Korea, and Singapore—constituting an important part of the intensifying regional connectedness—is quite strictly governed. Instead of “flowing” from one place to another, migrant workers are “transplanted” from their hometowns to overseas workplaces where they are subsequently encapsulated in tightly guarded spaces. Labor transplantation is not new, but the current round of neoliberal globalization has generated new modes of such transnational labor transplantation. There are two contradictions in the current social phenomenon of labor migration: the contradiction between upward concentration of capital and downward outsourcing of labor and the tension between the dispersion/fragmentation of labor management and the centralization of migration control. These render large-scale transplantation and camp-based encapsulation of labor, which have been common in modern East Asia, unfeasible; instead governments now have to develop new policy instruments aimed at more individualized “micro transplants.”

At the end of 2004, 600,000 Chinese were working overseas on contracts longer than a year, ten times more than in 1990 (58,000) (CHINCA 2004; Ministry of Commerce 2005; Center for International Exchanges 2005). A particularly curious phenomenon in this development is that the three provinces in northeast China (Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang), which had basically no tradition of outmigration (even to other parts of China), suddenly emerged as a major labor-sending area in the late 1990s. For example, migrants from these three provinces made up one third of all Chinese citizens in Japan in 2003. This suggests a very significant change since the Chinese community there had been dominated by people from the southeast (e.g. Fujian province). According to my informants’ estimates, northeasterners almost certainly also represent the largest regional group among the Chinese workers in South Korea, and probably also in Singapore. Liaoning province, where I conducted fieldwork, stood out as the second largest labor sending province nationwide in 2004, with 30,000 people migrating out through official channels that year (CHINCA 2004: 14; Center for International Exchanges 2005).

Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are the three top destinations of Chinese migrant workers worldwide. By November 2004, there were about 100,000 registered Chinese workers in Japan, 80,000 in Singapore, and 47,000 in South Korea. Chinese made up the largest nationality group among unskilled and semiskilled foreign labor in

Japan and South Korea (nearly 70 percent and over 40 percent respectively) and one of the four largest, probably the second largest after workers from Malaysia, in Singapore (CHINCA 2004: 16–17, 40–48). In this paper, I collate information about these three countries from documentary study and from my own on-going field research in Singapore.

Overview: The State-Managed, the Market-Driven, and the Corporatist

Japan, South Korea, and Singapore serve as good cases for analysis because they represent different approaches to the management of labor migration. Most Chinese from the northeast go to Japan to work as so-called “trainees.” Japan still refuses to admit unskilled foreign labor and instead adopts a “side-door” policy to import labor in the form of industrial trainees, ostensibly an international aid program to train workers from Third World countries. Chinese made up nearly half of all the trainees from fourteen countries during 1992 and 2003 (0.3 million out of 0.6 million) (Japanese Ministry of Justice, cited in Tsuda 2005: 41).¹ Under this system, the first-year trainees (*ken shusei*), are not recognized as employees, are given a stipend of JPY 60,000 (USD 500) a month, and are not protected by labor laws. There is no contract between the migrant worker and the employer; instead the employer or the employer’s association signs an agreement with the labor sending company—the recruitment agent in China—and labor migration is deemed a collaboration between the two organizations. From their second year, trainees can be upgraded to interns (*ji shusei*), subject to satisfactory results of examinations of Japanese language and working skills. Interns are comparable to employees and are paid about JPY 120,000 monthly. Interns’ contracts last two years and are in some cases renewable. This trainee system is directly managed by the Japan International Training Cooperation Organization (JITCO), which was set up by the Japanese government in 1991 under the joint jurisdiction of five ministries (Justice; Foreign Affairs; Economy, Trade and Industry; Health, Labor and Welfare; and Land, Infrastructure and Transport). Other public non-profit entities (but not employers) are also allowed to establish bilateral agreements with organizations in China to import trainees. Workers in northeast China pay agents anything between RMB 20,000 and 60,000 (USD 2,600–7,800) for going to Japan; prices to other destination countries are generally higher.

South Korea copied the Japanese trainee system in 1993. It is a general perception among agents in Liaoning that working conditions in South Korea are harsher than in Japan, but workers can save more. A trainee in South Korea earns KRW 640,000 (USD 640)² a month, about 20-25 percent of ordinary workers’ wages (Niu Xumou 2004), but with overtime they can earn a million won a month (based on 2005 data). A trainee with skills can thus save about RMB 200,000 after three years. The Korea Federation of

Small and Medium Business (KFSB), particularly its branch Korea International Training Cooperation Corps (KITCO) that was set up in 1994, is the central entity in running the system. Unlike JITCO, KFSB is not a governmental institution, but is a business body representing employers' interests. Paradoxically, however, KFSB acts more governmentally than JITCO. KFSB designated a limited number of agents in China (10 state-owned large companies in 2005) as partners; these agents accept applications in China, conduct preliminary selections, and pass on a shortlist to KFSB. KFSB makes the final selection and allocates workers to employers. Neither the worker nor the China agency has a chance to meet or even know about the prospective employer until the worker is allocated. South Korea does not allow for renewal of contract, and workers have to leave after three years. Despite the strict regulation, the South Korean program performed much less satisfactorily than the Japanese one from the government's point of view. In early 2004, for example, 63 percent of industrial trainees remained in Korea after the three year limit (Labor Department, CHINCA 2004: 60). In Japan, by comparison, 5.6 percent of trainees overstayed in 2000, and trainees accounted for just over 1 percent of the total overstays during 1997 to 2001 (JITCO 2001: 107) and 2 percent in 2004 (Tsuda 2005: 40). The agent fee for South Korea is also higher. I shall explain these differences later.

After years of debate, the South Korean parliament decided in 2003 to replace the trainee system with an employment permit program (EPP), which was implemented in August 2004. EPP grants migrants the same labor rights as local employees, including the rights to unionize, to strike, and to demand minimum wages. But by 2007, the South Korean and Chinese governments had yet to sign the Memorandum of Understanding to open the EPP to Chinese workers. Most of the agents whom I met in China were confident that the EPP would not change the existing recruitment practice very much.

In contrast to Japan and South Korea, Singapore has economically liberal policies regarding labor migration.³⁾ Singapore imports foreign labor according to local employers' demands, and regulates the number through the policies of "dependency ceiling" (which sets the proportion of foreign to local workers hired by the employer) and foreign worker levies. Instead of appointing public institutions to regulate the market, private recruitment companies play the main role. In 2007, 1,618 licensed agencies were active in placing foreign workers (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2007). This number is striking if one considers that, as a world-renowned shopping paradise, Singapore had only 250 department stores and supermarkets and 1,400 shops retailing food, beverage, and tobacco in 2004 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2006: 19). About 75 percent of all the recruitment agencies listed with the internet search engine for products and services (*Kellysearch*) are based in Singapore.⁴⁾ The Singaporean government bans almost all employers from hiring Chinese workers directly; instead they have to recruit through agencies designated by the Ministry of Manpower and authorized by the Chinese embassy in Singapore (50 in 2007). While Japan and South Korea focus on

pre-departure selection, Singapore is relatively open in admitting foreign workers but exercises control by post-entry regulations, particularly by imposing strict regulations over employers and agents. Employers or agents have to pay SGD 5,000 (USD 2,500) as a security bond for every foreign worker, and are obliged to ensure the worker does not violate any government regulation. These methods seem successful; illegal over-stays are believed to be at a minimum. The average salary for Chinese workers in Singapore is about SGD 550 a month, and up to SGD 1,000 by working overtime. The migrants are most commonly offered two year contracts, renewable for a third year. Agencies in northeast China charge fees ranging from RMB 55,000 to RMB 75,000 for going to Singapore. Migrating to Singapore is economically the least profitable for migrants.

Thus, among the three countries, the Japanese and Singaporean policies can be respectively described as state-managed and market-driven; South Korea stands in the middle, representing a corporatist governance pattern. But labor transplantation and encapsulation appear as the common policy goals and outcomes. In all three countries, intermediary agencies—be they public bodies (Japan), business associations (South Korea), or commercial entities (Singapore)—play the central role in shaping labor migration. What follows explores how intermediaries emerge and assume similar functions despite these divergent policy contexts.

Labor-Capital Decoupling

Labor transplantation is not new. From 1932 until the end of World War II, the Japanese government sent agricultural settlers from rural Japan and the Korean peninsula to Manchuria in a well planned and organized manner (known as *nogyo imin*).⁵⁾ In the era of national development, labor transplantation became even more tightly organized. From the 1960s to the 1980s, labor migration in and from East Asia was mainly tied to large contract projects, particularly in construction and infrastructure development. These collective and camp-based labor transplantations were dependent on two related conditions. The first was a direct employment relation between sizable capital and sizable labor force, and the second was a clear demarcation between internal and external economies. However, since the early 1990s when Chinese workers started migrating to Japan, South Korea and Singapore on a large scale, both conditions have changed.

The construction industry that currently hires nearly 30 percent of Chinese migrant workers overseas provides a typical example of the dissociation between capital and labor.⁶⁾ In the 1970s, when project workers were the main form of labor migration, few projects exceeded USD 100 million in contract value. By the 1980s, integrated development (such as building ports and industrial zones) became the mainstream model, and a single contract easily exceeded USD 1,000 million in value. Internationally, the average profit rate of construction contracting dropped from 20 percent in the 1970s to

below 10 percent in the 1980s (Zhang Gesheng 1999: 93–94), and further down to 7 percent in the 1990s and 2000s (Xing Houyuan 2005: 8). This renders large scale essential to generate profits. Various factors, such as developing countries' desire for infrastructure development but tight financial constraints, the privatization of state facilities aimed at utilizing private investment for public projects, and international capital's interest in infrastructure projects that stabilize its profit rate amidst global speculation, pushed for an integration of construction, investment, and long-term management. Contractors are increasingly expected to raise funds, and to recoup their investments through commercial operation of the infrastructure project before transferring it back to the host government. New contracting practices along this line include the build-operate-transfer (BOT), build-operate-own-transfer (BOOT), and engineering-procurement-construction (EPC) models. A Chinese industrial commentator estimated that BOT was responsible for about 60 percent of all the contracting projects worldwide in the mid 2000s (Xing Houyuan 2005: 10, see also Wang Shouqing 2004 for construction-investment integration in Indonesia and Thailand). Seeing BOT as the future of the international contracting business, the Chinese State Council issued special policies in 1999 to encourage Chinese companies to take up this model (Xing Houyuan 2005: 10).

As large companies become more capital-intensive, labor management is increasingly “handed down.” Big companies subcontract labor-intensive tasks to smaller building companies, small companies outsource recruitment to agents, and agents search for labor from ever more remote places in sending countries. The number of companies involved in the chain of labor management increases significantly. For example, China Development, the largest construction company in China and the first company to send labor overseas on a commercial basis, used to be a single company but now relies on numerous smaller building companies, classified into four levels, for labor. The connection between capital and labor thus becomes very remote.

At the same time that capital and labor became decoupled within the construction industry, labor migration from China experienced an important shift across occupations. Zha (2002: 137), based on his interviews with Chinese officials, reported that in the 1990s it was increasingly difficult for Chinese construction project companies to pick up projects in Japan, and consequently the role of project contracts in labor migration to Japan was reduced significantly. In 2003, only 12 percent of the 14,700 laborers who went abroad from Jilin, one of the three provinces in northeast China, were tied to projects (Yang Yunmu 2005: 51). Instead, more and more Chinese workers were hired at 3-D jobs in industries other than construction (Long Guoqiang 1995: 167). Chinese migrants in Japan and South Korea now typically work in agriculture and husbandry, food processing, and small household manufacturing. In Singapore, Chinese are commonly found in logistics, small manufacturing, and trading companies. The service industry, such as small restaurants and retail shops, is another major employer of Chinese workers in the three countries.

The governments of Japan and South Korea also realized that those who needed foreign workers the most were not international investors or exporters, as they had previously anticipated, but were small, low-end firms often located in remote areas. As the earlier regulation that only companies engaged in international trade could receive trainees evolved into the so-called “intra-firm trainee/exchange” system, the two countries stipulated that the mainstream trainee systems should primarily serve small and medium sized businesses. In South Korea, companies should have fewer than 300 employees to be eligible to hire foreign trainees (Niu Xumou 2004). When Japan revised the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act in 1990 and formally introduced the visa category of “trainee,” the change was justified as a means of alleviating the labor shortage facing small businesses, particularly those unable to bring in foreign workers on their own (*The Nikkei Weekly* January 19, 1991, p. 22. cited in Zha 2002: 141).

These trends complicate the relations between capital, labor, and state administration. Economic globalization no longer manifests itself as project-based, organized movements of foreign capital and foreign labor. Rather, the globalizing effects have become highly diffuse, reaching every level of the economy. Many small businesses in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, although completely local, face fierce competition from the world and particularly from China. Importing Chinese labor is the only feasible way, many argue, for low-end businesses to survive the Chinese exports. As foreign workers are hired across highly dispersed places, the states can no longer bracket them out neatly, let alone control them in physical encampments. Not only is the distinction between internal and external economies profoundly destabilized, but so also is the line between the economic and the social as foreign workers become present in every part of the social body. The states thus have to manage migrants *as individuals*. While project workers can be collectively and spatially confined to camps, “micro-transplant” requires far more sophisticated methods that can operate at the individual level. What follows documents two central policies of this new kind of labor transplantation: differentiation and specification.

Micro Transplant

Differentiation (i.e., classifying migrants into different categories) has become almost a universal policy measure, as reflected by the numerous types of visas, permits, and cards. For migrants, which card you hold determines who you are and what kind of life you will have. Apart from skill and income levels, ethnicity serves as a central criterion for differentiation in the three countries. South Korea has an especially favorable migration program for overseas ethnic Koreans. Similarly, Japan encourages the “return” of *nikkeijin*, particularly from Brazil and Peru, who are given more privileges than other foreign labor. It is significant that ethnicity and education are treated in a compatible

manner. The conflation of the “primitive” obsession about skin and blood with the neo-liberal cosmopolitan interest in skill and brain presents a new technology of profiling in a selectively globalizing world.

Differentiating categories makes some migrants more human than others. Those with “wrong” brain or blood are denied the right to bring in family members to destination countries, to marry citizens of the place of residence, to search for jobs, or to settle down. For citizens and desirable migrants, juridical liabilities are defined in negative terms, i.e., one remains innocent until proved guilty. But for the unskilled, law exists positively. One is guilty by default unless one makes all the efforts to comply with the requirements and to contain oneself in the narrow spaces of legality. Differentiation narrows down for whom the labor-human separation should be exercised and subsequently which workers are to be transplanted.

“Free labor equals black labor”

For unskilled labor, receiving countries seek not only a “just-in-time” migration (see Jordan and Duvell 2002; David 2006),⁷ but also a “to-the-point” migration. Before a migrant arrives, it must be identified without ambiguity what, when and where the migrant is going to work; and the migrant should do nothing else but as defined beforehand—transplantation in the literal sense. In order for this to happen, sector-specific migration policies seem indispensable. These policies divide occupations into those open to foreign labor and those which are not, and further provide detailed regulation of migration management for each sector. Martin (2006) describes the shift from general policies at the macro level to sector-specific micro programs as a change from shotgun to rifle tactics. A list publicized by JITCO allowed *ken shusei* in 55 occupations to upgrade to *ji shusei* for 1999, and the jobs are specified with such detail as “male garment making,” “canvas-made products manufacturing,” and “cotton tailoring.” The South Korean government allocates annual quotas to each sector open to migrants. Singapore keeps most sectors open to foreign workers, but unskilled workers of a particular nationality are allowed to work in designated sectors only. For the service industry, for example, only Malaysia, Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea, and Taiwan are “approved source countries.” Chinese workers are allowed to work in construction, manufacturing, and marine industries—and some service establishments only.

Compounded by these differentiation policies, sector-specific micromanagement creates numerous “boxes” in which migrants are slotted, with each box subject to different rules. The following figure illustrates how Singapore manages labor migration through complex policy matrices.

The matrixes reflect a trend that can be called the economicization of public policies. Migration policies are supposed to meet market demands as their sole objective, and are justified only by how well they do so. Conversely “wrong migration” or “mistaken migration”—how a senior official of a large international organization conceptu-

Table 1 Singapore Policy Matrix of Labor Migration Management

Sector	Dependency Ceiling (DC)	Category of Foreign Worker	Levy Rate (\$)	
			Monthly	Daily
Manufacturing	Up to 40% of the total workforce	Skilled	150	5
		Unskilled	240	8
	Above 40% to 50% of the total workforce	Skilled	150	5
		Unskilled	280	10
Above 50% to 60% of the total workforce	*Skilled/Unskilled	450	15	
Construction	1 local full-time worker to 5 foreign workers	Skilled	150	5
		****Experienced & exempted from MYE	300	10
		Unskilled	470	16
Marine	1 local full-time worker to 3 foreign workers	Skilled	150	5
		Unskilled	295	10
Process	1 local full-time worker to 5 foreign workers	Skilled	150	5
		****Experienced & exempted from MYE	300	10
		Unskilled	300	10
Services	Up to 30% of the total workforce	Skilled	150	5
		Unskilled	240	8
	Above 30% to 35% of the total workforce	*Skilled/Unskilled	280	10
Above 35% to 45% of the total workforce	*Skilled/Unskilled	450	15	
Harbour Craft	1 local full-time worker to 9 foreign workers No of crews (shown on MPA Harbour Craft Licence) × 2 The lower quota will apply	Certificated Crew	150	5
		Non-Certificated Crew	240	8
Domestic Worker	NA	NA	295/**200	10/**7
S Pass Holder	***10% of the total workforce	Skilled	50	2

Source: www.mom.gov.sg, accessed at April 13, 2007

alized migration that does not meet the expectations of migrants or governments—is not only wasteful but also dangerous to the host society.⁸⁾ The economicization of public policies thus does not imply neglect about the social and the political. Quite the contrary, the devotion to the law of the market is based on the faith that social control will be most effective when subjugated to the divine logic of “The Market.”

Micromanagement of labor migration greatly empowers employers and intermediary agencies. While it is acknowledged that labor migration policies are often the outcome of “client politics”—that policies are formulated through negotiations between economic interest groups and government officials outside the public eye (Freeman 1995: 2001)—sector-specific management is particularly susceptible to behind-the-

scenes lobbying (see Martin 2006). The gradual but steady extension of the list of occupations open for trainees in Japan and South Korea has been almost single-handedly promoted by employers. Furthermore, as the sector-specific programs are meant to meet market demands as accurately and quickly as possible, employers and private agents are essential to ensure good worker-job matching. Sector-specific management is not unique to Asia, but is a worldwide trend.⁹ Compared to guest worker programs in Western Europe in the 1950s, governments in industrial countries now tend to trust employers and labor agencies more than other governments.¹⁰ Employers, not unions, develop migration program rules (Martin 2006).

But what empowers employers and agencies the most is not the economicization of public policies, but the governmentalization of the society that turns employers into arms of the governments. All three countries tie migrants to their employers, and migrants are not allowed to change jobs. Once dismissed by the employer, the migrant automatically becomes illegal. Some NGOs in South Korea criticize this as a “system of modern slavery” (Seol 2005: 18), but the supposedly progressive EPP does not change much in this regard. EPP still requires migrants to work at the workplace as indicated in the initial labor contract they signed, and only in exceptional circumstances (such as factory close-down) can workers appeal to be transferred to other employers through the government Employment Security Center (Seol and Goh 2005: 55). In Singapore at the end of the 1990s, some small construction teams, mostly set up by enterprising migrants from China or local Chinese, brought workers from China to farm them out, or simply asked them to look for jobs themselves. To distinguish this from the official employer-tied programs, the system was called “free labor” (*ziyou gong*) migration. Since free workers often found jobs with higher wages, it was quite popular with migrants. But both the Singaporean and Chinese authorities saw this as deeply troublesome and were determined to crack down. “Free labor equals black labor (*heigong*),” the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Technology and Economic Cooperation (2001) declared in an urgent circular aimed at stemming it. The Chinese embassy in Singapore reiterates that “free labor is illegal,” as printed in its certificate authorizing Singapore agencies to recruit PRC workers. Thus, although migration is aimed at enhancing labor market flexibility, once the migrants are at the destination, they are deprived of all access to the labor market.

This migration management can be aptly summarized by the Chinese expression “one carrot, one hole” (*yige luobo yige keng*). The phrase refers to the situation in state socialism when work units could not create, remove, or modify positions, and staff could not change jobs either. While the Chinese communist government effectively put the carrots “on the move” as part of its reform agenda of building a market economy, which in turn contributed to the increase in outmigration, the migrants now find themselves trapped in “free” countries by policies that are more restrictive than those in Cultural Revolution era China.

Tying workers to employers or agencies severely impedes migrants' bargaining power. In 2004, a hidden camera found in the change room of nine Liaoning female migrants in Tokushima, Japan, triggered a huge outcry in China. The Liaoning provincial government had to send a special delegation to Japan to intervene. Despite the high level of political attention and the support that the workers gathered, they decided not to bring the case to the court. This was because if the employer were convicted, the factory would be closed down and all the workers would be deported back to China.

Martin (2006) predicts that, with the replacement of government dominated macro policies by detailed micromanagement, so-called "policy gaps"—discrepancies between policy goals and actual outcomes—will become wider in the coming decades. Governments will have a harder time administering these multiple programs in times of tight budgets and deregulated labor markets. Indeed, governments may have fewer policy tools to control migration directly without going through a third party. But this does not mean that states' power is necessarily undermined.

Conclusions

My paper questions two dichotomies prevalent in the current literature on migration and globalization. First, the literature commonly sets an expansive capital that is hungry for flexible labor against a protectionist state that is primarily concerned with social order; in other words, a dichotomy between economic globalization and the nation-state (e.g. Harris 1995). Second, there is a dichotomy between migrant networks and sovereign states. As reflected in the notion of "globalization/transnationalism from below," migration is expected to become self-perpetuating (for example by developing strong transnational networks and by pushing for family reunion programs) and would thus seemingly pose challenges to a rigid, territorialized state. Despite the differences between Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, this paper suggests that these notions—largely based on western experiences—have underestimated Asian states' governing capacity. The relations between state, capital, and labor in the context of globalization play out distinctly in this region. If we want to develop grand but grounded narratives of the Asian political economy, which could provide the basis for more fruitful intellectual and political debates, labor migration may well open an especially valuable new window.

Notes

- 1) The first group of Chinese trainees went to Japan in either 1979 or 1980 as agricultural workers, arranged jointly by Japanese agricultural associations and the Chinese government. The numbers increased quickly after 1991 when Japan expanded the trainee system.
- 2) In early 2006, when I collected most of the data for this project, 1 US Dollar (USD) equaled approximately 1,000 South Korean Won (KRW).
- 3) Singapore has a long history of labor migration and migration policies. The British colonial

- government passed an Immigration Restriction Ordinance in 1928 and introduced a migrant labor quota system.
- 4) I searched the entry “Contract Labor or Recruitment Agencies or Consultancy or Services > Southeast Asia” (accessed December 26, 2006).
 - 5) Relevant research includes Wilson 1995; Asano Tamanoi 2000; Young 1999; Brooks 1998; McDowell 2003.
 - 6) In 2004, 40 percent of all Chinese migrant workers overseas were working in manufacturing industries, 26 percent in construction, and 14 percent in agriculture, forestry, and fishing industries (CHINCA 2004: 10–11).
 - 7) The term “just-in-time” migration means that migrants move “rapidly between different employers and families, providing quick labor force both for employers and kin.”
 - 8) Conversation in Barcelona, September 2004. The official asserted that a large proportion of migrants came to Italy “by mistake” as they are not whom the government wanted, and he suggested governments and international organizations stop the “wrong migration.”
 - 9) For example, the UK government introduced a sector-based labor migration scheme in May 2003. The scheme grants 10,000 quotas to the industries of food processing and hospitality and catering, and allows them to recruit foreign workers aged between 18 and 30 on one-year work visas.
 - 10) Abella suggested that the end of government recruitment and the emergence of private players were due to the frustration with government behavior. Conversation on 27 April, 2006, University of Oxford.

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