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Ethnic Migrants and Casinos in Singapore and Macau

Juan Zhang

Current affiliation:

School of Social Science, University of Queensland

St Lucia, QLD 4072 Australia

Email: juan.zhang@uq.edu.au

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Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Bristol

43 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UU, United Kingdom

Email: zhang.jess@gmail.com

Abstract

This chapter offers an empirical account on migrant workers, their identities and their embodied experiences of labor hierarchy along ethnic lines in mega-casino resorts in Asia. As casino resorts become opportunities for fast-tract economic development and urban renewal in the region since 2010, the Asian gaming sector has become a major industry relying heavily on rural-urban, inter-regional and international migrant labour. With a focus on Filipino and Chinese casino workers in Singapore and Macau, this chapter explores complex inequalities experienced by migrants in a highly cosmopolitan and highly competitive work environment. Job hierarchies are often established based on cultural assumptions of particular characteristics and competencies attributed to different groups, consolidating classed and gendered stereotypes in the workplace. Although migrant workers in casinos try to resist negative ethnic stereotyping by emphasizing on their credentials and professionalism, they continue to perform the identity of the "perfect worker" with an "Asian-style" of conformity, self-discipline, and flexibility.

Introduction

Workers in Southeast Asia are on the move. The World Bank (2017) estimates that countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) now supply 8 percent of the world's migrants, who cross various national, cultural, and politico-economic boundaries in search of better economic opportunities. Intraregional migration has grown significantly over the past decades, with Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand as regional migration destinations. Around 6.5 million migrants now reside and work in these most desirable destinations, taking up a range of employment in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, health care, domestic work, hospitality, and service sectors (United Nations 2015).

As millions cross borders in Southeast Asia, migrants constitute a mobile workforce that continues to provide inexpensive, flexible, and often times disposable labor that supports the region's rapid economic growth and integration. Perceived by many as "a necessary cog in the machinery of capital accumulation" (Terry 2014:79), most migrant workers are seen as to be "naturally suited" for low-end, low skilled, and undesirable jobs that somehow match their "cultural traits" or various "innate characteristics". Such imaginations of migrant "natural dispositions" justify inequalities in wage levels, labor rights and welfare processes across borders. They also consolidate the hierarchical formation of stratified work relations along racial, ethnic, gender and class lines (Leitner 2000; Pratt 1997; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Construction workers from Thailand and Myanmar are often described as "hardworking" and "diligent", who rarely complain about the "bare life" they live in the host society (Kitiarsa 2014). Filipino workers, on the other hand, are seen as "naturally caring" and "cheerful" (e.g. Chin 2008; Guevarra 2014), and are therefore "perfectly suited" to work in care work and service-oriented industries. Prevailing stereotypes that certain kinds of jobs are best performed by certain groups normalize the discursive framing of labour identity, denying migrant workers the ability to access a higher degree of entitlement, acknowledgement, and upward social mobility in host societies (see Kelly 2012; Mullings 2012).

This chapter contributes to the debate on the production of multiple and complex inequalities in the cosmopolitan workplace, where ethnicity, gender, and class continue to bear significance on labouring subjectivities. Locating Southeast Asian migrants in an exceptional and truly globalized industry of casino gaming and entertainment in two holiday destinations in the region – Singapore and Macau, this chapter aims to show how migrant subject formation and social relations are produced through intersectionality. In particular, ethnicity, gender and class shape the ways in which migrant "self-fashioning" takes place in cosmopolitan casino resorts, where schemes of discipline and regulation reinforce hegemonic ideas of skill, competency, and professionalism. Ethnicity in this

case is theorized as a purposefully constructed and carefully maintained *awareness of difference* that produces a set of categorizing practices to formalize and normalize unequal positions of power (Louie 2014; Wallman 1996). In the cosmopolitan workplace, a worker's ethnicity is both ascribed as a pre-given social identity (i.e. often one and the same as one's nationality), and as a set of "soft skills" that indicates this person's "natural disposition", communicational competencies, and labor market desirability (Friberg and Midtboen 2018). Rather than showing something "innate" and "unchanging" about an individual, ethnicity makes sense only in social situations where "us" and "them" need some degree of differentiation. As Wallman (1996:2) argues eloquently, "it is not possible for me to be 'ethnic' by myself, or even in the company of others of my own ethnic kind. Each of us needs a 'them' to make us feel like part of an 'us'." The production of difference in the globalized workplace becomes extremely useful when labouring subject are "interpellated" into working beings with appropriate appearances, proper conducts, and the right kind of attitudes (Gill 2008; McDowell et al. 2007). Along this theoretical line, this chapter examines not the "ethnicity" of transnational casino workers per se, but the specific social relations and power locations where workers' ethnicity can be used as a productive marker of difference and hierarchy.

Mega casino resorts provide an interesting case for analysis because of their "exceptionality" (Zhang and Yeoh 2016). On one hand, these resorts are the cosmopolitan workplace par excellence where employees from diverse cultural and national backgrounds come together and work under one roof in the global gaming industry that is deeply rooted in the speculative logic of neoliberal capitalism (Vlcek 2015). On the other hand, casino resorts often require a more fundamental separation between "us" and "them" in the Asian contexts, when the moral economy of gambling produces sharply differentiated subjects associated with notions of productivity and risk (Zhang Forthcoming). Chinese and Indian nationals of a lower socio-economic status (often loosely defined, as these two categories can include a much wider group of individuals with East Asian and South Asian features), for example, are often believed to face a "higher risk" of gambling addiction and are in need of "regulation" and "protection"; whereas Western (i.e. white) patrons and employees are believed to be "low risk" individuals who are capable of working and having a good time at the casino. This form of "typecasting" of different groups at casino resorts shows the intersectionality of power, when one's appearance and skin colour are tied to economic status, class positions, self-conduct, gender identities and social relations. Ethnic typecasting also implicates the wider perceptions on work competency, professionalism, and performance as it influences silently the ways in which individual ranks, wage levels, and career development are determined in the cosmopolitan workplace.

This chapter begins with a theoretical engagement of ethnicity and its embodied complex inequalities in the context of labour migration in Southeast Asia. Following a brief discussion of research methods, this chapter introduces the Asian casino economy and its rapid development in the past few year, with Singapore and Macau as examples of success. Next, discussions on ethnicity as a skill in the casino will show how one's ethnic identity becomes an indicator of a set of informal skills. In this process, certain ethnic migrant groups "fashion" a particular professional identity that fits and conforms to the dominant perception of the "ideal worker" in the casino. This "fashioning" in turn consolidates the cultural association of ethnicity and "soft skills". Lastly, this chapter examines the politics of differentiation through the making of "strategic alterity" (Kingsolver 2007). The chapter concludes by drawing attention to migrant strategies of building a transnational "portfolio career" that plays up on what they believe as positive ethnic stereotyping. In doing so they also downplay negative stereotyping that trivializes their professional contribution and identity in the workplace. Ethnicity in this case can be performed strategically as migrant workers actively promote an "Asian-style" of conformity, self-discipline, and flexibility that may potentially enhance their desirability in the neoliberal labor market.

Ethnic Migrants and Complex Inequalities

Ethnicity has been an enduring concept in the social sciences and continues to be a focus of theoretical debate. Earlier studies on race and ethnicity focus primarily on the power relations between groups that are categorized as "us" and those deemed as the "Other" (e.g. Bhabha 1983; Briggs 2003). Such a focus shows the intellectual tradition of colonial and imperial projects, where racial and ethnic classifications have been used as a powerful tool to serve the management of Empire (e.g. Stoler 2010). Classic works such as Fabian (1983), McClintock (1995), Loomba (2005), and Eriksen (2002) show the persistence of the politics of making difference through colonial, imperial and nationalist projects, where groups are classed and categorized by a set of selected cultural, social and biological traits regarded as "natural" and "inherited characteristics" of these individuals. Critical race and ethnic studies have since moved the debate forward to highlight the specific conditions of power where one group is able to exercise dominance over others based on ideologies of ethnic differentiation (Sonenshein 1993; Yelvington 1995).

Feminist scholars point to the interrelationships between race, ethnicity, gender and class, and call for a stronger analytical attention on questions of power and multiple forms of social inequalities through an examination of intersectionality (Valentine 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006). Scholars also suggest racial performativity as a key analytical lens to unmask the ways in which identities are socially constructed and contested (Muñoz 2006; Veninga 2009). Classrooms and workplaces are

particular social sites where "bodies do race" (Veninga 2009:107), as individuals perform their identities in the normalized context of discipline, surveillance, and self-regulation (Crang 1994; McDowell 2009). It has been noted that many forms of work involve specific "performances" of certain labouring subjectivities. Low-skilled service sectors, for example, rely heavily on feminized labour to perform domestic and care work (see England 2005; Parreñas 2015). Merchant seafaring, on the other hand, has become a male-dominated ethnic niche industry staffed primarily by Fipilino maritime workers (McKay 2007).

Domestic and care work, commercial seafaring, health and hospitality (Batnitzky and McDowell 2013), call centres (Shome 2006) – these sectors are among the emerging and globalizing "ethnic labour market" that relies on the racialization and the specific "sorting" of different immigrant groups into different lines of work. The reproduction of a niche industry is maintained through a continuation of ethnic and gendered "typecasting" which determines who gets what jobs. Ethnic migrants are allocated into different types of work because "each group is perceived to posit a unique set of informal qualifications or 'soft skills' (Friberg and Midtboen 2018:1464)." It's not uncommon to hear employers in different trades comment that migrant workers are more "hardworking" (McLaughlin 2010:79), willing to "go the extra mile" (Friberg and Midtboen 2018:1472), and more "service-oriented" (Chin 2008:12). Southeast Asian migrant workers in particular embody the "naturalness" of good service work, as Chin (2008:12) cites a cruise line management staff who claims that: "they seem to have been born with a wonderful service culture. They always greet the guests and always smile. And they do it so naturally." As Mullings (2012:414) notes, "performances of deference, docility, aggression, or care can be crucial to the way that individual bodies are recruited, assessed, or advanced within work systems." The ascription of "service orientation" to Southeast Asian migrant workers effectively places them on the global labour market hierarchy where they are seen as "naturally suited" to be "servants of globalization" (Parreñas 2015) from various social and economic positions.

Once such stereotypical cultural representations are firmly established in the global labour market, migrant workers often find it difficult to shake off biased images and perceptions. With the rapid expansion of neoliberal industries on a global scale, a process of "strategic alterity" (Kingsolver 2007) produces different categories of labouring subjects. Using tobacco farmers and farmworkers as examples, Kingsolver (2007:89) shows how American farm owners are valued as "independent" and "free-trading citizens of the market", whereas low-wage and non-wage farmworkers (mostly migrants) are no more than being part of the "globalized labor force" supplementary to the tobacco industry. Migrant workers therefore are denied any claim of ownership or recognition of their contribution to the multi-million dollar industry, as they are "othered" as strategic alters and

enslaved labour in neoliberal capitalism. McKay's (2007) study shows a similar "othering" process on commercial ships where Asian workers constitute nearly 70 per cent of the seafaring labor force on-board yet remain de-valued as cheap maritime workers who can be easily replaced. Filipino seamen have learned to "fashion themselves as masculine exemplars" (McKay 2007:626) to resist and go beyond ethnic stereotyping to defend their status on and off the ship, at work and in their home communities.

In a truly cosmopolitan workplace like the mega casino resort, categorical associations between ethnicity, gender, and occupational "sorting" remain stubbornly consistent. Similar to the McDowell et al.'s (2007:3) description of Bellman International (pseudonym of an international hotel chain in London), within the casino resorts "a set of often-stereotypical assumptions about embodied social attributes influences employers' and managers' judgements about the acceptability of particular workplace presences and performances." There have been studies on the gendered, and often sexualized identities of female casino workers (de Volo 2003; Jones and Chandler 2007), and the hegemonic control of labour practices in the United States and South Africa (Sallaz 2009). Zhang et al. (2017) use "self-fashioning" to describe the embodied experiences of flexibility and discipline in Singapore's casinos. As casino workers perform professionalism, many strive to become "exceptional workers" (Zhang et al. 2017:4) who are highly employable in the transnational labour market. What remains missing in these discussions is an examination of how ethnicity and class also play into the construction of a working identity in global casino establishments. This chapter aims to fill this gap and provide a preliminary account on cultural representations, class and labour subjectivation in Asia's thriving casino economy.

Research and Methods

This chapter is based on two years of research (2013-2015) in Singapore and Macau's mega casino resorts. Data used in this chapter were collected in two projects, the first on the expanding casino industry in Singapore and its associated labour and consumer mobilities, and the second on the development of the Asian casino economy with a focus on Macau. Fieldwork included semi-structured interviews with local and migrant workers in the casino resorts in these two destinations, and employees in hotel and hospitality, entertainment and retail as part of the lager casino resort establishments.

This chapter draws insight from interviews and interactions with 40 casino employees in Singapore and Macau. One third of the interviews were with Singapore and Macau local workers, and the rest come from the Philippines, Malaysia, China, Taiwan, and Japan. Most of the migrant workers in Singapore's casino resorts are hired as skilled or semi-skilled employees with either an

Employment Pass or an S Pass under the country's "highly stratified system of work visas (Wise 2016:2289)." With the ASEAN agreement on visa exemption, Malaysia and Philippine nationals can enter Singapore without a visa for 14 days. A number of Malaysian and Filipino employees are able to find work in Singapore's casino resorts within the 14-day period and convert to work visas subsequently. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly difficult to gain employment this way as Singapore tightens its immigration regulations. Migrant workers now have to either go through labour agencies or apply for vacancies via online job search engines (e.g. JobStreet.com or JobsDB.com). Interviews by skype are common. Internal referrals within multiple casino establishments are widely practiced.

In Macau, most Southeast Asians can enter and stay as a visitor for 30 days without a visa. This longer time frame allowed more migrant workers from, for instance, Indonesia and the Philippines to go to Macau without a job offer in hand. Once arrived, they often stay with friends or acquaintances and start actively looking for work. Migrant workers obtained non-resident work visas in order to be legally employed in the cosmopolitan resorts. As casinos and tourism are the main industries in Macau, and due to Macau's local labour protectionism (Choi 2016), available jobs to migrants are mainly in the low-paying service sectors with limited long-term employment prospect. Workers from Southeast Asia constantly rely on co-ethnic networks for work-related introductions and referrals. They also use employment agencies if they are close to the end of the visitor's visa. At the time of research, most of the workers interviewed had been working in the casino resorts in a range of services for as little as six months to as long as about three years. By the time of writing, some have left the casinos for a better job and others are actively looking for new positions. Most of employees working on the main casino floors had to sign a confidentiality agreement as part of the contract, which prohibited them from sharing any specific information concerning the day to day operations within the casino establishment. To respect the confidentiality agreement, interviews centred mainly on casino employees' professional experiences, migration trajectories, and personal views on their lives and employment in a foreign country. Informant identities and their specific occupations are deliberately kept vague, and pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter.

The Asian Casino Economy

In the past decade, a "casino fever" took over Asia (New York Times 2014) where luxurious mega casino resorts became spectacles of economic growth and urban development. PricewaterhouseCoopers projected in 2015 that casino revenues throughout the Asia Pacific region grew by 18.3% per annum on average (PwC 2015), led by the exceptional performances by casinos in Singapore and Macau. The *New York Times* reported that within two years of the opening of

Singapore's two casino resorts, or Integrated Resorts (IR) – Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa – visitor arrivals increased by 50 per cent and tourism revenue reached $18 billion (New York Times 2014). The IR business success helped to fashion a new "Singapore model" in leisure gaming with a highly regulated approach (Zhang 2017). After Macau, Singapore has become the second best grossing leisure and gambling destination in the region, cashing in billions in not only gaming but also hospitality, retail, and entertainment.

Macau's status as the most established gambling hub in Asia has also elevated to being an Asian metropolis during the past decade (Simpson 2014) and a consumption heaven frequented by the increasingly affluent Asian visitors. As a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, Macau is home to over 40 casino resorts with major international casino operators including Wynn, Sands, Galaxy Entertainment, SJM Holdings, MGM Holdings and Melco Crown. In 2013, Macau's leisure and gaming revenue grossed US$45 billion, surpassing the total revenue generated on the entire Las Vegas Strip by seven times (Simpson 2018:75). Although the gaming industry in Macau and Singapore took a massive hit in 2014 with China's economic slowdown, and especially when Beijing launched a series of anti-corruption crackdown that targeted overseas VIP casino gambling, in 2016 the industry saw a turnaround. The Global Betting and Gaming Consultants (GBGC, an international gaming consultancy company) estimated that the global gambling revenue achieved US$435 billion in 2017, with Asia being the largest gambling region, taking up 31.3% of the market (GBGC 2018).

Such success stories inspired other Asian cities to follow suit. In the less developed parts of Asia, mega casino resorts are seen as opportunities "for fast-track economic accumulation and infrastructural development", and for "drawing in foreign direct investment, contributing to state tax revenue, and creating local jobs (Zhang 2017:651)." In countries like the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, large-scale international casino resorts were built and in operation, contributing to the booming gambling industry across Asia. As of 2017, at least 17 new IRs are being planned in the region. South Korea opened the "first Korean-style integrated resort" Paradise City in 2017. Japan's parliament passed a bill of casino legalization. Taiwan is going through rounds of referendums on casino legalization as well. These projects, backed by strong market and states' political interests, promote different versions of Asian "casino urbanism". As Zhang (2017:666) notes, "China's growing wealth and Asia's rise in power and influence stimulate imaginations of a profitable future made possible by the recent casino fever."

In both Singapore and Macau, the mega-casinos and associated leisure and entertainment industries make significant contribution to the national economies and labour force participation. S. Iswaran (2012), a Singaporean minister in the Prime Minister's Office and second minister for Home

Affairs and Trade and Industry in 2012, noted that Singapore's two IRs contributed between 1.5 to 2 per cent of the nation's GDP and employed nearly 2 per cent of Singapore's total labour force. The gaming industry in Macau contributed to 47 per cent of the GDP in 2016, and provided over 92,000 jobs, accounting for 23.8 per cent of Macau's total employment (Sheng and Gu 2018:76).

In order to support the operation and expansion of the gaming industry, large numbers of imported workers are recruited from the region, mostly in China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan and Hong Kong. In Macau, migrant workers are barred from taking up the higher-end occupations in the gaming industry, such as croupiers and pit supervisors (Sheng and Gu 2018:74). In Singapore, although there is no specific regulatory order that prohibits foreign workers from taking up certain types of jobs in the casino industry, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) maintains a strict "foreign worker quota" system that sets a limit on the number of Work Permit and S Pass holders the industry can hire.[1]

There is no official statistics on the exact number of migrant workers hired in the casino industry in Singapore and Macau. Interviews with several Human Resource (HR) staff members in the industry yielded vague answers. Foreign workers remain a sensitive issue and processes of hiring are confidential information in both countries. It is clear however that the casino sectors cannot function properly without migrant workers, and business operators are constantly battling with hiring restrictions and quota systems because, as one HR manager has implied, they prefer foreign workers over local workers if given a choice. One Singaporean HR staff made a comment off the record that the casinos would have to hire local workers just to have more quota for foreign workers. With restrictive labour regulations, migrant labour become invisible in official statistics and are treated as secondary to local residents and citizens. While they make significant contribution to the economic success of the industry and the national economies, they remain "an indentured, invisible majority" and "immediately deportable non-citizens", just like the disenfranchised migrant workers in Dubai (Davis 2006:64).

The Perfect Worker? Ethnicity as Soft Skills

As a multi-billion dollar industry and as new icons of Asia's tourism destinations, mega casino resorts in recent years have become a highly desirable place for work in the region. The cultural fascination with glamourous casinos (usually fuelled by images and imaginations of Las Vegas or Monaco

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[1] See https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/s-pass/quota-and-levy/levy-and-quota-requirements. The current cap for hiring S Pass holders is 15% of the company's total workforce in the service sector. Employers are also required to pay a "foreign worker levy" for S Pass holders. In the service sector, the monthly levy rates for one worker are tiered at SG$330 and SG$650.

portrayed in Hollywood blockbusters), the cosmopolitan lure of working in a world-class facility, working among international colleagues, and attractive salary packages (compared to other available jobs to transnational workers) give casino work a particular kind of appeal that is beyond just an ordinary "service job". Zhang et al. (2017:10) have shown how working in Singapore's casinos is associated with not only "gaining relevant skills and qualifications" but also "gaining status, recognition and possibly prestige" in the globalizing labour market within the service and hospitality sectors. In their 2007 study of employment in an international hotel in London, McDowell et al. (2007:8) note the increasing presence of migrant labour in London's hospitality sectors due to their low labour cost and the possibility of making flexible employment contracts. Citing a survey of UK employers, they show that foreign workers not only "filled technical skill gaps", but also embodying work attitudes as "being more appropriate for the hospitality sector". In fact, one of the key reasons for the employment of migrant workers was their "capacity for hard work" (McDowell et al. 2007:8).

In Asia's casino resorts, similar views and perceptions of migrant "work attitudes" and "capacities" are also strong, as employers rely on a flexible migrant labour force to keep their businesses functional and profitable. Asian employees are particularly welcome as they fit in different types of jobs that require different kinds of skills and knowledge. Employees from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan usually work in front office, customer relations, and VIP services. Most of them are female, embodying a specific kind of femininity for appropriate "emotional labour" (Hochschild 1983).[2] The main reasons for Chinese and Taiwanese employees to work directly with resort guests are their perceived "cultural affinity" to Chinese gamblers and their ability to speak fluent mandarin Chinese and Cantonese. These front-office employees are selected based not only on their ability to "understand our valued guests better" (according to a casino management staff member in Macau), but also on their "pleasant appearances and personalities". In Singapore's resorts, the management places a strong emphasis on diversity and the importance of having a multinational team of workers in the establishment to service international guests. Employees' ability to communicate in English and to provide "professional services" (e.g. servility, deference, effective communication) is considered more important than individual appearances. By simply having a "Chinese" face is usually enough, and the ability to understand and speak Chinese is a plus.

In Macau, however, things work out differently. Because the majority of the clientele come from mainland China and Hong Kong, specific requirements on the cultural and image presentations in the casinos become a must. Young female workers who are employed as receptionists, front-desk

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[2] There is a wealth of research on gender and emotional labour in sociology, anthropology, and organizational studies. For thorough reviews, see (Guy and Newman 2004; Wharton 2009).

staff, and VIP lounge staff usually come from the northern parts of China, who are believed to be taller, "in shape" (*shencai hao*), "more beautiful" with "a fairer skin tone" (compared to Chinese originally from southern provinces who are believed to be shorter and have darker skin tones). There are also fairly open criteria for body height and weight. One of the front-desk employees explained that although it was never stated in the hiring conditions, everyone knew that one's appearance was extremely important for female job applicants. "The taller and the slimmer the better of course", she explained matter-of-factly, "and image management is key. If we are not careful and have gained weight while on the job, we will be removed from front-line services." A male guest relations employee originally from Shandong province in northern China commented that "the employer wants everyone on the front line to look like models". Although male workers are subjected to less scrutiny with regard to their appearances, they are expected to be "well groomed" in general – i.e. dressing sharply, doing up their hair in style, and keeping fit.

In both Singapore and Macau, many mainland Chinese employees are aware that they are hired not because of their professional qualifications but simply because they are Chinese. Their supposed cultural knowledge of what mainland Chinese casino guests need and desire for is considered an important part of their employment. A Chinese employee in one of Singapore's casino resorts who called himself Jim[3] explained that it was not just simply about understanding the Chinese language. "Singaporean Chinese or Malaysian Chinese can understand and speak Chinese well, but they may not understand what a mainland Chinese guest really likes or dislikes." Some mainland Chinese gamblers believe that the likelihood of losing is be greater if they gamble within the same casino resort where they stay. Some guests believe that by consuming free drinks and free meals within the same casino where they gamble, their luck is likely to run out because they have taken advantage of casino "freebies". In these instances, Jim explained, it would be important to not promote in-house gambling packages or give free gifts or drinks so as to avoid offending these Chinese guests. But such "taboos" may not apply to all Chinese guests, as ethnic Chinese from Malaysia or Indonesia usually enjoy free gifts and packaged deals very much. A nuanced understanding of the different cultural preferences among guests of different Chinese backgrounds therefore is key to the delivery of satisfactory services. There are also occasions when problems take place in the guest's hotel room where housekeeping staff may have accidently moved the arrangements of the guests' personal items during cleaning (e.g. the orientation of shoes and bags, or the specific positioning of lucky charms that are supposed to enhance the guest's winning

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[3] Most Chinese casino employees in Singapore and Macau choose English names for work. This is done so they could be easily identified by international guests and supervised by managerial staff who are not Chinese. Jim is a pseudonym.

chance), guest relations staff like Jim need to come in to act as a cultural mediator and to resolve potential conflicts. In this sense, being mainland Chinese itself is seen as a kind of skill in guest relations and guest services that comes with the familiarity of certain cultural notions and practices.

Away from the front line of casino work, in switchboard and in a range of other VIP services for example, Taiwanese employees are seen as perfect for the job because they are more soft spoken, more gentle and polite in comparison to mainland Chinese employees (who are often stereotyped as being loud and lacking a "soft touch"). In the more hidden lines of work, gentle voices, patience, and a pleasant demeanour are regarded as more important than the guest's first impression of striking beauty or physical attractiveness. This is especially the case when VIP services involve taking care of the VIP gambler's family members (usually the wife and children who do not gamble). Taiwanese employees are seen as gentle, detailed and caring. Female employees are not required to look like "models", as they project a professional image of being friendly and approachable, suitable to work with the entire family. Their line of service is still heavily feminized, but intentionally de-sexualized so it is seen as less aggressive and more care-oriented.

In food and beverage, housekeeping and concierge, Southeast Asian employees become the dominant group. The stereotypical portrayal that Southeast Asians are diligent, hard-working workers who rarely complain persists. These jobs and positions are key to the successful operation of casino resorts, yet they are often located further away from direct interaction with casino guests. Kitchen work and housekeeping in particular provide backstage functions in all casino resorts. This line of work is strenuous and highly labour intensive, and it is something local workers are reluctant to take up. Filipino, Malaysian and Indonesian workers with restaurant and hotel experiences usually fill up these positions. Mainland Chinese workers who are hired through transnational employment agencies also take up these jobs with lower visibility and lower status. They are often older and do not possess the physical attractiveness to work in the front line. One Filipino supervisor in the housekeeping sector of one casino resort in Singapore made clear that "Asian people are the best labour". He said:

> Compared to the Europeans, Americans, and the Western side, Asians are the best. Hardworking, best in service, good recall, patience, everything. Mostly patience, mostly Southeast Asian people. Pinoys, Indonesians…Indonesians are quite good. It's the way we Filipinos work and Indonesians work, almost the same. But if you see someone, oh, from China, (big sigh and laugh), we are not being racist! We are not being racist. We just know. It comes from experience.

Apart from making cultural differentiations between Asian and non-Asian workers in the back stage operations of the casino resort, there is also an internal ethnic hierarchy between different

groups of Asian workers. Mainland Chinese, in this instance, are often seen as less capable and less international compared to the more seasoned employees from the Philippines. Filipino supervisor Neal who managed a team of 23 staff members in the concierge services of one casino resort in Singapore shared the difficulties of working with mainland Chinese colleagues in his day to day experience. In the interview Neal said:

> Neal: To be honest, because of the communication, it is not that easy. Because there is a (language) barrier. I don't blame them because they are from China, so they have a different attitude, you know. Maybe it's their culture or whatever. Okay, so for them it is like "okay this is my job". They don't go the extra mile. I think because of the government that they have over in China, they just follow orders, you know. They have to be told what to do, and nothing more. If their daily work is this, even though they see something else, they will not touch it.

> Interviewer: But are the Malaysians or Filipinos in your team different? Are they more willing … (interrupted)?

> Neal: Yes, especially Filipinos. I am not saying this because I am a Filipino. But you know Filipinos are actually, they are just automatic. Yeah, automatic. They have the pride.

> Interviewer: Pride?

> Neal: About their jobs. Meaning, if this work is assigned to me, nothing problematic will happen. A sense of ownership is there.

In Neal's view, mainland Chinese workers are more difficult to work with and they deliver less satisfactory job performances because of their "culture" and "attitude", which have stopped them from becoming competent employees in the cosmopolitan casino resort. In contrast, Filipino workers are "automatic" and having a strong sense of pride and responsibility in their job, which enables them to uphold a professional identity as the "perfect worker" (Terry 2014:76) in a globalized work environment.

The contrasting constructions of labouring identities and the ethnic hierarchies based on notions of work-related "soft skills" and competencies consolidate the categorical inequalities within the stratified arrangement of casino work. Just as Friberg and Midtboen describe:

> Such soft skills may also be related to the social and communication competencies needed to interact with co-workers, employers and customers, or to more intangible personal traits, such as sociability, pleasantness, or discreetness – whatever makes someone "fit in" in a particular workplace and in particular positions. In the end of the day, subtle traits such as, demeanour, accent, style and physical appearance, will often influence employer's gut feelings about which worker "looks and sounds right" for a particular job. (Friberg and Midtboen 2018:1465)

For mainland Chinese workers who have specific cultural knowledge, stronger communicational skills, and a more attractive appearance, they are able to occupy the much desired front line work that enjoys higher visibility and better employment benefits (e.g. opportunities to receive gifts and cash tips from guests and promotions if they receive compliments). Other Southeast Asian workers will have less access to these positions. Within the back stage operations of the casino business, less attractive and less qualified Chinese workers are perceived as professionally inferior to other Asian workers who embody more desirable traits and attitudes. In the cosmopolitan workplace, what Chinese, other Asian, and non-Asian employees can and cannot do often boils down to a specific understanding of culture and ethnicity masked as "skills". Such perceptions of "skills" in return reinforce persistent stereotypes of labour and the hierarchical formations of recognition and reward in the global labour market.

Local Workers as the Other

The politics of ethnic differentiation play out not only between different groups of migrant employees in the casinos, they are also salient in the ways in which local workers are differentiated from those with transnational experiences. Quite different from studies that demonstrate workplace ethnic hierarchies where local workers are usually the valued labour force whereas migrant workers tend to occupy lower places of marginalization (e.g. Harris and Valentine 2016; Lee 2018), in the casino resorts, such hierarchies are often actively resisted and on occasions reverted. Given the casino's cosmopolitan image and reputation, local workers with little or no overseas experience are regarded as less qualified, less component, and less competitive. Migrant employees complain that locals remain employed in casino resorts simply because of their citizenship status and the local workforce protective measure that governments have enforced. In this regard, many believe that local employees in Singapore and Macau do not possess the competitive edge if they are placed in the global labor market. When migrant employees talk about their local colleagues, a common impression has it that locals are spoiled, too "fragile" as they lack a sense of self-direction and work responsibility.

The Filipino supervisor Neal in one of Singapore's casinos described the problem with manpower he had to deal with in the workplace. In concierge services where he managed over 20 employees, most came from China, Malaysia and the Philippines. There were a few local Singaporean employees from time to time, but Neal professed that these local workers often gave him various issues. Singaporeans did not really want to work in the service industry, he explained, and they certainly did not want to work under a Filipino. Employees from other countries worked with him collegially because they respected his extensive overseas experience working in

international hotel chains and resorts elsewhere. But local Singaporeans would always see him as "just a Filipino", he complained.

In Macau's casinos, high-earning jobs such as croupiers (or card dealers) are reserved only for local residents. Local dealers as young as 18 years of age can already apply for entry level positions in the casino establishments. Shi and Liu (2014) have made a clear case that young people in Macau often quit schooling to work for a casino for immediate economic gains. "Because the gambling sector does not require a college education to work in the casino and because the job market has been dominated by the sector and offers little opportunity for non-gambling professionals, education is never seen as necessary to get a 'good' job (Shi and Liu 2014:938)." In contrast, most of the migrant workers in Macau's casinos have received tertiary education or specific vocational training (e.g. in tourism or hospitality sectors) in their home countries before getting employed. Many have had extensive work experiences in the service industry. Migrant employees therefore like to see themselves as more mature, more experienced and more qualified than local workers.

In interviews, Filipino and Chinese employees often highlight their training and professionalism, and complain that their local co-workers perform poorly yet receive high salaries and bonuses. A Chinese mid-level management employee Leo said that of all the 50 plus staff members he was in charge of, the locals could not meet the same standards set by his migrant employees. "I wouldn't see anyone (local workers) who would work voluntarily overtime; but we (foreign workers) can extend working hours without payment. I can see the difference in the amount of passion for work." What Leo's words reveal is quite a troubling perception that the willingness to perform overtime work (without pay) is equated to a strong passion for work. Just as Friberg and Midtboen (2018:1465) argue, this kind of willingness is interpreted as a skill or "work ethic" that ethnic migrant workers possess, which also shows the level of exploitation they are willing to endure just to be perceived favourably in the workplace. Employers are likely to see this "willingness" as a plus, and local workers in comparison offer "no value added".

In the casino workplace, local workers are thus constructed as the "other" who make little actual contribution but continue to occupy favourable positions simply because of their resident status. In the migrant discursive construction of the local-foreign divide, local employees are strategically undervalued as the "other" to the more diligent, competent, and competitive migrant professionals. In doing so, a process of "strategic alterity" (Kingsolver 2007) takes place in the casinos where the assertion of local workers as "the other" establishes a sense of pride and superiority among transnational workers who see themselves as capable individuals in the neoliberal labour market. The Filipino housekeeping supervisor in Singapore indeed described local employees

who worked under him as almost a "burden" – "even though I see that local staff are not at the standard that I want, I cannot kick them out." Because of the labour quota system in Singapore, he explained:

> Manpower is a problem. Local can decide, "Eh, I go to another company tomorrow", and it's quite difficult for the company because we have to fight to get another local staff to fill (the gap). So you have to manage them (local employees). If he has one year (contract), you have to live with him. Especially right now MOM doesn't give us any quota (for foreign workers). Our quota is closed and of course we have to work on the budget. At the moment, the quota for PRC (mainland Chinese workers) is closed for the rest of the year. MOM is encouraging the company to hire more Singaporeans, which is difficult for us. No Singaporeans want to do work (in housekeeping). There are some, but the age is … (long pause) quite mature (laughing). We have local staff like over 60 years old. You can't scold these aunties or uncles, or tell them how to do their job.

A Filipino guest services manager Adam who works in the same resort in Singapore believed that foreign employees like him and his colleagues are far more exceptional than their local colleagues. "They (Singaporeans) somehow think that the government took foreigners in and that's why we are losing our jobs. But on the other hand, the reason why the government actually took foreigners in is that … their locals cannot do the work!" These discursive constructions that foreign workers can do the job better than locals reflect a strategic process of elevating migrants' social and professional status in the workplace. Datta and Brickell (2009:459) in their study of Polish builders on London's building sites show a similar strategy where Polish builder construct themselves as "artistic, versatile, professional, cultured, and hence 'superior' workers to English builders." In this way, Polish builders are able to "stress a Polish work ethic" and "negotiate their place in the London labour market and the social hierarchies of the building site." Polish workers thus claim that "we have a little bit more finesse as a nation" to deflect detrimental stereotypes that run along ethnic and class lines. In a similar fashion, in Singapore and Macau's casino resorts, migrant employees also highlight professional differences between themselves and local workers. In doing so, they may be able to counter certain cultural stereotypes and fashion themselves as high skilled and highly valuable employees in the neoliberal labour market (see Zhang et al. 2017).

Concluding Remarks

This chapter brings to light the intersectionality of ethnicity, gender and class in identity politics and labour hierarchies in a cosmopolitan workplace like the mega casino resorts in Singapore and Macau. Focusing on migrant workers' experiences, this chapter shows how migrant subject formation and social relations are shaped by various notions of skill, competency, and attitude that play along ethnic and class-based assumptions about "culture" and "nature". With a focus on Filipino

and Chinese casino workers in Singapore and Macau's mega resorts, this chapter shows how "Asian" workers turn themselves into "perfect employees" in global casino resorts, capable of demonstrating the right kind of professionalism, self-responsibility, and self-discipline as the ideal "neoliberal worker" (Waite 2009). Their desirability is further contrasted in the casino space against other low-wage South Asian migrant workers who patronize casinos as gamblers, who are seen as lacking self-control and easily fall into "debt traps" and develop "addictions" (e.g. Ang 2010; Kok and Lin 2010; Lee and Kor 2017). The juxtaposition of the ideal "Asian professionals" in the cosmopolitan resorts and the vulnerable low-skilled migrant workers in construction sites reflects the socially constituted meanings of ethnicity and class in migrant recipient countries.

In the casino workplace, an implicit labour hierarchy is in place based on the logic of labour racialization. Workers' racialized identities often "dictate the sorting of different immigrant groups into particular kinds of work (Kelly 2012:438)", reinforcing stereotypical perceptions of which group is suited to perform what kinds of tasks. In the casino resorts, Asian and non-Asian migrant workers occupy different positions of recognition and reward, with Chinese workers performing front line services due to imagined cultural affinity to Chinese gamblers, and Southeast Asian workers performing behind the scene tasks of cooking, cleaning, serving, and other types of care giving. Within the broader classification of "Asian workers", more subtle differentiations persist to separate the more "qualified Asians" who enjoy higher social and economic status in the workplace, and the less qualified Asians who are rendered more or less powerless in their social relations. Qualification in this sense, is akin to "skill" and remains a vague and often arbitrary marker (Friberg and Midtboen 2018:1465) that serves to differentiate rather to define. It can be about the migrant worker's education, work experience, background, or simply about one's language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and physical appearance. These different aspects are often folded into unquestioned ideas of ethnic identities and national characteristics, where some Asians are perceived as more competent and more desirable than other Asians in the labour market.

This chapter also argues that in the casino workplace migrant workers often place a strong emphasis on their transnational competencies, professionalism and flexibility to resist being identified as the inferior "Other". Many build successful "portfolio careers" (Power et al. 2013; Waite 2009) in different sectors and in different locations with the hope that their transnational work experiences would downplay their ethnic identity and its associated presumptions, and highlight their professional identity as highly desirable in a global market. In this sense, ethnic characteristics and differences are minimized where necessary when migrant workers need to project a more "cosmopolitan" identity that embodies the neutral corporate professionalism in the workplace. Their "ethnic characteristics" and cultural knowledge can also be activated strategically when these

workers need to bank in on their social capital and "soft skills" when it comes to securing an employment or demonstrating better competent work performance. The production of cultural differences in and around the casinos reinforces different positions of power, naturalizing regulatory structures that serve the neoliberal workplace.

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