# Building Brokers: How Contractors and Middling Migrants Manage Singapore's Developmental Contradictions




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## Abstract

This dissertation examines how Singapore's postcolonial developmental state has produced a multi-layered mediation system that enables state-directed capitalism to function through managed contradictions rather than bureaucratic resolution. Through multi-sited ethnography within Singapore's construction industry, archival research, and policy analysis, this study reveals how three structuring forces – global capitalism, Singapore's developmental state apparatus, and racialized citizenship – intersect to create essential intermediary positions that hold together logics the state requires but cannot officially reconcile.

The research identifies two distinct intermediary figures: citizen-contractors who mediate between state development goals and market operations; and "middling migrants", former migrant workers who mediate between contractors and current migrant labour. Rather than viewing intermediaries as marginal facilitators, the dissertation demonstrates how Singapore's development model fundamentally depends on these figures' capacity to navigate between incompatible systems – formal regulations and informal practices, state planning and market flexibility, modernization imperatives and traditional relationships – without fundamentally resolving the tensions between them.

This research contributes to anthropological literature on intermediaries by showing how they function not merely as brokers or fixers but as constitutive elements of state-capitalist assemblages, revealing how political-economic systems manage inherent contradictions by distributing mediating labour across differentiated social positions

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# 1: Introduction

Down a busy road next to some modular high-rise public flats lies a world beyond most Singaporeans' imagination. The industrial estate in Kaki Bukit looks like suburban America, except instead of cookie-cutter homes there are rows of prefabricated offices in muted pinks and yellows. Equipment lies scattered about in what safety inspectors might call organized chaos: metal bars, plumbing fixtures, and air conditioning units littered haphazardly on shelves and concrete floors. Someone is sawing a piece of metal, sparks flying, in what is decidedly an unsafe environment for passers-by like me. As a woman, I stand out in these industrial estates built for construction and manufacturing trades. Often, a worker glances at me quite curiously, wondering what I am doing in this part of town on a weekday.

These industrial estates represent more than just spaces of production. They embody the material legacy of one of the twentieth century's most ambitious experiments in state-directed development. The contractors who occupy these prefabricated units, managing everything from sole proprietorships to regional headquarters, emerged from specific historical conditions that transformed Singapore from colonial entrepôt to industrial city-state within a single generation. Their scattered equipment and multilingual coordination practices reflect deeper questions about how rapid development actually functions when state planning meets global capitalism.

The diversity hidden behind uniform 'contractor' designations reveals systematic patterns that official narratives about Singapore's modernization rarely acknowledge. How do these figures coordinate between state bureaucracy and construction sites when formal procedures cannot accommodate the flexibility that rapid development demands? What enables them to manage across linguistic, cultural, and regulatory boundaries that other business forms cannot bridge?

How do their practices allow Singapore's developmental model to pursue contradictory goals – rapid accumulation and political stability, international integration and strategic autonomy – that formal institutional arrangements cannot openly reconcile?

These questions direct attention toward contractors as important intermediaries who enable complex systems to function through coordination across competing demands. Why contractors? Of all the figures who populate Singapore's development story – the bureaucrat, the banker, the factory worker, the trader – the contractor emerges as particularly revealing precisely because of their in-between position. They straddle multiple worlds: between state and market, formal and informal economies, local and migrant labour, Chinese-educated and English-educated classes, 'old' and 'new' Singapore. Unlike bankers who represent pure financial capital or bureaucrats who embody state power, contractors must constantly navigate between different forms of power and knowledge. They must speak multiple languages, literal and metaphorical. On any given day, a contractor might move between Hokkien or basic native languages with workers, English with officials, and Mandarin with suppliers. They must understand both the formal requirements of state tenders and the informal networks that make projects possible.

Contractors thus occupy a unique position in Singapore's narrative of progress: simultaneously celebrated as examples of entrepreneurial success and criticized as obstacles to modernization, they embody the contradictions of the city-state's developmental capitalism. Studying

contractors thus offers a 'cutting point'[1] (Strathern, 1996), or a position from which to view multiple systems in relation to each other. Their practices show how developmental capitalism operates through rather than despite institutional contradictions, requiring figures who can translate between state planning and construction reality, between formal compliance and operational flexibility, between the competing demands that rapid development generates but cannot formally reconcile.

Singapore's independence in 1965 generated construction demands that exceeded anything the colonial period had required or imagined. The new state confronted immediate existential crises: mass unemployment affecting nearly 15% of the workforce, acute housing shortages with thousands living in overcrowded shophouses and deteriorating kampung settlements, and economic uncertainty following the traumatic separation from Malaysia that had eliminated Singapore's natural hinterland overnight (Turnbull, 2009; Huff, 1995). The People's Action Party's response proved audacious in both scale and speed. Within a single generation, they transformed a colonial entrepôt dependent on trade intermediation into a diversified industrial city-state through comprehensive state intervention in economic and social life (Rodan, 1989; Low, 2001).

The scale defied imagination. Between 1965 and 1990, Singapore constructed over 600,000 units of public housing. Entire kampung populations relocated from wooden stilts to concrete towers, where over 80% of Singaporeans moved into new Housing Development Board flats

[1] Marilyn Strathern's concept of a 'cutting point' refers to analytical positions that reveal how different systems of knowledge, practice, or value intersect and mutually constitute each other. Rather than assuming that complex phenomena can be understood from a single perspective, cutting points illuminate how multiple logics operate simultaneously within the same social space. Strathern developed this concept through her work on Melanesian sociality, where she demonstrated how Western analytical categories like 'individual' and 'society' failed to capture how persons were constituted through relationships that exceeded such binary distinctions (Strathern, 1988; 1996). A cutting point thus offers not a neutral vantage point but a position from which the partiality of different analytical frameworks becomes visible, revealing how seemingly discrete systems actually depend on each other for their coherence.

(Chua, 1997). Simultaneously, industrial estates like the one I visited in Kaki Bukit sprouted across reclaimed swampland. MRT tunnels carved through bedrock. The state embarked on massive land reclamation projects that expanded Singapore's territory by over 25% (Lim, 2017). This construction boom required not just enormous capital investment but new forms of labour organization, project coordination, and risk management that would give birth to Singapore's distinctive contracting system.

Singapore's approach to managing capitalism differed markedly from both free-market models and socialist planning. The developmental state pursued 'pragmatic' policies (Chua, 1995): strategic intervention in labour markets through foreign worker quotas and skills training programs, selective embrace of multinational corporations while protecting local businesses, and careful orchestration of ethnic relations through housing policies and employment practices. Rather than eliminating market forces, the state sought to channel them toward developmental goals while maintaining space for private accumulation (Low, 2001). This required constant negotiation between competing goals: attracting foreign investment while building domestic capacity, maintaining labour discipline while ensuring social stability, pursuing rapid growth while managing inequality.

This construction boom demanded entirely new forms of labour organization, project coordination, and risk management that neither colonial arrangements nor direct state control could adequately provide. Colonial construction had operated through small-scale projects using direct labour supervision by ethnic foremen managing racially segregated work gangs for extractive infrastructure serving metropolitan rather than local needs (Turnbull, 2009). The post-independence scale required coordination across multiple specialized trades, international suppliers, complex regulatory frameworks, and multiethnic workforces that exceeded any

single organization's capacity to manage through direct employment relationships. The gap between developmental ambitions and existing organizational capabilities created systematic openings for intermediaries who could navigate between worlds: state planning and construction dust, tender documents and Tamil-speaking workers, bureaucratic English and the multilingual chaos of building sites. Contractors emerged to fill these gaps, becoming so embedded in Singapore's development story that they crystallized into cultural archetypes – Phua Chu Kang with his yellow boots and entrepreneurial swagger, the working-class hero who built his way to prosperity.

The contractor's role deepened as Singapore's model evolved. The state's systematic embrace of foreign workers from the 1980s onward transformed these figures from coordinators of local labour into managers of transnational migration. Malaysian carpenters gave way to Bangladeshi construction crews. Thai welders replaced local apprentices. As the migration regime grew more complex, new intermediary positions emerged alongside contractors. Supervisors, foremen, and translators – often themselves migrants with different visa statuses – formed cascading layers of mediation between state policy and worksite reality. Contractors became the primary interface between Singapore's controlled guestworker policies and the messy realities of housing, feeding, and organizing foreign bodies whose legal status remained perpetually temporary, but they increasingly depended on these other intermediary figures to manage across linguistic, ethnic, and regulatory boundaries. This expanding landscape of mediation – not just the contractor figure but the relational networks through which racialized labour hierarchies operate – forms the central object of this dissertation's analysis. Contractors absorbed the contradictions of rapid development: celebrated as entrepreneurial success stories while shouldering blame for the exploitation that cheap, fast construction inevitably produced.

This positioning as essential intermediaries raises a fundamental question that cuts to the heart of contemporary capitalism: are contractors victims or villains in Singapore's development story? The COVID-19 pandemic crystallized this ambiguity with brutal clarity. When infection clusters erupted in foreign worker dormitories, contractors became convenient scapegoats. Media coverage zeroed in on cramped living conditions, inadequate sanitation, overcrowded transport. Contractors were cast as the villains of neoliberal Singapore, profit-hungry middlemen who exploited vulnerable workers while the state pursued rapid growth. Public outrage flowed downward through the contracting chain, landing squarely on individual businesses rather than the policies that structured these arrangements.

This selective scapegoating exposes how responsibility flows through contemporary capitalism's supply chains. Blame cascaded downward while structural conditions remained untouched. Contractors faced public outrage for dormitory overcrowding, yet the regulatory frameworks that made such arrangements economically rational escaped scrutiny. Structural conditions remained largely unexamined while contractors became lightning rods for public anxiety about exploitation.

This vilification misses how contractors actually operate, profiting from the gaps between official policy and practical necessity while absorbing the moral tensions that rapid development inevitably creates. Who exactly were these figures caught between profit and blame?

### 1.1. Who is the Contractor?

The contractor in Singapore operates not merely as a functional figure within supply chain capitalism but as a potent cultural symbol that embodies the contradictions of the city-state's development narrative. This symbolic resonance emerges from how contractors represent a

particular pathway to mobility, one that bypasses formal educational credentials and professional pathways in favour of entrepreneurial risk-taking and cultural capital rooted in working-class networks. In a society where meritocracy officially governs advancement but where English-language education and professional credentials remain markers of elite status, contractors embody an alternative form of success that challenges while simultaneously reinforcing dominant hierarchies. They achieve wealth and recognition through practices that the state alternately celebrates as entrepreneurial dynamism and criticizes as obstacles to modernization, making them perfect vessels for anxieties about authentic Singaporean identity in an increasingly globalised economy.

Perhaps no cultural artifact better captures the contractor archetype than the beloved sitcom character Phua Chu Kang (PCK), played by Gurmit Singh in what would become Singapore's longest-running sitcom "Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd" (1997-2007). The character's humble origins, where he was raised in a kampung with limited formal education, mirrored the backgrounds of many real contractors I encountered in my fieldwork. PCK's signature costume tells a story that resonated deeply with Singaporeans. his yellow boots marking him as a man of the construction site, his long-sleeved checkered shirt suggesting aspirational respectability, his curly perm and thick moustache embodying the gaudy aesthetics of the nouveau riche contractor, and his jeans bridging working-class roots with entrepreneurial ambition. His catchphrase "Don't play play!" and self-proclamation as the "best in Singapore, JB, and some say Batam" captured both the bravado and regional reach of local contractors.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his roguish charm and occasional scheming, PCK became such a beloved national icon that the government recruited him for multiple public campaigns, from promoting Singlish-to-English learning in the early 2000s to starring in Singapore's COVID-

19 public health campaigns. His enduring appeal lies in embodying a quintessentially Singaporean story: the working-class man achieving mobility through entrepreneurial spirit, his Singlish marking him as distinct from his English-educated, affluent peers. Twenty-five years after the show's debut, PCK remains so synonymous with the contractor figure that his catchphrases still pepper everyday Singaporean speech, his reruns continue to draw viewers on Netflix, and his character is regularly revived for national campaigns. All of this is testament to how deeply this archetype of the working-class contractor-made-good resonates in Singapore's cultural imagination.

If PCK represented the aspirational contractor of the 1990s, his character emerged from very real transformations that began a decade earlier. The 1980s construction boom – MRT lines, shopping malls, semiconductor factories – transformed contractors from manual labourers into towkays. As one of my interlocutors, Darren, put it from his air-conditioned office: "Now I'm rich, but inside still same contractor. Cannot change one." This gap between economic achievement and social position created its own form of alienation. Contractors had the income of successful businessmen yet remained excluded from circles where real power moved. They maintained Singlish alongside English, coffee shops alongside boardrooms, carbon-paper invoices alongside WhatsApp coordination; hybrid practices that enabled them to work across Singapore's multiple systems.

These contractors were products of specific historical transformations. The 1980s marked their emergence as a distinct class, when Singapore's development acceleration created unprecedented opportunities for those willing to work hard. Many who grew up in kampungs, children of chicken farmers and odd-job labourers, became CEOs. A telling trade magazine article from the period celebrated the 'modern contractor', someone who worked from an air-

conditioned office, played golf, used proper English, managed via email. This transformation was more than individual mobility. Unlike the English-educated professional class who embodied cultural whitening through Western business practices, contractors maintained their position as cultural intermediaries even as they accumulated wealth. Their success came not from fully embracing modernization but from maintaining capacity to work across multiple registers, a position that gave them unique coordinating power between state bureaucracy and construction reality. This became their primary space of mediation: bridging Singapore's multiple linguistic, regulatory, and cultural worlds. As foreign labour increasingly dominated construction work from the 1980s onward, however, contractors required additional intermediaries to manage across the growing ethnic and linguistic distance between themselves and migrant workers. Middling migrants – supervisors, foremen, managers, occupying various visa categories between full citizenship and temporary work permits – emerged to fill this gap, creating cascading layers of mediation through which labour control operated.

The question of who the contractor is proves more complex than it initially appears, as I discovered during an evening at Kim San Bistro, where I often joined contractors for after-work drinks. Matthew, who runs a listed company handling multi-million-dollar BTO projects, introduced himself simply as "AC contractor." Across the table, Ah Huat, who operates as a sole proprietor with a small team of three workers, used exactly the same designation. The term becomes a kind of protective covering, allowing both ends of the industry's spectrum to claim a shared identity while obscuring vast differences in scale and capital.

"We don't talk about company size here," Kenny told me one evening at the coffee shop where contractors gathered each morning to share intelligence about tender opportunities and delayed payments. He lowered his voice, though the whirr of ceiling fans and clattering dishes would

have covered our conversation anyway. “Very sensitive. Some people here actually very big already, but they still come drink kopi like small contractor. Some people very small but don’t want to lose face. So everyone just say ‘contractor’ only.” He gestured toward a table where several contractors were engaged in animated discussion about a new BTO project. “That one actually listed company boss, but he never say. That one struggling to pay workers, but also never say. Better like that.”

The shared designation serves multiple purposes that illuminate the delicate social dynamics of Singapore’s construction ecosystem. For larger contractors, identifying simply as ‘contractor’ maintains access to ground-level intelligence: morning coffee shop conversations; after-work beer sessions; whispered warnings about which clients pay late, which workers are reliable, which projects are heading for trouble. Formal corporate channels rarely capture this real-time, granular knowledge that drives construction decisions. The million-dollar operator still shows up for kopi with sole proprietors because the intelligence network matters more than the hierarchy.

For smaller operators, the shared terminology offers dignity that resists supply-chain capitalism’s hierarchical realities. Rather than being relegated to categories like ‘micro-enterprise’ or ‘subcontractor’ – terms that mark subordinate position – they claim membership in the same social category as listed companies. This reflects deeper tensions about how status operates in Singapore’s construction industry. Contractor identity cuts across conventional hierarchies, creating alternative forms of respectability based on practical knowledge and relationship management rather than formal credentials. The man who left school at fourteen to become an apprentice electrician can sit as equals with the engineering graduate who inherited his father’s company.

This definitional complexity stands in tension with how contractors appear in Singapore's popular imagination. The cultural archetype obscures the remarkable heterogeneity of what we call a 'contractor.' The term stretches across trades from air-conditioning to electrical work, scales from sole proprietors to multinational corporations, and positions within complex hierarchical chains. At the top sit large main contractors who secure major projects from government agencies or private developers. These main contractors rarely perform actual construction work themselves. Instead, they subcontract specific components like electrical systems, plumbing, and tiling to specialized sub-contractors, who might further delegate tasks to smaller labour contractors managing teams of workers. Even the designation of 'main contractor' is remarkably fluid. Some handle billion-dollar projects while others manage modest renovations worth a million. A single person might appear as 'main contractor' on a small shophouse renovation while simultaneously functioning as subcontractor on a larger development.

This heterogeneity matters theoretically because it reveals how intermediation operates through flexible positioning rather than fixed categories. The same figure slides between roles depending on project scale, client type, and market conditions. These shifting positions generate the relational complexity that makes contractors essential to Singapore's development model. They can simultaneously coordinate upward with state agencies and downward with migrant workers, sideways with competitors who become collaborators, across linguistic and regulatory boundaries that more rigid organizational forms cannot accommodate.

The very ambiguity that makes 'contractor' difficult to define becomes the source of their coordinating power. This power operates within specific conditions of contemporary capitalism

that demand theoretical examination. How do these intermediary figures relate to broader transformations in global production? What does their necessity reveal about the relationship between state planning and market coordination? Why do developmental states that promise institutional rationalization instead produce systematic reliance on figures who thrive in regulatory gaps?

These questions require situating contractors within broader debates about capitalism's contemporary forms – how it organizes production through increasingly complex chains of subcontracting, how it manages the contradictions between accumulation and legitimacy, how it depends on intermediary figures to coordinate across institutional boundaries that its own rationalization creates. The contractor emerges not as an anomaly within Singapore's development model but as a figure who illuminates fundamental dynamics of how contemporary capitalism actually functions.

### 1.2. Capitalism

This section establishes the theoretical frameworks for understanding how contractors emerged from and operate within Singapore's specific configuration of capitalism. The ethnographic puzzles from my fieldwork – why contractors thrive in regulatory gaps, how ethnic Chinese systematically manage South Asian workers, why moral relationships coexist with systematic exploitation – require theorizing capitalism as structured social relations that produce these specific arrangements.

Capitalism emerged as an analytical category through specific intellectual battles. While Marx didn't invent the term, he gave it theoretical coherence in *Capital*, analysing capitalism as a historically specific mode of production characterized by wage labour, commodity production, and surplus extraction (Marx, 1867). For Marx, capitalism wasn't just markets or trade, but a

social system where labour power itself became a commodity. Weber responded by emphasizing capitalism's cultural and institutional foundations. Weber examined the Protestant ethic, rational calculation, and bureaucratic organization, shifting the focus from exploitation to rationalisation (Weber, 1905). By the mid-twentieth century, capitalism had largely vanished from mainstream economics. Neoclassical synthesis replaced capitalism's social relations with supply and demand curves (Samuelson, 1948). Development economics spoke of "modernization" without theorizing the capitalist social relations that structured it (Rostow, 1960).

The 1970s crisis revived capitalism as explicit analytical object. French regulation theorists examined how different "regimes of accumulation" temporarily resolved capitalism's contradictions – Fordism through mass production and consumption, post-Fordism through flexibility (Aglietta, 1976; Boyer, 1990). World-systems theorists argued capitalism was singular and global, incorporating peripheries through unequal exchange (Wallerstein, 1974). Political scientists developed "varieties of capitalism" frameworks, distinguishing liberal from coordinated market economies (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Anthropologists studied capitalism as lived experience; how factory discipline transformed Malaysian peasants into workers (Ong, 1987), how Bolivian miners understood exploitation through devil contracts (Taussig, 1980), how people navigated market forces through moral economies and alternative value systems (Nash, 1979; Verdery, 1996).

### 1.2.1. Developmental State

The 1980s-90s featured competing frameworks. While neoliberal approaches dominated policy circles, developmental state scholarship emerged from political economy to explain East Asian industrialization that confounded orthodox frameworks. The World Bank couldn't explain state-led growth through market fundamentalism; dependency theorists couldn't account for

successful peripheral industrialization. Scholars documented states that neither replaced markets nor followed them but guided transformation through strategic intervention – Johnson's plan-rational bureaucrats in Japan, Amsden's deliberate price distortions in Korea, Wade's market guidance in Taiwan, Evans's embedded autonomy balancing bureaucratic competence with business connections (Johnson, 1982; Amsden, 1989; Wade, 1990; Evans, 1995).

Singapore entered this literature as the awkward fourth tiger. Unlike Korea and Taiwan, which pursued import-substitution before shifting to export promotion (Amsden, 1989), Singapore maintained openness to foreign investment and export orientation from the outset. Where Korea and Taiwan restricted foreign direct investment to protect domestic firms, Singapore's developmental model simultaneously welcomed multinational corporations while creating government-linked companies as state champions. These comparisons mattered because they shaped research questions, always explaining Singapore's deviation from the Northeast Asian model rather than understanding its specific configuration.

Singapore scholars worked within these inherited frameworks. Garry Rodan (1989) documented PAP's consolidation through eliminating independent unions and incorporating business through state-controlled associations. W.G. Huff (1994) traced the transition from entrepôt to manufacturing through foreign investment. Linda Low (2001) examined adaptation under globalization through sovereign wealth funds and biomedical initiatives. These accounts explained Singapore's formal institutions – the Economic Development Board courting multinationals, Jurong Town Corporation developing industrial estates, the Central Provident Fund mobilizing savings – but missed the informal coordination that made these institutions function.

Southeast Asian studies' broader trajectories reinforced these gaps. Anthony Reid noted how area studies oscillated between particularist cultural explanations and universalist social science, rarely examining the intermediate level where culture and economy intersect through actual practice (Reid, 1999). Donald Emmerson traced how Cold War funding shaped research toward peasant studies and political elites while missing emerging urban formations (Emmerson, 1984). When scholars did encounter informal practices in Singapore's development, they coded them as either corruption to be eliminated (Quah, 1999) or expressions of Asian values to be celebrated (Mahbubani, 1998; Chua, 1995). The possibility that informality might be systematically produced by developmental capitalism, that it might be functional rather than dysfunctional, rarely surfaced.

Construction barely appeared except as evidence of success. Scholars counted housing units completed and industrial estates opened without asking who built them or how. Chua Beng Huat's (1997) analysed public housing as political incorporation but not the labour regimes that enabled rapid construction. The actual process of building, how contractors coordinated between state agencies and construction sites, how subcontracting chains organized production, how ethnic hierarchies structured work, remained invisible. This blindness reflected the literature's focus on state-business relations at the commanding heights while missing the ground-level intermediaries who translated plans into concrete and steel.

Li Zhang's analysis of private developers in post-reform Kunming demonstrates how entrepreneurs became active agents in urban transformation, fundamentally shaping the city through their business practices (Zhang, 2010). Singapore's contractors occupied a more constrained position. While Zhang's developers could acquire land and initiate projects, Singapore's contractors primarily executed state visions. Yet within these constraints,

contractors exercised agency through their coordination practices, determining how projects got built if not what got built. Unlike Zhang's Chinese developers who operated in a rapidly privatizing market, Singapore's contractors navigated a hybrid space where state control remained strong, producing a different form of entrepreneurial agency focused on operational coordination rather than strategic direction.

I engage this literature because it establishes essential context: the institutional frameworks, accumulation imperatives, and state projects that created systematic demand for construction coordination. Evans's embedded autonomy helps explain why Singapore's Economic Development Board could court multinationals while maintaining strategic direction. Johnson's analysis of administrative guidance illuminates how bureaucrats steered investment toward infrastructure. Yet the developmental state scholarship developed analytical blind spots shaped by its origins in political science and economics departments. The field emerged to explain aggregate outcomes – GDP growth, export ratios, industrial transformation – through institutional mechanisms. This worked for policy audiences, but it meant certain questions never got asked. Who actually built the factories that anchored industrialization? How did construction happen at the speed development required? What made rapid urban transformation physically possible? The developmental state literature captured half the story: how states mobilize resources for transformation. My ethnographic approach reveals the other half: how transformation actually happens through intermediaries managing contradictions that planning creates.

### 1.2.2. From Fordism to Supply-Chain Capitalism

The developmental state literature captures how states mobilize resources and direct investment but cannot explain the organizational forms through which construction actually happens. Singapore's Building and Construction Authority and the Housing Development Board sets

regulatory rules, but the actual building occurs through cascading networks of contractors and subcontractors that fragment rather than consolidate production. This fragmentation intensified precisely when the developmental state promised rationalization through planning. Why did organizational forms become more complex rather than more efficient under strong state capacity?

This paradox wasn't unique to Singapore. Subcontracting exploded globally during the 1970s-80s across vastly different contexts: construction contractors in Singapore alongside labour contractors in China (Pun, 2005), gangmasters in Britain (Brass, 2004), and temp agencies in Silicon Valley (Hyman, 2018). David Harvey's analysis of the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation explains the structural driver: the post-war system of vertical integration hit crisis by the early 1970s, and capital responded by fragmenting production into subcontracting networks that could rapidly reconfigure according to market conditions (Harvey, 1989). This reorganization pushed risk downward, made labour precarious, and replaced hierarchical coordination with market relationships. Construction exemplified this transformation – the industry's project-based nature and demand variability aligned with flexible accumulation's requirements (Eccles, 1981). By the 1980s, main contractors had become management firms coordinating multiple tiers of subcontractors who themselves subcontracted further (Debrah and Ofori, 2001). Singapore's massive construction demands accelerated this locally: the scale of 600,000 housing units and entire new towns made integrated firms unviable, while the speed required made permanent employment impossible to sustain.

This systematic fragmentation created what Eccles calls quasi-firms, stable networks repeatedly working together while remaining legally separate, allowing rapid reconfiguration when conditions changed (Eccles, 1981). It also created openings for local intermediaries.

Foreign construction companies entering Singapore during the 1960s-70s brought essential capital and technical expertise. Japanese firms like Kajima Corporation and Sato Kogyo established regional operations to capture growing Asian markets. But these companies couldn't directly manage Singapore's multiethnic workforce or navigate local regulatory requirements. They possessed technical capabilities and capital but lacked the relationship networks and linguistic fluency that construction coordination required. Local entrepreneurs had complementary capabilities – cultural competence across ethnic groups, government relationships, understanding of local labour practices – but lacked access to international markets and large-scale capital. The subcontracting arrangements that emerged created intermediary positions where local contractors could bridge between foreign technical knowledge and local operational realities.

Subcontracting offered specific advantages that aligned with both global capitalist pressures and Singapore's developmental needs. Fragmentation enabled firms to scale rapidly for mega-projects then contract during downturns without bearing restructuring costs. It allowed access to specialized capabilities – piling, façade work, mechanical systems – without permanent investment. Most significantly for Singapore, subcontracting facilitated the use of temporary foreign workers who could be imported during booms and expelled during busts, a flexibility that permanent employment would have prevented (Ofori, 1993). This labour strategy intersected with the racialized hierarchies I examine later, where subcontracting chains systematically positioned local contractors as coordinators and foreign migrants as workers, creating entrepreneurial opportunities for some while maintaining others as permanently temporary labour.

Yet Harvey's structural account leaves key questions unanswered: How exactly do intermediaries create value from fragmentation? What specific work do they perform at the interfaces between supply chain segments? Why does capitalism increasingly depend on such figures rather than eliminating them through market efficiency?

Anthropological investigations of actually existing supply chains reveal the limits of political economy's aerial view. Anna Tsing's ethnographic work shows how intermediaries actually create value within fragmented production. Her essay "Supply Chains and the Human Condition" (2009) emerged from conversations between anthropologists and labour scholars grappling with how global capitalism reorganized after the 1970s crisis. While Harvey provided the structural account of flexible accumulation, Tsing asked different questions: How do supply chains actually work? What happens at the interfaces between their segments? Her answer challenged assumptions about standardization and efficiency that dominated both business literature and critical accounts.

Following matsutake mushrooms from Oregon forests to Tokyo markets, Tsing demonstrates that supply chains generate value through friction and diversity rather than smooth standardization (Tsing, 2009). Mushroom pickers operate through forest knowledge and gift economies. Buyers translate these mushrooms into commodity grades. Japanese consumers receive them as cultural symbols of autumn and tradition. The supply chain doesn't eliminate these differences; it depends on them. What Tsing calls "supply chain capitalism" profits precisely from connecting incompatible value systems without making them compatible (Tsing, 2009).

This theoretical move matters because it frames intermediaries as value creators rather than parasitic middlemen. Her mushroom buyers generate profit through translation work, making forest mushrooms legible as commodities while maintaining the differences that create arbitrage opportunities. They perform what she later theorizes as "salvage accumulation", or capitalism's ability to appropriate value from non-capitalist spaces and relations (Tsing, 2015). Construction operates through similar dynamics of translation and salvage, though the 'non-capitalist' spaces involve village networks, kinship systems, and informal economies rather than forest ecologies. Each translation generates value – contractors and middling migrants profit from bridging systems that remain fundamentally incompatible.

Hannah Appel's ethnography of oil capitalism in Equatorial Guinea demonstrates how subcontracting creates strategic separation through modularity – enclosed operational spaces deliberately separated from local contexts (Appel, 2019). Offshore rigs operate as American enclaves connected to Houston while floating miles from African shores. Gated compounds recreate suburban Texas for expatriate workers. Contracts specify that local companies supply labour, though these companies are shells that subcontract back to international firms. This modularity generates capitalism's "licit life" – legitimate appearance maintained through contractual distancing from violence and exploitation (Appel, 2019). When security forces attack villages, ExxonMobil points to subcontractor responsibility. When workers die, liability stops at labour contractors. When corruption pervades operations, oil majors claim separation from local partners. Modularity enables accumulation while maintaining plausible deniability about its conditions.

Singapore's construction operates through comparable modular arrangements. Main contractors distance themselves from dormitory conditions through labour contractors.

Developers avoid employment relationships through subcontracting chains. Government agencies maintain legitimacy through intermediaries who absorb blame for exploitation. When COVID-19 infected thousands in dormitories, this modularity functioned as designed – contractors faced public outrage while the policies creating overcrowding remained unexamined.

### 1.2.3. Racial Capitalism

While previous sections explained institutional contexts (developmental state) and structural transformations (flexible accumulation), neither account for the persistent ethnic patterns structuring Singapore's construction industry. Chinese Singaporeans overwhelmingly become contractors while South Asian migrants concentrate in manual labour. These patterns persist across decades despite formal equality and market competition. Neither framework explains why flexible accumulation in Singapore takes specifically racialized forms, why the developmental state's intermediaries are consistently Chinese, or why these patterns reproduce across generations.

Racial capitalism provides the framework for understanding how ethnic differentiation serves systematic functions within Singapore's development model. The question isn't why markets fail to eliminate racial patterns, but how capitalism actively produces and maintains them.

Racial capitalism emerged from Black radical traditions challenging orthodox Marxism's treatment of race as superstructural, a divide-and-conquer strategy that would dissolve once workers recognized their class unity. W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935) demonstrated how American capitalism depended fundamentally on racial division. White workers received what he called "public and psychological wages", both social privileges (access to public facilities, deference from authorities) and material advantages (supervisory

positions, union membership, credit access) that compensated for their economic exploitation while binding them to the system (Du Bois, 1935). These wages provided tangible mobility denied to Black workers performing identical labour.

Oliver Cromwell Cox extended this analysis globally in *Caste, Class, and Race* (1948), arguing that racism was a modern ideology developed to justify colonial exploitation. For Cox, capitalism required racism to explain why colonized peoples could be super-exploited: why Indian peasants could be taxed into starvation, why African labourers could be worked to death in mines. Racism made this differential exploitation rates appear natural rather than systematic (Cox, 1948).

Cedric Robinson synthesized these insights in *Black Marxism* (1983), coining "racial capitalism" to capture how capitalism was racial from inception. Robinson traced capitalism's emergence through European colonialism, showing how it developed by incorporating difference rather than homogenizing labour. The Irish were racialized before being proletarianized. European capitalism emerged through differentiating Slavs, Jews, Roma – creating hierarchies that preceded and enabled colonial expansion (Robinson 1983).

Robinson's crucial insight: capitalism doesn't tend toward homogenization, creating an undifferentiated proletariat as Marx predicted. Instead, it develops through differentiation, actively producing and maintaining difference as the basis for differential exploitation. The Atlantic slave trade was not a form of primitive accumulation preceding "real" capitalism but constitutive of capitalism itself. Sugar plantations were among the first capitalist enterprises, combining enslaved African labour, European capital, and Indigenous land in accumulation processes that required racial hierarchy to function (Robinson, 1983).

This genealogy matters for Singapore because it reveals how capitalism systematically produces difference rather than gradually eliminating it. The construction site becomes a space where racial capitalism's logic materializes daily; not through explicit racial exclusion but through administrative categories, cultural explanations, and market mechanisms that consistently reproduce ethnic hierarchies while maintaining legitimacy through procedural neutrality.

### 1.2.4. Limits of the Black-white paradigm and Singapore's adaptations

These theorists developed their frameworks through analysing specific historical formations of racial domination, but applying racial capitalism to Singapore requires careful adaptation. The racial capitalism framework emerged from analysing Atlantic slavery and its afterlives, contexts where racial domination operated through stark biological racism and exclusion. The Black-white binary developed from specific conditions: transatlantic slave trade's dehumanization, one-drop rules defining racial purity, Jim Crow's legal apartheid. Southeast Asia's racial formations emerged differently.

The British colonial administration from 1819 institutionalized racial categories by managing labour migration through differentiated systems. Chinese arrived through credit-ticket arrangements where brokers advanced passage money, Indians through kangani foremen recruiting from home villages, Javanese through formal indenture contracts (Wang, 1991; Sandhu, 1969). These mechanisms produced distinct relationships to capital. A Chinese sinkheh could become towkay within a generation through the credit networks that initially bound him. An Indian worker remained enmeshed in kangani obligations that limited mobility. Malays retained aristocratic titles while losing economic ground.

Rather than creating absolute racial hierarchies, these overlapping systems produced graduated positions that persist in contemporary visa categories. A Bangladeshi worker, Malaysian technician, Chinese contractor, and Western expatriate occupy the same construction site under radically different regulatory frameworks. The state includes each through different mechanisms: temporary work permits, skilled passes, citizen privileges, expatriate packages. The CMIO framework appears as neutral census classification yet structures everything from housing to employment (Rodan, 1989). When work permits restrict Bangladeshis to construction and Filipinos to domestic work, the state achieves racial stratification through bureaucratic sorting.

### 1.2.5. Contemporary developments in racial capitalism theory

If Singapore operates through graduated unfreedoms rather than slavery, administrative categories rather than explicit race, how do we theorize its persistent ethnic stratification?

Lisa Lowe's work on colonial sedimentations within liberalism directly addresses the puzzle of how Singapore maintains racial hierarchies through administrative neutrality. She demonstrates how colonial divisions between human and less-than-human don't disappear but get rearticulated through immigration law and citizenship categories (Lowe, 2015). Singapore's visa system exemplifies this perfectly: Employment Pass holders access full personhood (family reunification, job mobility, permanent residence pathways) while Work Permit holders remain mere labour power (bonded to employers, mandatory departure, no family rights). These aren't explicitly racial categories, but they consistently channel Europeans toward Employment Passes and Bangladeshis toward Work Permits. Lowe's framework explains how colonial hierarchies persist through bureaucratic categories that appear racially neutral even in its contemporary administration.

This administrative neutrality operates through what Jodi Melamed identifies as "neoliberal multiculturalism", where diversity is celebrated even while intensifying stratification (Melamed, 2011). In Singapore, Racial Harmony Day coexists with segregated labour markets, CMIO representation with concentrated political power, housing integration with dormitory segregation. Melamed's insight reveals how Singapore's "regardless of race, language, or religion" rhetoric doesn't contradict racial capitalism but enables it. The celebration of diversity provides legitimacy for a system that channels different ethnicities into hierarchical positions. This connects back to Singapore's plural society heritage, where colonial management of ethnic difference has transformed into neoliberal diversity management.

These mechanisms depend on intermediary figures that David Roediger's work illuminates. Extending Du Bois's 'wages of whiteness,' Roediger shows how European immigrants became white in America through managing Black workers – Irish police supervising Black neighbourhoods, Italian unions excluding Black workers (Roediger, 1991). Singapore's Chinese contractors occupy a parallel position, gaining entrepreneurial opportunities through managing South Asian workers. These adaptations matter theoretically because they show racial capitalism's flexibility. The same logic of differentiation operates through incorporation rather than exclusion, administrative categories rather than biological racism, graduated sovereignty rather than binary hierarchy. The construction site becomes a space where these mechanisms converge.

But while the analysis thus far has focused on contractors, racial capitalism's operations in Singapore become fully visible only when examining multiple intermediary positions. My work brings both contractors and middling migrants to the fore, revealing how racial capitalism

operates through multiple, interacting intermediaries rather than simple citizen/non-citizen binaries.

Contractors demonstrate how racial capitalism creates entrepreneurial opportunities through managing racialized others. The Chinese contractor who started as a construction worker now supervises Bangladeshi crews, translating between state bureaucracy and migrant labour. His class mobility depends on maintaining ethnic hierarchy. Middling migrants – permanent residents, S-Pass holders, naturalized citizens – reveal the gradations within racial hierarchies that binary frameworks miss. The Malaysian PR foreman, the PRC engineer on S-Pass, the Indian IT professional on Employment Pass each occupies distinct regulatory positions with different rights, constraints, and pathways to permanence. An Indian professional might manage Bangladeshi workers while remaining excluded from citizenship himself. A Malaysian supervisor might earn less than a PRC engineer but access permanent residence more easily. Each position in the hierarchy extracts value from those below while being exploited by those above.

The novelty of examining both figures together lies in revealing how they interact to maintain capitalism's accumulation processes**.** Contractors depend on middling migrants as supervisors who can translate between management and workers while absorbing the tensions that direct exploitation would create**.** Middling migrants depend on contractors for employment and potential mobility. Both depend on maintaining advantage over Work Permit holders whose hyper exploitation subsidizes the entire system. When immigration policy shifts – tightening PR criteria, raising S-Pass thresholds – their positions shift relationally.

This graduated system intensifies exploitation while making it sustainable. If all foreign workers were equally precarious, they might organize collectively. If all had pathways to citizenship, labour costs would rise. The gradations create just enough hope for advancement to prevent solidarity while maintaining sufficient desperation to ensure compliance. Capital accumulates not despite these complex hierarchies but through them.

These racial hierarchies operate through citizenship categories that appear administratively neutral while producing consistent ethnic patterns. Each category in Singapore's visa system represents a different price point for labour power – Work Permits cost $450 monthly, S-Passes $1,500, Employment Passes $6,000. Citizenship becomes a technology for managing labour costs, maintaining hierarchy through bureaucratic categories that ensure capital can access differentiated labour at different prices. This sets up the next analytical layer: how moral economy intersects with these citizenship categories to make this exploitation socially sustainable.

### 1.3. Brokerage

The capitalism literature reveals why contractors emerged structurally; flexible accumulation created fragmentation requiring coordination, racial capitalism determined who could occupy intermediary positions. Yet these structural accounts leave a crucial question unanswered: How do contractors actually coordinate across the contradictions that capitalism creates? What are the specific practices, relationships, and forms of knowledge that enable them to bridge between incompatible systems?

This question directs attention toward a different scholarly tradition that developed through following intermediary figures rather than analysing structural transformations. Anthropologists tracked brokers through Mediterranean villages and colonial territories,

patronage networks and bureaucratic offices, watching how they managed between worlds that formal analysis kept separate. These scholars documented the daily work of coordination: the translations between languages and logics, the relationships cultivated across hierarchical divides, the trust generated through repeated interaction. Where capitalism theorists examined why fragmentation occurred, brokerage scholars revealed how coordination happened.

The two literatures rarely engaged each other productively. Political economists treated intermediaries as structural effects worth mentioning but not examining. Harvey notes subcontractors without following them, Tsing identifies brokers without theorizing brokerage itself. Meanwhile, brokerage scholars treated capitalism as context rather than cause, documenting intermediary practices without asking why capitalist development consistently produced positions for such figures to occupy. The gulf between these approaches left critical questions unexamined: Why do strong states create broker positions rather than eliminating them? How does capitalist restructuring shape specific brokerage practices? What forms of coordination does developmental capitalism require that formal institutions cannot provide?

The concept of the broker first emerged in anthropology through scholars attempting to understand how complex societies coordinate across institutional boundaries. Eric Wolf coined "cultural brokers" while tracking figures in Mexican communities who managed between ejido councils and federal bureaucracies, village Spanish and bureaucratic Spanish, customary land practices and legal property regimes (Wolf, 1956). Jeremy Boissevain extended this through Mediterranean fieldwork, following Sicilian patrons who coordinated between local families and state agencies, Maltese entrepreneurs who bridged village networks and national markets (Boissevain, 1974). Both scholars positioned these figures as temporary necessities, useful accommodations during the transition from traditional to modern society that would become

obsolete once institutions strengthened. Strong states would develop bureaucratic capacity, market mechanisms would replace personal connections, modernization would render brokers unnecessary.

Yet, Singapore achieved precisely the institutional strength Wolf and Boissevain associated with broker elimination. World-class bureaucracy, transparent governance, efficient markets: the city-state embodies the modernization these scholars predicted would make intermediaries obsolete. Instead, intermediary positions multiplied.

Later scholarship moved towards framing brokers as constitutive rather than merely transitional. Lisa Björkman's Mumbai fixers actively generate the political relationships through which urban services flow, producing electoral constituencies through pipe connections rather than simply linking pre-existing networks (Björkman, 2015). Julia Elyachar showed Egyptian microfinance brokers crafting the borrower networks through which credit circulates, their interventions producing the social relationships that make markets legible to development institutions (Elyachar, 2005). Tania Li traced how development brokers in Indonesia constitute “community” itself as a governable category, assembling the very beneficiary groups they claim to represent (Li, 2007). Across these different sites, a shared insight emerged: intermediaries don't just navigate between existing categories and systems. They generate the very categories through which power operates.

Yet even this literature examines brokers at capitalism’s margins or in contexts of institutional weakness. Stoler’s intermediaries operated within colonial administration’s gaps. Björkman’s fixers thrive because Mumbai’s infrastructure fails. Elyachar’s brokers emerge where formal finance doesn’t reach. The possibility that strong states might deliberately engineer brokerage

arrangements, creating intermediary positions through regulatory design rather than inheriting them from institutional inadequacy, rarely surfaces. What happens when developmental states that promise rationalization instead produce systematic reliance on figures who thrive in the very gaps that state policy creates?

Matan Kaminer's ethnography of Thai migrant workers in Israel directly theorizes how states create labour brokerage systems to manage contradictory imperatives (Kaminer, 2024). While Tsing and Roitman examine intermediaries at capitalism's margins, Kaminer demonstrates how developed states engineer brokerage arrangements at capitalism's core. Kaminer analyses how the Israeli state delegates migration management to contractors who coordinate Thai agricultural workers (Kaminer, 2024). These brokers operate within deliberate regulatory architecture: bilateral agreements channel workers through approved agencies, work permits bond workers to specific employers, cultural management requirements make brokers indispensable. His contractors manage workers building infrastructure that serves both civilian and military purposes; the same concrete becomes shopping malls or security barriers, the same roads enable commerce or military deployment.

Kaminer's key contribution to brokerage theory lies in demonstrating that states create these arrangements strategically rather than inheriting them from institutional weakness. The Israeli state maintains regulations requiring contractor mediation because brokers absorb contradictions that direct state management would expose. When Thai workers face exploitation, responsibility falls on contractors rather than state policy. When security imperatives override labour protections, brokers manage the tension while the state maintains distance. This labour brokerage system enables the state to pursue irreconcilable goals through intermediaries who bear the costs of these contradictions.

This provides the clearest precedent for understanding Singapore's contractors. Both states achieved strong institutional capacity yet deliberately create broker positions through regulatory design. Both use labour brokerage to manage foreign workers within controlled migration regimes serving developmental goals. Singapore's contractors emerge from similar strategic calculations: work permit conditions requiring daily coordination, safety requirements in English that workers cannot read, productivity demands conflicting with worker welfare. The state creates these contradictions through policy choices that make contractor mediation appear necessary rather than engineered.

The contrast with colonial precedents illuminates why deliberate engineering matters. Frederick Cooper's Mombasa dockworkers showed how intermediaries could frustrate rather than facilitate state objectives. Sirgangs and headmen preserved casualized labour arrangements that gave workers bargaining power, maintaining their ability to move between port work and rural cultivation despite colonial attempts to create a permanent proletariat (Cooper, 1987). These intermediaries thrived precisely because colonial administration lacked the regulatory precision to align their interests with imperial goals. Singapore's success, by contrast, emerges from carefully calibrated frameworks – work permit conditions, levy systems, dormitory regulations – that ensure contractors' profitability depends on delivering the disciplined temporary workforce the state requires. Where colonial Mombasa's intermediaries preserved worker autonomy, Singapore's contractors enable systematic labour control.

The theoretical trajectory from Wolf through Roitman to Kaminer marks a shift in understanding: from seeing intermediaries as persisting despite modernization to recognizing

how states actively produce them. Yet even Kaminer, who demonstrates deliberate state engineering of brokerage, doesn't fully address how these arrangements become sustainable over time. What prevents the contradictions that brokers manage from generating resistance? How do intermediaries make exploitation bearable for those experiencing it? These questions direct attention toward a different body of scholarship concerned with the moral dimensions of economic life.

### 1.4. Moral Economy in Anthropological Theory

The frameworks examined thus far reveal intermediaries as structurally necessary positions (capitalism), occupied by specific groups (racial capitalism), operating through particular coordination practices (brokerage). Yet these analyses treat intermediaries as if they functioned through purely technical or economic mechanisms. What's missing is how contractors make exploitation bearable for those experiencing it. Workers understand their conditions perfectly well: crowded dormitories, structurally low wages, perpetual precarity. Contractors profit from maintaining these conditions. The system's stability depends on intermediaries cultivating moral relationships that generate obligation alongside exploitation, creating bonds that persist despite their contradictory foundation.

The same office where a contractor calculates profit margins on dormitory cost-cutting houses thank-you cards from workers whose medical bills he covered during family emergencies. These practices operate in tandem: the cost-cutting enables profit while the personal care generates loyalty, together creating a system where exploitation coexists with genuine obligation. This moral work represents a distinct form of intermediary practice, as essential as translation or coordination but operating through different mechanisms. Where brokerage scholarship examines how intermediaries bridge institutional gaps, moral economy reveals how they bridge human ones – the gap between what workers deserve and what they receive,

between formal equality and lived hierarchy, between the promise of development and the reality of exploitation. Without this moral mediation, the technical coordination would collapse.

### 1.4.1. Garden vs. Conveyor Belt

The concrete mechanics of this moral coordination became clear during my fieldwork at Super Cool. While I worked on a tender, the HR Director at Super Cool approached me, and said, "you're the one researching on migrant workers right?" even though I had formally requested to work at the company to better understand the company's everyday processes, rather than investigate migrant worker relations per se. He gestured me to a quiet corner of the office and, over cups of instant coffee in paper cups, offered what he called "the inside story."

"There are two kinds of contractors," he explained, sketching on a piece of scratch paper. "The conveyor belt and the garden." He drew two simple diagrams, one showing workers moving through a company like products on an assembly line, the other showing something that looked like plants growing. The conveyor belt companies, he explained, see workers as just another factor of production – bring them in, use them up, send them home. High turnover, constant churn, minimal investment in training. "Like factory," he said, "just input, output." The garden companies, in contrast, treat workers like seeds to be nurtured. They invest in training, help workers rise through the ranks, even assist with PR applications. "You can always tell which is which," he said, tapping his pen on the turnover statistics in the company's HR records. "Look how long workers stay. Some companies, three months only. Our Bangladeshi supervisor there?" He pointed through the glass partition to a man reviewing blueprints. "With us fifteen years already."

This garden-versus-conveyor belt metaphor echoes what E.P. Thompson (1971) identified in his seminal work on moral economies – the tension between market logic and moral imperatives in labour relations. Unlike Thompson's English bread riots, where workers demanded traditional rights against market forces, here contractors themselves articulate competing visions of labour relations. As James Ferguson (2013) observes in his work on dependency in Southern Africa, what might look like exploitation from one angle can represent valued relationships of sustained patronage from another. The "garden" companies' investment in workers' long-term development creates moral communities (Werbner, 1999) with networks of obligation and responsibility that exceed pure market relations. The coexistence of market rationality and moral obligation within the same spaces and relationships suggests that contractors' mediation involves more than just economic or political translation; it requires navigating between different moral frameworks and creating spaces where seemingly contradictory ethical systems can productively coexist.

The collapse of state socialism forced a reconsideration. Katherine Verdery's Romanian subjects navigated late socialism's scarcity through "economies of favours," parallel exchange systems that compensated for formal economy failures (Verdery, 1996). Caroline Humphrey documented how Russians repurposed these socialist-era networks to navigate capitalist transition, transforming personal favours into business assets and workplace relationships into privatization opportunities (Humphrey, 2002). These works observed how moral relationships didn't disappear with capitalism's arrival but became essential to its operation. The binary that had structured earlier analysis, moral economy versus market economy, could no longer hold.

This trajectory, from Thompson's defensive communities through Verdery's adaptive networks to Ferguson's aspirational dependencies, traces how moral economy evolved alongside

capitalism itself. Each theoretical moment responded to capitalism's changing forms: external threat requiring resistance (1970s), systemic transition requiring navigation (1990s), totalizing reality requiring meaning-making within rather than against its logic (2000s).

### 1.4.2. Moral Economy as Coordination Mechanism

What I observed challenges a genealogy of moral economy scholarship that has, until recently, positioned moral relationships as either doomed resistance to or nostalgic remnants within capitalist transformation. These contractors reveal something different: moral economy as the very mechanism through which developmental capitalism coordinates its contradictions.

These intermediaries inhabit the theoretical space beyond Ferguson's aspirational dependence, using moral relationships to manage the contradictions that flexible accumulation creates and racial capitalism structures. These practices work in tandem to sustain a system that should logically collapse from its own tensions. Singapore's contractors demonstrate how moral economy has evolved from defensive bulwark against capitalism to essential mechanism for capitalism's operation. They deploy moral relationships that generate specific effects: emergency assistance creates loyalty, patron-like care ensures retention, generosity maintains stability without enabling mobility. Whether these acts emerge from genuine care, cultural obligation, or strategic calculation, they produce systematic outcomes: stable labour supply despite structural violence. The moral economy doesn't oppose or adapt to or seek inclusion within capitalism; it becomes the mechanism through which capitalism reproduces itself despite its contradictions.

Singapore's moral economy operates through multiple intermediary figures occupying different positions within the citizenship hierarchy. The Bangladeshi S-Pass supervisor after fifteen years embodies both advancement possibilities and their limits. The PRC engineer code-

switches between efficiency with management and understanding with workers. Each position enables specific moral work through co-ethnic solidarity, religious fellowship, or linguistic intimacy. A Bangladeshi worker experiences these layers simultaneously; gratitude to the contractor who paid medical bills, loyalty to the supervisor who secured his job, deference to the foreman who ensures prayer breaks. These interlocking obligations bind workers more effectively than pure economic coercion. The moral economy operates through cascading mediations, each intermediary making the next layer possible, together transforming systematic exploitation into dense webs of unequal reciprocity.

This moral architecture absorbs shocks that would otherwise threaten systemic stability. Wage theft triggers personal loans rather than labour protests. Family crises prompt emergency assistance that substitutes for social protection. The contractor who helps a worker ensures that worker won't report violations. The supervisor who advocates for his crew prevents independent organizing. The foreman who arranges informal solutions forestalls formal complaints. Development appears smooth precisely because moral relationships absorb contradictions that would otherwise demand resolution.

Moral relationships explain what technical coordination cannot: why workers remain despite recognizing exploitation, why contractors maintain obligations beyond profit, why this system reproduces without generating threatening resistance. Singapore's developmental state depends on intermediaries absorbing tensions through moral bonds rather than resolving contradictions institutionally. Resolving them would require choosing between rapid accumulation and worker welfare, between meritocratic ideology and ethnic enterprise. Instead, intermediaries make these contradictory imperatives simultaneously achievable through graduated moral obligations.

This completes the theoretical architecture. Capitalism's restructuring creates fragmented positions. Racial capitalism determines who occupies them. Brokerage illuminates coordination practices across incompatible systems. Moral economy reveals how these arrangements reproduce through relationships that transform structural violence into bearable obligation. Each framework captures what others miss. Together, they explain how developmental states achieve transformation through intermediaries who manage rather than resolve fundamental tensions.

### 1.5. Method, Ethics, Positionality

To trace how mediation occurs in practice, I developed a multi-sited research approach. This methodology allowed me to observe how contractors operate across different spaces and scales – from formal tender meetings to informal gatherings, from corporate offices to construction sites, from official documents to whispered agreements. For six months, I conducted participant observation at "Super Cool," a large air-conditioning and mechanical ventilation (ACMV) contractor, working in their Commercial Affairs Department. There, I attended meetings and helped prepare tenders, including an unusual major submission for an American client, though most projects involved local work like servicing petrol stations, water and gas pumps, offices, and residential properties. These experiences exposed the importance of informal networks and trust relationships in securing contracts, as well as the subtle practices of collusion and backdoor negotiations that characterized the industry.

Alongside this, I shadowed Mr. Wee, a renovation contractor, for another six months as he moved between worksites, supplier warehouses, and contractor-dominated social spaces. Through Mr. Wee's networks, particularly at a bar where contractors regularly gathered, I gained access to contractors across different trades - electrical, plumbing, carpentry, structural

works - conducting over 30 in-depth interviews that traced their life histories and career trajectories. I supplemented this ethnographic work with archival research at the National Archives of Singapore and the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, focusing particularly on the post-independence period. Key materials included documents from 1975, when major shifts occurred in the construction sector, and the 1980s, when the government attempted to transform the foreign workforce into a 'wholly Singaporean' one.

This multi-sited approach allowed me to understand several key aspects of contractors' intermediary position: how they translate between formal and informal economies, how they maintain relationships across different social and ethnic groups, how they navigate between state requirements and practical necessities, and crucially, how they manage the moral tensions inherent in their position as both employers of migrant workers and subjects of larger market forces. I sought to understand how their practices create and maintain the intermediary spaces that brokerage scholarship identifies – zones where different systems meet without fully merging, where translation generates value, where contradictions become productive rather than paralyzing.

The challenges of accessing these zones highlighted something fundamental about contractors' position in Singapore's political economy. The construction industry's closed doors initially seemed impenetrable. Not only because of standard corporate secrecy, but because contractors' effectiveness as intermediaries depends partly on their ability to maintain strategic opacity about certain practices. Their position requires them to navigate between legal requirements and practical necessities, between official policies and unofficial arrangements, work that becomes more difficult under outside scrutiny.

Getting inside meant finding people willing to let me witness the gap between public compliance and private adaptation. Some contractors simply refused interviews outright. Others spoke in careful generalities that skirted around actual practices. The few who eventually opened their doors did so only after months of relationship building, often through mutual contacts who could vouch for my discretion. Even then, certain conversations happened only after recording devices were put away, certain documents remained firmly off-limits. "Write about something else," they told me over coffee, "these contractors won't talk to you." This resistance to academic investigation stemmed from multiple sources: the industry's semi-informal practices that resist documentation, contractors' awareness of their precarious position between state and market forces, and their experience of being blamed for systemic issues during crises like the COVID-19 outbreak. Many contractors had learned through experience that visibility often meant vulnerability. When dormitory outbreaks made international headlines, fingers pointed at contractors who had followed established housing practices for years. When workers protested unpaid wages, contractors found themselves defending decisions made within regulatory frameworks they hadn't designed. The pattern was consistent; when things went wrong, intermediaries absorbed the blame while policies and structures remained unexamined.

The breakthrough came from an unexpected direction – through the very connections I had been hesitant to use. I worried about how family ties might colour my analysis, how personal histories might blur analytical distance. More than that, I feared the emotional complexity of navigating relationships with family members whose views on worker welfare often differed sharply from my own academic positions. Construction work ran through my family's history: uncles who had worked their way up from odd jobs to site supervision, aunties who managed contractor offices, relatives who supplied building materials. Their stories of the industry had

filtered through countless family gatherings, whispered over steamboat dinners and Sunday lunches, though I had never imagined they would become crucial to my research.

Growing up in what we called a "construction family," I absorbed the rhythms of the industry alongside the rhythms of daily life. The constant ringing of phones during dinner, urgent calls about site problems. The smell of metal and concrete that clung to work clothes. The well-worn safety boots by the door, caked with dried mud from countless sites. These sensory memories took on new meaning during my journalism days, when debates about worker transport erupted after a series of truck accidents. My initial moral outrage – how could contractors treat workers like cattle, packing them into the backs of trucks just to save money? – collided with family members' more complicated perspectives. "I sat in those same trucks when I was fifteen," a close relative told me quietly one evening, recounting his apprenticeship days with a metal worker. His response reveals the complicated subject position of other working-class strivers or even first-generation migrants who achieved upward mobility through enduring hardships they now see as formative rather than exploitative. Like many who built Singapore's infrastructure, he carried what Lauren Berlant might call 'cruel optimism', an attachment to conditions of possibility that were simultaneously conditions of constraint (Berlant, 2011). The truck rides weren't just transportation but initiation rituals into a masculine world of construction work, where enduring discomfort became proof of worthiness for eventual entrepreneurial success. This perspective complicates simple narratives about exploitation, revealing how those who 'made it' often defend practices that enabled their mobility even when those same practices disadvantage current workers.

The memory seemed to transport him: the pre-dawn air, the rumble of the engine, the camaraderie of workers huddled together in the darkness. "Our Malaysian carpenter relatives

still transport workers this way. It's not just about safety or profit. It's how things have always been done." This phrase, 'how things have always been done', carries multiple meanings that structure contractors' moral universe. It suggests not just tradition but a form of practical knowledge about what works in Singapore's specific conditions: the tight project timelines that make efficient worker transport essential, the trust relationships between contractors and workers that personal familiarity enables, the economic margins that make expensive safety equipment seem wasteful rather than prudent. Yet, it also reveals how practices become naturalized through repetition, how 'tradition' can obscure power relations, and how those who succeeded through particular systems develop investments in defending them.

My earlier writings on migrant worker conditions had created fault lines at family gatherings. As a journalist, I had published several critical pieces about worker exploitation in the construction industry, documenting poor living conditions in dormitories and investigating other unsafe and discriminatory practices. These articles, which explicitly called out contractors for their role in perpetuating poor working conditions, positioned me among those who publicly vilified the industry. At family gatherings, my uncles and aunties who worked in construction would grow quiet when these topics came up, seeing me as someone who, despite coming from a construction family, had aligned myself with the industry's critics without fully understanding its complexities.

"You don't understand how things work," an uncle once told me over dinner, his voice carrying an edge of hurt rather than anger. During fieldwork, these tensions would resurface in unexpected ways. Contractors from small enterprises would share their struggles over kopi at industrial estate coffee shops, voices dropping as they described being squeezed by main contractors through delayed payments and impossible demands. "Everyone thinks we're just

greedy," one told me, stirring his coffee endlessly, "but try running a small company when the big boys control everything." These quiet confessions complicated my earlier certainties.

Both narratives could be true: the systemic exploitation of workers and the genuine constraints faced by smaller contractors, the profit motives and the weight of tradition, the need for better safety standards and the complex realities of implementation. This tension exemplified exactly what I had theoretically outlined earlier - how contractors' position as intermediaries required them to absorb and manage contradictions within Singapore's construction industry. Their practices reflected the complex ways they navigated between different pressures and responsibilities while maintaining their mediating role. To characterize them as simple expressions of greed, or tradition, would therefore be reductive.

Methodology wasn't my only concern. My entire conceptual approach to understanding power in the construction industry needed rethinking. My earlier work with migrant workers had already traced their experiences through NGO events, poetry readings, and dormitory visits. Yet through fieldwork, I began to see how focusing solely on workers, while crucial for understanding exploitation and resistance, missed something vital about how power operated in Singapore's construction industry. The challenge wasn't just how to study contractors, but how to reconceptualize the entire network of relationships, obligations, and constraints that shaped their practices.

The figure of the contractor kept emerging as a critical pivot point: not quite aligned with state power, yet not entirely powerless; often blamed for worker exploitation, yet themselves subject to various pressures from above. Like the workers they employed, many contractors had their own histories of manual labour and precarity, having worked their way up from apprenticeships

and odd jobs. Unlike the clear moral lines of my migrant worker advocacy, studying contractors meant confronting messier realities – where the same person who organized Hari Raya celebrations for his workers might also engage in practices that perpetuated their vulnerability.

This complexity became particularly apparent at Super Cool, where my attempts to speak with workers were gently but firmly deflected. Rather than seeing this as just another instance of controlling worker access, I began to understand it as indicative of something fundamental about how power and responsibility were distributed in the industry.

Contractors occupied an ambiguous middle ground – close enough to workers to understand their conditions, yet positioned within structures that often made improving those conditions feel impossible. “Of course we want to treat workers better,” one contractor told me, “but when main con squeeze us like this, what to do?” Their position as intermediaries meant they both enabled and were constrained by the very systems they operated within. This positioning creates what Marxist scholars have long identified as capitalism’s genius for fragmenting potential class alliances. Contractors share similar backgrounds with their workers and often understand construction work’s harsh realities from personal experience. In different circumstances, they might even serve as natural allies in challenging exploitative practices.

Their position as small business owners, dependent on contracts from above while managing labour from below, typically leads them to seek individual survival strategies over collective resistance. They might provide better accommodation for their own workers or ensure timely salary payments, but these personal interventions, while meaningful, often serve to soften rather than challenge structural exploitation. This structural positioning transforms potential critics into reluctant enforcers, creating a buffer zone that insulates major developers from

direct confrontation with worker grievances while ensuring that systemic pressures still reach the ground level where labour actually occurs. As one contractor explained while showing me photos of his workers' newly renovated dormitory: "I try my best to take care of my men. But cannot fight the whole system lah." This sentiment captures how contractors become central to capitalism's reproduction - close enough to workers to feel moral responsibility for improving their immediate conditions, yet structurally positioned to channel that responsibility into limited reforms rather than radical change.

My earlier pre-doctoral research focused on migrant workers – their living conditions, their modes of expression, their strategies for making their voices heard within Singapore's restrictive political context. I attended grassroots community events hosted by literary organizations and NGOs, documenting how migrant workers used poetry and film to articulate their experiences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I reported on the crisis that erupted in the foreign worker dormitories, leading to a widespread public reckoning. While much of the blame was directed at government policies, contractors became convenient scapegoats – cast as the villains of neoliberal Singapore, where the constant drive for construction and growth supposedly fostered exploitation. Media coverage focused on contractors' cost-cutting measures: cramped living conditions, inadequate sanitation, and overcrowded transport. When infection clusters emerged in dormitories, contractors were publicly criticized for prioritizing profit over worker welfare, even as larger structural issues like the state's migrant labour policies and the real estate developers' tight project timelines remained largely unexamined.

This selective scapegoating reveals how contractors function as intermediaries not just in production but in the distribution of moral and political responsibility. They absorb criticism for systemic arrangements they operate within but did not design, becoming convenient

repositories for public outrage while the regulatory frameworks, visa policies, and development timelines that structure exploitation remained largely unquestioned.

### 1.5.1. On the Ethics of Writing

How then might we approach the ethics writing about what might be called "unlikeable figures" in anthropology? Contractors occupy morally ambiguous positions that resist easy categorization. The anthropological task here is not to rehabilitate their image or to condemn their practices, but to understand how their particular position illuminates broader structures of power and capital. This complexity raises important questions about how we write about such figures. Like scholars writing colonial intermediaries (Stoler, 2010), I found myself grappling with how to represent subjects whose practices often conflict with my own moral positions while avoiding both condemnation and apologism. These methodological and ethical challenges, which I explore further in Chapter 2 push us to consider the denaturalization of capitalism's ordinary operations, examining how particular forms of accumulation and exploitation become normalized through everyday practices. Through this lens, contractors emerge not merely as victims or villains, but as key figures through which to understand how Singapore's particular form of developmental capitalism reproduces itself through necessary contradictions.

This complexity manifested in concrete ways during my fieldwork. At Super Cool, I encountered subtle but firm boundaries around worker interactions. Management politely discouraged my attempts to speak with workers, citing language barriers – "You won't understand them" – and time constraints – "They are very busy." When I offered to teach English at their dormitories on weekends, initial enthusiasm from the boss gradually dissolved into discussions of "logistical difficulties" and the complexities of obtaining permission from dormitory operators and government authorities to visit the Purpose-Built Dormitories (PBDs).

The irony wasn't lost on me – I had previously visited these same dormitories during an internship with the Ministry of Manpower's Foreign Manpower Management Division. Located in Singapore's industrial peripheries, these PBDs were stark concrete structures housing thousands of workers, their scale both impressive and unsettling.

These were not mere dormitories but small cities unto themselves, housing thousands of workers in cramped conditions – often twenty to a room, their double-decker beds arranged with military precision. High fences topped with barbed wire encircled the compounds, while CCTV cameras surveilled every corner. Security guards manned checkpoints 24/7, screening visitors and enforcing a complex web of rules: no alcohol after 10:30 PM, no gatherings of more than five people in common areas, no cooking in rooms. Along the corridors, vending machines hummed continuously, stocked almost entirely with Red Bull and other energy drinks – liquid fuel for workers pushing through long days of physical labour. The regimented nature of these spaces spoke to broader patterns of control and segregation in Singapore's labour regime, where workers' lives were carefully managed even in their off-hours. During my previous visits as a Ministry intern, I had observed how these architectural features – the checkpoints, the fences, the surveillance systems – created a form of carceral architecture (Foucault, 1975) though their purpose was ostensibly protection rather than punishment. This controlled access reflected broader patterns of social segregation that my position as a researcher both illuminated and was constrained by.

I found myself navigating shifting boundaries and hierarchies that were simultaneously social, spatial, and methodological. This marked a significant departure from my earlier research on migrant workers, which was primarily mediated through NGOs and grassroots communities.

In workplace settings, hierarchies were more pronounced and access more controlled, requiring careful attention to how power operated through both formal and informal channels.

My path to studying contractors was marked by its own contradictions. At industrial estates and coffee shops, contractors would sometimes google my name, discovering articles I had written about migrant worker exploitation during COVID-19. “Ah, you’re that writer,” they would say, their tone shifting, guards rising. Yet in the same conversations, when they learned my father had worked his way up from apprentice to project manager in the construction industry, these guards would often lower. “Your father contractor also ah?” They would smile, ask which company, which projects, mapping our connections through Singapore’s dense web of construction relationships. These moments of recognition would often lead to deeper conversations about the industry’s transformation – how it felt to move from hands-on work to management, how relationships with workers had changed over the decades, how new regulations and technologies were reshaping old practices.

This positioning as both critic and insider speaks to broader shifts in anthropological practice. As Kirin Narayan (1993) argues, the discipline has moved far from its colonial origins where the anthropologist was presumed to be an objective outsider studying “exotic” others. Contemporary anthropology recognizes multiplex identities, where researchers are often simultaneously insiders and outsiders, critics and participants. Studying one’s own society, as scholars like Syed Hussein Alatas and Wang Gungwu did in Southeast Asia, further complicates these positions. Like them, I found myself navigating the “double bind” (Chakrabarty, 2000) of postcolonial scholarship – using Western theoretical frameworks to understand Asian realities while remaining attentive to local forms of knowledge and understanding.

This dual positioning opened up richer terrain for ethnographic understanding. Instead of encountering a monolithic "contractor figure," I met individuals whose approaches to business and labour relations varied widely. There was Mr. Tan, who proudly showed me the wedding invitations of workers who had worked with him for many years and since returned to India; Mr. Lee, who spoke bitterly about how new safety regulations were making it impossible for "small players" to survive; Mdm. Ho, one of the few female contractors I met, who described how she had nursed a worker through sickness and ensured he received the hospitalization care he needed despite the costs. Through these encounters, contractors emerged not as abstract figures of exploitation or entrepreneurship, but as complex individuals navigating their own histories and contradictions within Singapore's construction industry.

These layered relationships challenged me to move beyond both the critical lens of migrant worker advocacy and the potentially romanticized memories of family construction businesses. Like Anna Tsing's (2005) approach to studying Indonesian forest entrepreneurs, I found myself tracking how larger forces – state policies, market pressures, cultural transformations – manifested in individual lives and practices. The contractor figure began to emerge not as a type to be categorized but as a position to be understood – a node where multiple histories, pressures, and possibilities intersected. This approach aligns with what Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) call for in anthropology: attention to how global processes are made in particular places, through particular relationships and practices.

This dissertation makes three primary contributions. First, it challenges developmental state scholarship's focus on formal institutions by revealing how Singapore's transformation depended on intermediaries who coordinated between state planning and construction reality.

Contractors and middling migrants did not persist despite modernization but were actively produced by it, filling gaps that strong institutions systematically create rather than eliminate. Second, the dissertation extends racial capitalism theory beyond the Black-white binary to show how postcolonial states generate accumulation through graduated citizenship hierarchies. Singapore's visa system channels different populations into different positions not through explicit racial exclusion but through administrative categories that consistently reproduce ethnic stratification while maintaining procedural neutrality. Third, I demonstrate how moral economy functions not as resistance to capitalism or adaptation within it but as a coordination mechanism that makes developmental contradictions sustainable. Contractors deploy relationships that generate obligation alongside exploitation, absorbing tensions that would otherwise threaten systemic stability. Together, these contributions reveal how contemporary developmental capitalism achieves transformation through managing rather than resolving contradictions, depending on intermediary figures who hold together incompatible demands that formal institutions cannot openly reconcile.

### 1.5.2. Chapter Outline

This dissertation argues that intermediary figures – contractors and middling migrants alike – do far more than implement supply-chain capitalism or the state's developmentalist agenda. Through their everyday practices of managing citizenship hierarchies, creating informal economies alongside formal markets, and navigating between bureaucratic requirements and practical necessities, these intermediaries enable developmental states to pursue contradictory goals simultaneously. They make modern capitalism workable precisely through their ability to move between different worlds and ways of working.

Three key questions guide this analysis: How do intermediary figures enable developmental states to manage contradictions that formal institutions cannot resolve? What do these positions

reveal about how racial capitalism functions in postcolonial contexts—not through simple exclusion but through creating specific mobility pathways that depend on managing racialized hierarchies? And how do intermediaries' practices illuminate contemporary capitalism's structural dependence on figures who can hold together incompatible demands?

This dissertation unfolds across seven chapters. The analysis moves from historical foundations through contemporary practices to reveal how developmental success depends on creating spaces where formal equality and substantive hierarchy can coexist.

Chapter 2 establishes how intermediary roles evolved while maintaining core functions. Bugis traders mediated between different political systems through personal relationships and cultural knowledge. Colonial kepala managed racialized labour gangs by translating between British administrators and local workers. Contemporary contractors and middling migrants coordinate between state bureaucracy and worksites using similar strategies: linguistic switching, relationship management, and cultural translation. The chapter reveals how intermediaries consistently derive authority from their ability to bridge different worlds rather than control resources directly.

Chapters 3-5 examine how contractors specifically operate within Singapore's construction industry. Chapter 3 shows how contractor class formation during the 1980s boom enabled rapid infrastructure development by absorbing contradictions between state planning and market flexibility. Chapter 4 analyses specific practices like quota trading and phantom hiring that allow contractors to satisfy regulatory requirements while maintaining operational flexibility. Chapter 5 examines how contractors coordinate through informal networks that formally violate competition rules but systemically enable market functionality.

Chapters 6-7 reveal how intermediation operates through multiple figures managing citizenship hierarchies. Chapter 6 demonstrates how both contractors and middling migrants transform abstract visa categories into workplace hierarchies that determine wages, housing, and mobility opportunities. Chapter 7 focuses on middling migrants – permanent residents managing temporary workers, naturalized citizens maintaining transnational networks – to show how intermediation functions through cascading layers of authority and belonging rather than single pivotal figures.

Chapter 8 argues that these intermediary practices illuminate how contemporary developmental capitalism generates competitive advantage through managing rather than resolving contradictions, challenging modernization theories that assume successful development requires institutional rationalization.

# 2: Pre/Colonial Histories

## 2.1. Introduction

Across Southeast Asia's colonial ports – Batavia, Rangoon, Singapore – colonial capitalism transformed existing intermediary positions and generated new ones. In nineteenth-century Singapore, Chinese kepala recruited and managed coolie labour for godowns and plantations (Trocki, 1979; Yen, 1986), while Bugis and Arab traders who had long operated regional maritime networks adapted to interface with European merchant houses (Andaya, 2008). By independence, local contractors coordinated construction projects. This was not unique to Singapore: compradors, shroffs, and kangchus performed analogous functions across colonial port cities, facilitating trade, finance, and labour recruitment between European firms and Asian populations. Some positions like compradors emerged specifically from colonial arrangements; others, like Bugis traders, represented older commercial networks refracted through colonial structures. What united them was their necessity for managing across linguistic, legal, and cultural boundaries that formal colonial institutions could not bridge.

Following scholars who have examined similar figures across different contexts, I understand capitalist intermediaries as those who generate profit through managing wage labour relations. The baogongtou labour contractors Ngai Pun and Huilin Lu (2010) studied in China's construction industry, the gangmasters Tom Brass (2011) analysed in British agriculture, the temporary staffing agencies Chris Benner (2002) traced in Silicon Valley all share something fundamental with Singapore's kepala and contractors. They mediate between capital's need for flexible labour and workers' need for employment, extracting value from this structural position rather than from directly controlling means of production. Yet, less attention has been paid to how these figures transform across different political-economic formations. The

progression from Bugis to kepala to contractor demonstrates that intermediaries are not traditional remnants but are actively produced by each era's specific contradictions. This challenges both modernization narratives that predict intermediaries' eventual elimination through institutional strengthening (Wolf, 1956; Boissevain, 1974) and approaches that treat informality as static features of underdevelopment (De Soto, 1989).

What distinguishes these intermediaries from earlier forms of brokerage is their relationship to labour as commodity. A Bugis trader connecting trepang divers with Chinese merchants mediated between different product markets. A colonial kepala recruiting coolies for plantations mediated the transformation of persons into labour power, managing the fiction that workers freely sold their labour while maintaining the coercion that made this sale compulsory. Contemporary contractors extend this logic, turning Bangladeshi farmers into construction workers, managing the contradiction between Singapore's promise of meritocracy and its dependence on workers permanently excluded from its rewards.

As discussed in the introduction, anthropological studies of intermediaries have shown how brokers emerge at points of disjuncture between different social worlds (Lindquist, 2015; James, 2011). The figures I trace, from Bugis traders through colonial kepala to contemporary contractors, share certain structural positions while operating within fundamentally different economic systems. This distinction matters. The Bugis operated within networks of tributary exchange and mercantile accumulation, where profit emerged from price differentials between markets and personal relationships with rulers. The kepala and contractors, by contrast, function within capitalism proper, where value derives from controlling labour power as a commodity.

I begin with the Bugis traders deliberately, though their world of tributary exchange and mercantile accumulation predates capitalism's wage relations and systematic surplus extraction. These figures established patterns of intermediation – translation between incommensurable value systems, navigation across political boundaries, credit networks spanning vast distances – serving as antecedents that colonial capitalism would seize and transform. The British institutionalized these practices through the kepala system, converting fluid trading relationships into rigid labour hierarchies organized by racial categories. After independence, contractors inherited these structural positions, now coordinating foreign workers within developmental capitalism's imperatives of rapid accumulation and political stability.

This chapter asks: How has the intermediary figure changed in Singapore, from pre-colonial times to the post-colonial present? What logics of capitalist intermediaries might they illuminate? And how might these early figures – the Bugis traders and the colonial kepala – serve as antecedents for the modern contractor?

**2.2 Pre-Colonial Figures**

To understand how intermediaries evolved in Singapore requires starting before Singapore itself existed as a colonial entity. The patterns that would later structure contractor-worker relationships, the techniques of managing between incompatible systems, the very idea that profit could emerge from translation rather than production took shape in the precolonial maritime world where the Bugis operated.

Although European colonialism intensified and transformed the nature of 'capitalism' in Southeast Asia, the broader Malay Archipelago already had thriving hubs of trade and commerce long before the arrival of the British in the early 19th century (Reid, 1993; Miksic,

2013). Srivijaya for instance was a powerful maritime kingdom based in Sumatra that controlled the trade routes through the Malacca Strait and the Sunda Strait from the 7th to the 13th centuries (Abu-Lughod, 1989). Srivijaya's capital, Palembang, was a thriving cosmopolitan centre visited by merchants from across the Afro-Eurasian world (Abu-Lughod, 1989). These trade networks were based on sophisticated systems of credit and contracts that could be seen as early forms of capitalist practice, even if they were not necessarily organized around the same logics of profit maximization and capital accumulation that would come to dominate in later periods.

In pre-colonial Singapore and the wider Malay Archipelago, various intermediary figures served as brokers between different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups, using their knowledge of local markets and customs to facilitate the flow of goods, people, and ideas across the region. These intermediaries included the syahbandar (harbour masters) who organized trade and traffic in the harbour, and mediated between local rulers and foreign merchants (Kratoska, 1984), and the penghulu, a village head or chief who served as a link between local communities and the ruling elites, mediating in disputes and organizing labour for public works and military campaigns.

The presence and importance of these intermediaries highlight the decentralized and fragmented nature of political authority in the pre-colonial Malay world. The region was characterized by a complex patchwork of overlapping and competing centres of power, from small-scale chiefdoms and harbour principalities to larger sultanates and empires (Reid, 1993; Andaya, 2008). Intermediaries were therefore fundamental in mediating between these different centres of power. The salience of these intermediaries reflects the fragmented nature

of the state in pre-colonial times, where power and authority was negotiated through networks of personal relationships, economic transactions, and political alliances.

The ‘state’ during this period operated less as a centralized bureaucracy than as what Wolters (1982) called a mandala – concentric circles of power radiating from multiple centres, overlapping at their edges, expanding and contracting with seasonal rhythms and political fortunes. Authority diminished with distance from the palace, dissipating into zones where rival centres exerted competing gravitational pulls (Tambiah, 1976; Andaya, 1993). A village might pay tribute to three different rulers depending on who could project force that particular season (Reid, 1988; Lieberman, 2003). Intermediaries didn’t just facilitate this system; they constituted it. Without permanent garrisons, power travelled through bodies (Anderson, 1972). The tax farmer who arrived after harvest embodied royal authority more than any distant decree (Kathirithamby-Wells, 1993). The labour broker who could summon workers materialized state capacity that otherwise existed only as possibility (Warren, 1981). These figures navigated between multiple centres of authority – the Sultan’s court, the territorial chief’s compound, the merchant guild – translating incompatible claims into workable arrangements (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Milner, 1982).

This mandala structure of power made intermediaries essential to political existence. Unlike European states with their cadastral surveys and permanent bureaucracies, Southeast Asian polities achieved coherence through relationships rather than institutions. When colonial powers arrived seeking to extract value from these territories, they encountered not empty spaces awaiting administration but dense networks of intermediation. What changed wasn’t the structural necessity of intermediaries but their relationship to accumulation. Pre-colonial

intermediaries accumulated influence, obligations, and followers; colonial intermediaries accumulated capital.

These intermediaries show how power and exchange operated together in Southeast Asian polities. The Malay Archipelago connected European, Middle Eastern, Indian, and Chinese trade networks, dealing in spices, textiles, gold, and slaves (Reid, 1993). Every transaction required navigation through overlapping sovereignties, cultural protocols, and protection arrangements. Commerce remained embedded in social and political relationships. The syahbandar for example embodied this fusion of commercial and political mediation. The syahbandar translated between incompatible systems – converting Chinese weights to Malay measures, Islamic law to customary practice, merchant disputes to royal justice (Kwee, 2006). When European colonial powers arrived from the 16th century onwards, they worked through these existing intermediary positions (Andaya, 2008). The syahbandar who once served Malay sultans now negotiated between Dutch monopolistic ambitions and local trading networks (Blussé, 1986; Andaya, 1981), Portuguese religious missions and Muslim merchant communities (Subrahmanyam, 1993; Reid, 1993), European demands for fixed contracts and Southeast Asian practices of flexible obligation (Wolters, 1999).

The contradictions intermediaries managed shifted fundamentally. Pre-colonial intermediaries reconciled different cultural systems that shared assumptions about reciprocity and hierarchy. Colonial intermediaries bridged incompatible logics – European capitalism demanded standardized commodities while Southeast Asian practice bundled economic and social obligations together. Colonial law insisted on fixed territorial boundaries while the mandala operated through fluid sovereignties. These new contradictions required different forms of mediation, different techniques for making incompatible systems function together.

### 2.2.1. Bugis Traders

The Bugis traders show how intermediaries thrived at the friction points between incompatible systems. The Malay Archipelago before European colonialism operated through overlapping networks of trading polities, where power flowed from controlling maritime routes rather than territorial dominion (Reid, 1993). Bugis traders were renowned for their extensive maritime trading networks, which stretched across the Indonesian archipelago and linked the spice-producing regions of eastern Indonesia with the entrepôts of the western archipelago, including Singapore (Pelras, 1996). Within weeks of the British arrival, 500 Bugis fled Dutch-controlled Riau for Singapore, seeking refuge from Dutch interference (Abdullah, 2006). By the 1820s, 90 to 120 Bugis vessels were arriving annually during the monsoon season, transforming Kampong Glam into their commercial hub (Pelras, 1996).

What made the Bugis distinctive was how they mediated between incommensurable systems without fully belonging to any. They connected trepang divers of eastern Indonesia with Chinese luxury markets, translated between Islamic commercial law and Southeast Asian customary exchange, navigated between Dutch monopolistic ambitions and indigenous trading networks (Sutherland, 2000). Unlike Chinese merchants who established permanent settlements and maintained distinct community structures, or Arab traders who preserved diaspora identities while operating through religious networks, the Bugis combined maritime mobility with political integration. They married into local nobility, established ruling dynasties from Riau to Selangor, and shifted fluidly between trading, raiding, and ruling (Andaya, 1975).

The same prahu that carried trepang – sea cucumbers dried on deck under tropical sun for Chinese medicinal markets – might return with captives from coastal raids. Warren (1981)

argues slave raiding formed the core of their economic strategy. Profits from selling captives in Sulu markets funded their next ventures: buying massoi bark from forest collectors, advancing credit to village headmen, cementing alliances through marriage gifts. These were not capitalist practices; they involved neither wage labour nor systematic surplus extraction through ownership of production. These practices operated through what might be called relational accumulation: profit emerged from maintaining positions between different value systems, from knowing which sultan's court would pay highest for bird's nests, which Chinese merchant would extend credit against future trepang deliveries, which village headman controlled access to forest products. Their power derived from translation rather than production, from bridging rather than controlling.

The Bugis developed as maritime traders through a combination of geographic position and political economy. South Sulawesi's location between the Spice Islands and western ports made maritime commerce practical, while the region's political structure – multiple competing kingdoms rather than a single territorial state – rewarded mobile accumulation over fixed agricultural surplus. Wajo Bugis merchants particularly thrived under Makassar's free trade policies before 1669, with trading offering aristocratic families alternative paths to wealth and status beyond court positions or agricultural estates (Pelras, 1996). Maritime skills developed for fishing and inter-island warfare converted readily to commercial voyaging, while Bugis cultural emphasis on adventure and honour ('siri') made long-distance trading socially prestigious as well as economically profitable (Andaya, 1995).

The Bugis used their extensive trading networks and maritime skills to facilitate the movement of slaves from peripheral areas like Bali and Sulawesi, to ports and plantations in Java, Sumatra, and the Malay Peninsula. Bugis raiders targeted vulnerable coastal communities and merchant

ships, using their superior maritime skills and weaponry to extract tribute and booty (Hägerdal, 2021). The Bugis slave trade reflected the broader political economy of the region, in which the control and exploitation of labour was a principal source of power and wealth for local elites (Sutherland, 1983). Just as how Man Year Entitlements (MYEs) in the construction today have been abstracted into a form of social and economic currency (a point which I discuss extensively in Chapter 4), slaves were commonly used as a form of tributary gift (Reid, 1990; Andaya, 2006). By acting as intermediaries in the slave trade, the Bugis were able to leverage their position between local suppliers and foreign buyers to extract rents and profits, and cement alliances with powerful patrons and protectors.

### 2.2.2. Bugis Traders and Mercantile Capitalism

The Bugis operated within Southeast Asia's complex economic landscape where tributary states and mercantile networks coexisted and overlapped. Sultanates like Aceh, Banten, and Makassar extracted surplus through tribute and corvée labour, maintaining authority through military force, ritual display, and carefully cultivated alliances (Kathirithamby-Wells, 1993). The Bugis navigated between these political structures while practicing what scholars identify as mercantile capitalism: accumulating through circulation rather than production, profiting from price differentials across markets rather than transforming labour into commodities (Braudel, 1982; Arrighi, 1994). Merchant capitalism was characterized by a system of long-distance trade and exchange, which connected different regions and communities across the archipelago, and which relied on webs of personal and institutional relationships, including kinship ties, credit networks, and trading partnerships (Reid, 1993).

The Bugis trading networks pursued systematic profit through arbitrage – buying trepang cheap in Aru to sell dear in Makassar, advancing credit to forest collectors against future deliveries, calculating which ventures would yield returns worth the monsoon voyage (Sutherland, 2001).

These mercantile practices operated through the same kinship networks that structured political alliances, the same seasonal rhythms that determined military campaigns. The Bugis were adept at forging alliances with local rulers and political elites, securing access to valuable resources and trading privileges (Andaya, 1995). Bugis traders for example depended on their extended family networks to recruit crews for their ships and to finance their voyages through complex systems of profit-sharing and joint investment (Pelras, 1996). A successful trader needed both market knowledge and sultanic protection, understanding of price differentials and ritual protocols.

The Bugis managed these overlapping requirements through their distinctive mobility – unlike merchants bound to particular ports or rulers defending specific territories, they could shift between trading, raiding, and temporary political alliances as conditions demanded. This flexibility allowed them to operate within mercantile capitalism while remaining embedded in Southeast Asia's tributary and political relationships, accumulating wealth through positions maintained between systems without permanent allegiance to any single one. The Bugis traders thus constitute a distinctive form of merchant capitalism, one that operated across and between different political systems while maintaining its own organizational logic. Exchange operated through multiple mechanisms simultaneously – barter, credit, various currencies including gold, silver, and cowrie shells (Reid, 1988), alongside reciprocity, redistribution, and gift-giving. These transactions remained embedded in social and political relations (Mauss, 1954) rather than following pure market logic.

Yet crucial differences distinguish Bugis mercantile operations from the capitalist intermediation that kepala and contractors represent. The Bugis accumulated through what Marx called "profit upon alienation" – buying cheap and selling dear – rather than extracting

surplus value from wage labour (Marx, 1867). Their wealth came from controlling trade routes and maintaining market knowledge. Even when Bugis fish entrepreneurs (bos) utilized debt to control fishermen – providing daily necessities on credit through their kiosks, obligating repayment through catches – these remained relations of personal bondage rather than wage labour (Acciaioli, 2000). The fishermen retained ownership of their tools and control over their labour process, even while deeply indebted and exploited. The Bugis couldn't systematically transform these producers into workers selling abstract labour power – the defining feature of capitalism proper (Wood, 2002). This distinction matters theoretically even as scholars like Warren (1981) and Sutherland correctly note these debt-bondage systems could be profoundly exploitative. Exploitation predates capitalism; what capitalism introduces is the specific mechanism of accumulation through commodified labour.

This distinction matters for understanding intermediaries. The Bugis mediated between different markets and political systems but didn't mediate the commodification of labour itself. They connected products across space – trepang from eastern seas to Chinese medicine shops – rather than transforming persons into labour power. The kepala and contractors, by contrast, specialize in this transformation. They convert Bangladeshi farmers into construction workers, manage the fiction that bonded workers freely sell their labour, maintain the mechanisms that make labour appear as commodity even while denying workers the mobility that commodity status supposedly entails.

The transition from Bugis to kepala thus marks more than a change in personnel or techniques. It represents capitalism's fundamental transformation: from accumulation through trade to accumulation through controlling labour as commodity. The Bugis needed knowledge of markets, seasons, and political arrangements. The kepala needed to manage human beings as

simultaneously free agents capable of contracts and unfree bodies requiring coercion. This contradiction – workers who must be free to sell their labour yet unfree enough to accept its terms – generates the specific intermediary forms that capitalism requires.

Other pre-colonial intermediaries navigated colonial capitalism's arrival through different pathways, each shaped by their existing forms of authority. The Hadrami traders maintained commercial networks through genealogical prestige as descendants of the Prophet, their spiritual status opening palace doors and validating contracts where religious authority mattered more than military force (Ho, 2006). Dutch administrators, unable to govern Muslim populations through Christian bureaucracy, discovered this spiritual capital could translate into colonial utility. The Hadrami became qadis in Islamic courts, managed the hajj trade, converted pilgrimage into permits and quotas – operating through registers the colonial state couldn't replicate (Mobini-Kesheh, 1999).

The Bugis, lacking comparable religious authority, scattered across different trajectories. Some maintained seasonal trading routes through the 1960s, their prahus following monsoon rhythms older than colonial borders. Others found niches colonial capitalism overlooked – coastal trade between minor ports the Dutch deemed unprofitable, connections to regions beyond effective colonial control, settlement in Selangor where political influence translated into commercial advantage (Sutherland, 2001). These varied adaptations show how colonial capitalism selectively incorporated existing intermediaries according to which forms of mediation its contradictions required. Religious authority could manage Muslim subjects; maritime knowledge could exploit forgotten routes; political connections could secure privileges. Each group's capabilities determined their colonial possibilities.

Why do the Bugis traders matter for understanding intermediary practices in Singapore? They illustrate the conditions that generate intermediaries across different economic systems. The archipelago's fragmented political authority meant constant gaps between sultanates, colonial powers, and stateless peoples. Vast distances stretched between production and consumption – trepang divers in Aru working for medicine shops in Canton, forest collectors in Borneo supplying incense markets in Mecca. Meanwhile, Islamic commercial law, Malay customary exchange, and Dutch monopoly contracts remained mutually incomprehensible. The Bugis thrived at these friction points.

Colonial capitalism transformed these conditions without eliminating the need for intermediaries. The kepala emerged where British legal frameworks met Chinese customary practices, neither side fully understanding the other. Plantations in Johor needed workers from specific villages in Fujian – geographic and linguistic gaps that required bridging. Racial classifications separated Chinese, Indians, and Malays into distinct categories, yet production demanded their daily interaction on the same estates. Today's contractors face parallel gaps. MOM regulations written in bureaucratic English must somehow reach Bangladeshi workers who speak Sylheti. Dormitories cluster in Tuas while worksites scatter across the island. Paper compliance bears little resemblance to actual construction practice, yet both must coexist.

Rather than representing stages of development, these figures show how each economic configuration produces its own contradictions requiring human mediation. The techniques change – the Bugis used kinship networks and seasonal credit, the kepala deployed debt bondage and dialect groups, contractors manipulate quota systems and moral obligations. Yet the structural position persists: someone must absorb the tensions between systems that require each other while remaining incompatible.

### 2.2.3. Comparing Bugis Traders to Contractors

The Bugis traders and modern contractors emerge from similar structural conditions: gaps between incompatible systems that require human mediation. For the Bugis, these gaps opened between Malay sultanates with overlapping jurisdictions, Dutch monopolistic ambitions, British free trade zones, and indigenous networks that followed neither European nor aristocratic protocols. For contractors, comparable gaps exist between state regulations and construction realities, between formal employment law and informal labour practices, between bureaucratic categories and human needs.

Both derive power from controlling flows of labour rather than owning productive assets directly, a point which is fundamental to understanding intermediaries. The Bugis accumulated wealth through slave trading and debt bondage, managing human mobility across the archipelago without necessarily owning the ships or controlling the ports. Modern contractors profit from recruiting and managing migrant workers, converting regulatory categories like work permits and quotas into economic advantage without owning construction equipment or development projects. This power emerges from their position between systems: the Bugis between different political authorities and trade networks, contractors between the developmental state and global labour markets.

Yet the political contexts fundamentally differ. The Bugis operated within fragmented authority where practices like slave trading and debt bondage were accepted elements of commerce rather than violations requiring concealment (Pelras, 1996). They navigated between sultans, played Dutch against British interests, operated beyond any single authority's complete control. Modern contractors work within Singapore's comprehensive regulatory state that minutely governs construction, employment, and migration (Rodan, 1989). This strong state, however,

generates its own contradictions: demanding world-class infrastructure at third-world prices, importing workers while denying them permanence, requiring compliance with regulations that make projects economically unviable if actually followed.

These differences show how state formation shapes intermediary practices. The Bugis's debt contracts and tributary exchanges were the established structures of their era. Contractors' informal practices – phantom workers, kickback systems, falsified paperwork – emerge from regulatory excess, when formal requirements become so comprehensive yet contradictory that violation becomes necessary for functioning. The Bugis managed relationships between sultanates through kinship networks and seasonal credit. Contractors navigate state demands and market pressures through citizenship hierarchies and carefully calibrated obligations. Each era produces distinct techniques for managing its specific contradictions. These intermediary positions persist across centuries because certain conditions keep recurring: regulatory systems that can't speak to each other, value frameworks that remain mutually illegible, vast distances between where things are produced and where they're consumed. Wherever these gaps appear, positions open for those who can translate across them.

### 2.2.4. Why Start with Pre-Colonial Traders?

I begin with the Bugis traders deliberately, though they operated before capitalism proper emerged in Southeast Asia. This choice addresses a common assumption: that intermediaries represent traditional remnants that modernization will eventually eliminate. Tracing intermediation back to pre-capitalist formations shows these figures have always been necessary where incompatible systems meet. The Bugis thrived precisely at such friction points – between Malay sultanates and Dutch monopolies, between Islamic law and customary exchange, between forest collectors and Chinese medicine markets.

The Bugis weren't capitalists. They engaged in tributary exchange and mercantile trade without wage labour or systematic capital accumulation. Yet their practices – managing debt relationships, controlling labour through bondage, navigating between hostile political powers – established patterns that would endure through radically different economic systems. When colonial capitalism arrived, it transformed these techniques for its own contradictions. The Bugis's seasonal credit became the kepala's debt bondage. Their kinship networks found echoes in dialect-group recruitment. Their navigation between sultans paralleled the kepala's mediation between colonial law and local custom.

Starting with the Bugis also refuses the search for capitalism's singular "arrival" in Southeast Asia, a question that, as Chakrabarty (2000) argues, reproduces Eurocentric narratives where history only begins with European presence. Rather than identifying when capitalism "reached" the region, examining the Bugis shows how existing practices were gradually transformed. The shift from collective Bugis kinship groups to individual intermediaries marks capitalism's reconfiguration of social relations. Under colonial rule, Chinese kepala and Indian kangany emerged as parallel systems of labour management, each channelling their respective communities into plantation work through debt and obligation. These individual intermediaries competed within labour markets structured by racial hierarchies that persist today in who becomes contractors.

This genealogy reveals something paradoxical about developmental states. Singapore promises to eliminate inefficient middlemen through institutional modernization, yet contractors multiply alongside bureaucratic capacity. Each reform creates new intermediary forms: abolishing slavery produced the kangany system, ending indenture generated labour contractors, regulating dormitories spawned quota trading. The persistence suggests that

capitalism produces intermediaries to manage its contradictions rather than gradually eliminating them through market efficiency. The contractors I studied inherit this structural position, transforming patterns of intermediation that have structured Southeast Asian economies long before colonialism declared itself the starting point of modern history. This historical genealogy provides essential context for the ethnographic analysis in subsequent chapters, where I examine how contemporary contractors inherit and transform these patterns of intermediation within Singapore's construction industry.

### 2.3. Kepala and Colonial Rule

The figure of the kepala emerged during the colonial period as a distinct intermediary tied to British imperialism's labour needs. The term kepala, meaning 'head' or 'chief' in Malay, referred to Chinese and Indian foremen who supervised and managed migrant labourers in Malaya's mines and plantations (Jackson, 1968). These intermediaries occupied a unique position in the colonial economy, mediating between British planters, migrant workers, the colonial state, and Chinese secret societies or kongsi that controlled labour recruitment and credit networks (Trocki, 1990).

Colonial plantations required new forms of labour intermediaries. The kepala system emerged to manage massive recruitment of Chinese and Indian workers, a role demanding specific linguistic skills (Hokkien, Tamil, Telugu), acceptance of subordinate positions within colonial administration, and willingness to enforce racial labour hierarchies through debt and coercion (Trocki, 1990; Kaur, 2004). This transformation shows how capitalism selectively incorporates, displaces, and transforms existing intermediaries according to its evolving needs. The kepala's position embodied colonial capitalism's contradictions. They advanced passage money to workers from China, creating debt relationships that bound labourers to specific plantations, practices that generated profit while skirting British prohibitions on slavery. They

translated between British demands for productivity and Chinese workers' expectations of fair treatment, often absorbing the violence when these proved incompatible. When workers protested wage cuts during the 1840s depression, kepala faced pressure from planters to maintain order while their own kinsmen demanded solidarity. When secret societies clashed over territory, kepala navigated between colonial authorities demanding information and brotherhood oaths requiring silence (Yen, 1986). Their power derived from managing these irreconcilable demands: making colonial capitalism function through practices that colonial law officially prohibited.

The Bugis had derived power from mobility between trading systems, from navigating political fluidity, from maintaining autonomy while embedding themselves strategically. The kepala operated within fundamentally different constraints. Colonial courts backed their authority over "their" workers. Immigration ordinances formalized their recruitment role. Plantation boundaries contained their sphere of influence. Where precolonial intermediation thrived on fluid networks and voluntary association, colonial intermediation depended on racial hierarchies and legal coercion. The kepala system converted the archipelago's patterns of brokerage into instruments of extraction.

The expansion of colonial rule led to the emergence of new forms of capitalism, as European trading companies and colonial governments sought to control and exploit the resources and markets of the region. While the British colonial state was more centralized and bureaucratic than its pre-colonial predecessors, it still relied heavily on intermediaries to maintain control over local populations and to extract resources and revenues, even as it discriminated against them and viewed them as an inferior race (Trocki, 1979). The British East India Company for instance relied on Chinese and Arab merchants to facilitate the exchange of goods and the

collection of revenues (Furber, 1976). These intermediaries reflect the changing nature of the state and of capitalism under colonial rule. They operated within fundamentally different conditions than their Bugis predecessors, shaped by colonial capitalism's specific requirements for wage labour and racial management.

The British transformed existing practices of credit, debt, and commercial exchange into specifically capitalist relations based on wage labour and private property. The establishment of Singapore as a free port created new opportunities for trade and investment, while the introduction of modern banking and joint-stock companies provided new sources of capital and credit for local entrepreneurs (Brown, 1994). The British set about reshaping the economy of Singapore and the surrounding areas in order to facilitate free trade, maximize its revenues, and assert control over the population. To do so, the colonial government imposed new legal and administrative frameworks that privileged private property, contractual relations, and market competition (Turnbull, 1989). This transition involved the selective appropriation and adaptation of pre-existing economic formations, converting fluid trading relationships into rigid labour hierarchies.

The British colonial regime also introduced new forms of economic control and exploitation, particularly in the realm of labour. The British government heavily encouraged the use of indentured labour from China and India, as they were keen to establish permanent sources of cheap labour for its highly lucrative plantations (Northrup, 1995). In fact, in the states of Kedah and Perlis, applicants for rubber land were banned from recruiting local Malays to work on the plantations, and were required to show evidence of being able to import sufficient immigrant labour before their application for land would be approved (Sandhu, 1969: 52-53; Ramachandran, 1994). Rather absurdly, after excluding the local Malays, the British colonial

government then cited the lack of indigenous labour as one main reason for recruitment of Indian and Chinese labour (Ramachandran, 1994). This policy was undoubtedly motivated by profit, as there were abundant supplies of cheap labour from China and India willing to work for low wages in mines and plantations, who were not just cheaper but also politically less problematic for the colonial administration (Ramachandran, 1994).

The kepala represents a distinct intermediary tied to the economic and political logic of British imperialism. The kepala occupied a unique position in the colonial economy, mediating between British planters, migrant workers, the colonial state, and in some cases, even secret societies. These secret societies, or kongsi, were Chinese organizations that controlled labour recruitment, credit networks, and protection rackets in colonial Singapore. Groups like the Ghee Hin and Hai San societies wielded significant power over Chinese workers through both mutual aid and coercion, making kepala who could navigate between colonial authorities and these societies particularly valuable (Trocki, 1990).

This shift represents a transformation in how intermediation works. The Bugis mediated between groups with different forms of dependency – forest collectors relied on trade networks for salt and tools, sultanates extracted tribute from subjects, Chinese merchants operated through credit obligations. Each maintained distinct systems of value and authority even while interconnected through trade. The Bugis themselves enforced hierarchies, trading slaves and binding fishing crews through debt. But they operated across systems rather than within a single structure. Under colonial capitalism, the kepala mediated between actors locked into wage labour relations. Workers had been largely separated from subsistence alternatives, making wage work necessary for survival. Planters required this labour to generate profit. The colonial state depended on both to function. The kepala managed these relationships within capitalism's

unified hierarchy of accumulation. They profited from workers' constrained choices: charging recruitment fees because workers had limited paths to employment, extracting dormitory rents because workers faced restricted housing options, providing credit at high interest because workers lacked access to formal banking. Where Bugis intermediation connected different systems of dependency, kepala intermediation managed positions within capitalism's totalizing wage labour hierarchy (Balachandran, 2011; Kaur, 2004).

The 'kepala' was sometimes referred to as the 'kangchu', which refers specifically to the Chinese headmen responsible for overseeing the cultivation of pepper and gambier plantations in Johor, and managing the Chinese migrant labour employed in these plantations (Trocki, 1976). The kepala was also sometimes referred to as the 'kangany' (also sometimes spelled 'kangani'), Tamil for 'overseer', and is associated with the recruitment of 'free labour' in the early 20$^{th}$ century following the abolishment of indenture (Ramachandran, 1994). The kangany was typically a person already employed as a labourer in a plantation, but who was sent by his employer to recruit agricultural labour from his own native village in India (Ramachandran, 1994). This was institutionalized under Immigration Rule 7 (2), and the kangany had to obtain a license by both Indian and Malayan colonial officials (Ramachandran, 1994). In other words, not all kepala were kangchu or kangany, but kangchu and kangany could be seen as examples of kepala. 'Kepala' and 'towkay', Hokkien for 'boss' (also sometimes spelled 'taukeh'), also seem to be used interchangeably by some historians (Trocki, 1990). There are also some similarities between the kepala and the 'coolie broker' or the 'crimp', although the two terms are not necessarily interchangeable. The 'crimp' was a labour recruiter who used deception, intoxication, or violence to force men into ship crews, particularly in port cities like San Francisco's Barbary Coast or Shanghai (Fingard, 1982). Both crimps and kepala profited from delivering workers to employers – crimps received 'blood money' from ship captains, kepala

got recruitment fees from plantations. While crimps relied primarily on physical force and deception, kepala used debt bondage and social obligation. Both operated in legally ambiguous zones where exploitative practices were tolerated by authorities who needed labour supplied (McKeown, 2004)

Over time, the term itself appears to have been imbued with new meanings, as I found in the National Archives that the 'kepala' was later used in the 1970s by state officials to refer to the mobile foremen/sub-contractors on construction sites who may answer to several contractors, and are usually skilled in a specialized trade. I discuss more of this in Chapter 3, when I bring in the archival materials I encountered on the state's view towards 'kepala' in the construction sector. Nonetheless, it is not the scope of this chapter to give an exhaustive definition or genealogy of the term (that could be explored in a separate paper).

The kepala occupied an ambiguous position, simultaneously serving the interests of the colonial state and capital whilst managing the demands and expectations of the workers they supervised. In the mining districts, Chinese communities were governed by a Kapitan Cina who held official administrative over local Chinese and functioned as ceremonial leadership (Wong, 1965). At the workplace level, Chinese labour gangs were supervised by kepala (foremen) who managed day-to-day mining operations. They organized labour recruitment through dialect networks, allocated workers to different mines, maintained discipline, and ensured production targets were met. The colonial government appointed these Chinese leaders to handle conflicts within Chinese communities, though British authorities intervened when necessary (Trocki, 2007). This system allowed indirect governance while kapitans profited through tax collection, labour contracting, and often their own mining ventures.

### 2.3.1. The Kepala and the Kapitan

Colonial Malaya's mining districts operated through cascading layers of Chinese intermediaries. At the community level, the Kapitan Cina – literally "Captain of the Chinese" – held official administrative authority over entire Chinese populations, appointed by colonial authorities to govern districts, collect taxes, and maintain order (Wong, 1965; Trocki, 2007). These kapitans typically came from established merchant families, Peranakan or long-settled traders who had accumulated capital through generations of regional commerce. At the workplace level, kepala supervised specific labour gangs in mines and construction sites. The kepala – a Malay word meaning "head" – were often recent arrivals themselves, sinkheh who had worked their way up from indentured labourer to foreman. This dual structure persists in contemporary Singapore: intermediation functions through layers of coordination at different scales, each position enabling the others while managing distinct contradictions.

The Kapitan Cina occupied a position parallel to today's contractors. Both hold official state appointments or business registrations, both interface with state bureaucracy while maintaining private enterprises, both coordinate across incompatible systems – British legal frameworks and Chinese customary practices then, government regulations and market realities now. Yap Ah Loy, Kapitan Cina of Kuala Lumpur, became Malaya's wealthiest individual through mines, plantations, and shops while serving as the colonial state's instrument for governing Chinese communities (Wong, 1965). His success demonstrated how these positions enabled accumulation through managing the contradictions between colonial extraction and community survival.

The kepala operated at the granular level of workplace coordination, prefiguring today's middling migrants. These foremen managed through practical knowledge rather than formal

authority. They recruited through dialect networks, knowing which villages in Fujian produced reliable miners. They allocated workers based on kinship ties that British supervisors couldn't perceive. They maintained discipline through combinations of ethnic solidarity and calculated coercion that formal management couldn't replicate. Kepala occupied liminal positions – more secure than common workers yet excluded from ownership, trusted with coordination yet denied real authority, essential to production yet perpetually replaceable.

This layered structure addressed racial capitalism's core challenge: extracting value from populations marked as different while maintaining legitimacy. The British needed Chinese labour and racial hierarchy simultaneously. The Kapitan-kepala structure distributed this contradiction: kapitans managed the political tensions of representing communities while serving colonial interests; kepala handled the practical contradictions of maintaining productivity while enforcing exploitation. Together, they transformed unsustainable extraction into a functioning system that persisted for generations.

The relationship between kepala and Kapitan Cina Illuminated how colonial racial capitalism operated through hierarchical layers of Chinese authority rather than simple binary divisions. While both were Chinese intermediaries, they occupied fundamentally different class positions that structured their relationship to both colonial power and Chinese labour. The Kapitan's authority encompassed the kepala – he could appoint or dismiss foremen, mediate disputes between kepala and workers, and often held financial stakes in the very mines where kepala supervised (Trocki, 1990). Yet the kepala possessed operational knowledge the Kapitan lacked: which workers shirked, whose debts were mounting, where tensions simmered that might disrupt production. This created mutual dependence despite vast inequality. The Kapitan needed kepala to deliver the labour that justified his position to colonial authorities; kepala

needed the Kapitan's political protection and access to credit networks. Their relationship embodied the layered sovereignty of colonial rule – authority cascading through multiple intermediaries, each extracting value while remaining subordinate to the layer above.

When conflicts erupted between rival Chinese secret societies, as in the Larut Wars of the 1860s-1870s, the limits of the Kapitan system became apparent – while colonial authorities expected Kapitans to maintain order, real power often lay with secret society leaders who controlled mining territories and fighting men, forcing Kapitans to negotiate between colonial demands for stability and the violent realities of tin mining competition (Wong, 1965; Khoo, 1972). This pattern of cascading responsibility with upward-flowing profit would become a defining feature of how intermediation functions in Singapore's construction industry – contractors blame subcontractors who blame labour suppliers, while value accumulates at each level precisely through managing these tensions.

This historical arrangement shows how contemporary intermediaries represent capitalism's consistent solution to managing contradictions through differentiated coordination. The cascading coordination that once operated through Kapitan and kepala now functions through contractors and middling migrants. The mechanisms might have changed – market competition replacing colonial appointment, visa categories replacing racial classification – but the structure endures, each layer absorbing different tensions while enabling the others.

### 2.3.2. Kangany

Colonial capitalism produced differentiated intermediaries positioned differently within racial hierarchies. Chinese kepala operated through pre-existing networks – secret societies, dialect groups, centuries of regional trade – maintaining autonomy that sometimes allowed them to circumvent colonial regulations. Tamil kangany operated through formalized mechanisms

under Immigration Rule 7(2), requiring licenses from both Indian and Malayan officials (Ramachandran, 1994). These Tamil foremen came from relatively high subcastes, experienced plantation workers who returned to Tamil Nadu villages to recruit labour through kinship and caste networks (Sandhu, 1969). Planters lacked Tamil language skills, village connections, and cultural knowledge to secure labour directly. The kangany transformed rural Tamil vulnerability into organized labour flows – his village reputation guaranteed worker compliance, his knowledge identified which families needed seasonal income, his position allowed him to manage both patrimonial care and systematic extraction. He arranged marriages while calculating compound interest, managed remittances while deepening debts that passed through generations, children inheriting their parents' obligations (Kaur, 2004; Arasaratnam, 1970).

The plantation ecology shaped kangany intermediation through specific temporal demands. Rubber trees required seven years before producing latex, demanding stable labour forces across growing seasons. Workers who deserted after two years wasted investments in training and maintenance. The kangany's debt system solved this by making departure economically impossible – wages calculated to remain below advances, compound interest accumulating faster than repayment. Remote estates required provision shops, temples, medical care. The kangany managed these functions, creating dependencies beyond wage relations.

Mining operated through different temporalities. Tin deposits exhausted unpredictably, sometimes within months. Operations needed to dissolve quickly without carrying liability for workers. The kepala's credit-ticket system enabled this flexibility – workers held individual debts that moved with them between sites. When mines failed, kepala shifted to new ventures while workers found other kepala. Chinese mining kongsi used profit-sharing arrangements

where workers held stakes, requiring intermediaries who could calculate partnership distributions and track shares through turnover. The kangany's inherited debt and estate provision systems would have prevented mining's necessary flexibility. The kepala's portable credit arrangements would have failed to maintain plantation discipline across growing seasons.

These different management forms emerged from the material requirements of accumulation. Colonial authorities produced multiple intermediary types because each sector generated specific contradictions requiring human mediation. Chinese networks, developed through centuries of regional trade and secret society organization, provided mining's required flexibility. Tamil kangany, drawing on village hierarchies and caste relationships, maintained plantation stability. The British needed Chinese entrepreneurial mobility for mining's volatility and Tamil kinship durability for plantation's long horizons. Each position enabled distinct forms of value extraction while managing particular tensions.

What emerges is how intermediaries exist to solve specific contradictions that different forms of accumulation create. The material conditions of production determined which intermediary forms could function and which groups could occupy these positions – a pattern persisting in Singapore's construction industry today, where contractors, supervisors, and foremen each manage different contradictions between developmental promises and accumulation imperatives.

The kangany-kepala comparison shows how intermediaries become the mechanism through which racial capitalism produces and maintains differentiation. Scholars have documented that capitalism creates difference rather than homogenizing labour (Robinson, 1983), that it

operates through graduated sovereignty rather than binary exclusion (Lowe, 2015). What remains underexamined is how this differentiation actually happens in practice. Intermediaries make racial categories operational. The kangany position transformed Tamil identity into a technology for managing plantation labour – caste status, village networks, and kinship ties became instruments of accumulation. The kepala position converted Chinese dialect groups and secret society membership into mechanisms for organizing mining. These intermediary roles actively produced racial categories by making ethnicity functionally necessary for capitalism's operation.

A Chinese person couldn't effectively become kangany – they lacked the village networks in Tamil Nadu that made the position function. A Tamil couldn't operate as kepala without secret society connections and dialect group affiliations. The intermediary positions themselves enforced racial specialization while making it appear technically required. This pattern continues in Singapore's construction industry. Through intermediaries, racial capitalism transforms ethnic difference into technical specialization, making hierarchy appear as functional necessity.

### 2.3.3. The "Freedom" Transformation and the Multiplication of Intermediaries

The kepala's evolution through the end of indenture demonstrates how states create intermediary positions when managing capitalism's contradictions. In the early 20th century, colonial authorities faced mounting pressure to abolish indentured labour. Anti-slavery societies, Indian nationalists, and liberal reformers condemned it as barely disguised bondage (Tinker, 1974). The British response – replacing indenture with "free" labour – appeared to eliminate the coercive structures kepala operated within. This transformation instead intensified the need for intermediaries, establishing patterns Singapore reproduces today through different mechanisms.

This shift from indenture to "free" labour marked a transformation in how capitalism organized exploitation. The change responded to multiple pressures: humanitarian campaigns that made explicit bondage politically untenable, Indian nationalist movements that challenged colonial labour extraction, and emerging international labour standards following World War I and the formation of the International Labour Organization (Parmer, 1960). Capitalism still required cheap, disciplined labour for colonial production. The reconfiguration maintained exploitation through market mechanisms that appeared voluntary. Workers gained formal freedom to sell their labour while becoming ensnared in economic dependencies that restricted mobility as effectively as legal bonds.

This reconfiguration required new forms of coordination that only intermediaries could provide. Under indenture, the state directly enforced labour contracts through courts and police. Under "free" labour, discipline operated through debt, social obligations, and market pressures that needed active management. The kepala's role expanded from enforcing legal compliance to orchestrating economic compulsion – a more complex task requiring knowledge of village credit networks, understanding of compound interest calculations, and ability to balance extraction with worker retention. Each time capitalism reorganizes to address legitimacy crises, it multiplies intermediary functions. Intermediaries proliferate through modernization, managing the new contradictions that each reform generates.

The abolition of Chinese indentured migration in 1914 forced a reconfiguration that made kepala more essential. Legal contracts no longer bound workers to employers. Mines and plantations still needed stable labour supply. The credit-ticket system that emerged shifted bondage from legal to economic forms. Kepala advanced passage costs from Fujian and

Guangdong, creating debt obligations that bound workers more effectively than indenture contracts (Blythe, 1947). A worker arriving with $50 in passage debt faced compound interest that could triple the amount within months. The kepala managed these debt relationships across oceanic distances – tracking obligations, arranging remittances, negotiating with village moneylenders. Workers were theoretically "free" to leave. Departure meant defaulting on debts that would destroy their families' creditworthiness back home.

This shift from legal to economic bondage multiplied the kepala's functions. Under indenture, their role was straightforward: deliver workers, ensure compliance, maintain discipline. Under the credit-ticket system, they became financial intermediaries managing complex webs of obligation. They maintained relationships with village headmen who vouched for workers' reliability. They tracked market wages to ensure workers earned enough to service debts while remaining dependent. They balanced extraction with sustainability – too much pressure and workers absconded, too little and profits evaporated. The "free" labour system required more sophisticated coordination than indenture's blunt coercion.

The Chinese Protectorate, established in 1877, exemplified how states create intermediary positions while claiming to eliminate them. Officially, the Protectorate existed to shield Chinese workers from exploitation by "unscrupulous crimps and brokers." Its officers conducted depot inspections, investigated abuse allegations, mediated labour disputes. The Protectorate's actual function was managing the contradiction between humanitarian rhetoric and labour extraction needs. As McKeown (2004: 182) notes, "accounts of Asian indenture generated a well-articulated suspicion of unregulated intermediaries, recruiters, and transportation companies as sources of unfreedom". Colonial accounts generated well-

articulated suspicion of unregulated intermediaries that paradoxically justified state intervention while preserving the system requiring such intermediaries.

The Protectorate incorporated kepala into regulatory frameworks that legitimized their role. Licensed labour brokers replaced unlicensed crimps, registered depots replaced informal barracks, regulated contracts replaced verbal agreements. These reforms created paperwork that made exploitation appear orderly. A worker's thumbprint on a contract he couldn't read became proof of consent. Medical inspections that passed diseased workers became evidence of care. The Protectorate generated documentation that protected the colonial state from criticism while enabling the same extraction through formalized channels.

This pattern – states creating regulatory frameworks that require intermediaries while claiming to protect workers from them – established templates Singapore still follows. When the Ministry of Manpower prosecutes "errant contractors" for dormitory conditions, it parallels the Protectorate prosecuting "unscrupulous crimps." Both deflect blame from structural policies onto individual bad actors. Both maintain legitimacy by attacking the very figures their regulations make necessary. The contemporary foreign worker levy system bonds workers to employers through debt, mirroring the credit-ticket system's economic coercion. Work permits that restrict job mobility reproduce indenture's constraints through bureaucratic mechanisms.
Contractors inherited the kepala's structural position within different regulatory frameworks. Kepala managed credit-ticket debts; contractors manage levy payments. Kepala navigated between secret societies and colonial law; contractors balance state regulations and market pressures. The Protectorate licensed brokers to maintain oversight; the Building and Construction Authority licenses contractors for the same purpose. The mechanisms evolved

while the function persisted: intermediaries absorb contradictions between state legitimacy and accumulation needs.

This historical pattern undermines conventional assumptions about development and modernization. Each reform that promised to eliminate intermediaries multiplied their necessity. The end of indenture created credit systems requiring elaborate coordination. The Protectorate's regulations generated compliance requirements that made brokers indispensable. Contemporary reforms follow the same trajectory – workplace safety laws create certification industries, dormitory standards generate inspection regimes, fair employment practices produce compliance consultancies. Every attempt to formalize and regulate construction work creates new gaps requiring intermediary coordination.

The "freedom" that replaced indenture was freedom for capital to access labour through flexible mechanisms, and constraint for workers navigating economic rather than legal bondage. The kepala's transformation into contractors demonstrates how capitalism adapts its forms while maintaining its functions. Singapore's construction industry runs on the same contradictions that made kepala necessary, now distributed across government agencies, compliance regimes, and visa categories. What appears as institutional sophistication actually multiplies the spaces where intermediaries operate.

### 2.3.4. Colonial Variations: The Necessity of Intermediaries

Why did some colonial systems generate elaborate intermediary architectures while others attempted direct control? The answer lies in how different empires managed the contradictions their extraction methods created.

The Dutch Cultivation System in Java (1830-1870) faced an arithmetic that demanded intermediaries. Approximately three thousand European officials extracting agricultural surplus from millions of Javanese peasants needed local aristocrats (*priyayi*) to maintain any semblance of order. Preserving these traditional hierarchies created its own impossibility. Javanese aristocrats derived legitimacy from reciprocal obligations – protecting peasants during poor harvests, maintaining ritual exchange, ensuring community survival through seasonal fluctuations. The Cultivation System demanded they violate these obligations, forcing peasants to dedicate 20% of land to export crops even when it meant starvation. Village heads (lurah) found themselves caught between Dutch quotas and peasant survival, between maintaining traditional authority and enforcing policies that led to widespread death during the1840s famines (Boomgaard, 1989).

This impossibility generated cascading intermediary layers. District chiefs (penghulu) absorbed tensions between Dutch administrators and village heads (Breman, 1983). Overseers (mandor) translated seasonal agricultural rhythms into industrial production schedules (Breman, 1989). After 1870, Chinese contractors (pemborong) managed wage labour as private capitalism replaced state extraction (Rush, 1990). Each position emerged from specific gaps – between Dutch officials speaking no Javanese and peasants reading no Dutch, between customary law and colonial decree, between traditional reciprocity and capitalist accumulation. The system extracted 823 million guilders through these buffers that made unbearable demands temporarily bearable, though humanitarian criticism eventually forced its abolition in 1870 (Fasseur, 1992).

French Indochina's rubber plantations operated differently. Labour recruitment expanded significantly, yet French companies never developed Vietnamese equivalents to kangany or

kepala (Murray, 1980). Workers transported from the Red River Delta to highland plantations encountered French managers without intermediary buffers. French plantations relied on physical isolation and legal restrictions to retain workers. They lacked the debt relationships that bound workers through obligation, the patronage networks that provided crisis assistance, the ethnic foremen who could translate between European demands and Asian realities.

This absence correlated with chronic instability. French plantations faced persistent labour shortages as workers fled when possible. The 1930 Phú Riềng strike at Michelin's plantation escalated into armed confrontation – grievances accumulated until they exploded, with no intermediary layers to absorb incremental complaints (Brocheux and Hémery, 2009). French plantations remained entirely French-owned while only a handful of Vietnamese participated in the colonial economy (Murray, 1980). The absence of intermediary positions blocked indigenous accumulation and prevented the emergence of local stakeholders who might defend the system. Geographic isolation and the scale of French operations also contributed to these chronic problems, yet the contrast with British Malaya's intermediary-mediated stability remains striking.

These colonial variations sharpen what's at stake in contemporary Singapore. The French case suggests that intermediaries enable capitalism to function over extended periods, even if no colonial system proved indefinitely sustainable. They transform contradictions into manageable tensions. French direct control produced chronic crisis. Dutch layered mediation sustained extraction for four decades before collapsing under its own contradictions. The British differentiated intermediaries – Chinese kepala managing through secret societies, Tamil kangany through village networks – created accumulation possibilities that generated their own legitimacy.

### 2.4. From Kepala to Contractor

Singapore's independence in 1965 didn't eliminate the kepala system so much as absorb it into the machinery of nation-building. A decade later, Ministry of Labour officials still called them "kepala," these intermediaries who recruited workers through dialect networks and managed them through personal obligations.[2] The 1975 report captures this persistence with bureaucratic candour: the system "has worked in Singapore because it is uneconomical for main contractors to have a permanent workforce." The state even maintained what it termed "implicit subsidies" – exempting contractors from paying CPF for foreign workers, a preferential treatment that other sectors didn't receive. Why? Because "HDB had to construct housing units rapidly and the arrangement would make contractors much more aggressive in securing a steady inflow of labour." The kepala occupied the same structural position they always had, bridging between what the state demanded and what construction actually required.

The contradictions that created colonial kepala persisted in new forms. Construction sites still operated through Tamil instructions and Hokkien negotiations while safety regulations arrived in bureaucratic English. The state proclaimed meritocracy while organizing labour through citizenship tiers – citizens, permanent residents, work permit holders – each category determining wages, housing, and possibilities for permanence. Singapore needed to build 600,000 HDB units, entire new towns rising from swampland, industrial estates sprawling across the island. This construction demanded coordination at scales that dwarfed colonial plantations. Yet the underlying problem remained unchanged: main contractors needed workers delivered daily without bearing the costs of permanent employment, and only intermediaries could make this possible.

[2] Ministry of Labour, Singapore. "Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry in Singapore." December 1975. Study Group Report. National Library Board, Singapore.

The practices themselves showed remarkable continuity. According to the 1975 study group, contractors still recruited through "the network of family and kinship ties," bringing in "their kinsmen and friends as apprentices" just as kepala had always done. They extended personal loans during emergencies, organized festival celebrations, managed through what my own interlocutors would later call "taking care" of their workers. The report uses "contractors and kepalas" interchangeably, sometimes writing "contractors or sub-contractors" as if unsure whether these were distinct categories or the same people wearing different administrative hats. They were both: kepala who had registered businesses and filed tax returns while continuing to operate through the same dialect networks and moral economies that had always structured construction labour. The terminology would gradually standardize around "contractor" by the 1980s, a linguistic shift that suggested professionalization while obscuring how much remained unchanged. What appeared as modernization was actually sedimentation – new regulatory requirements layering onto existing practices as labour sources diversified from Malaysia to Bangladesh, Thailand, India, each new flow creating demands for different kinds of coordination that only intermediaries could provide.

### 2.4.1. What Developmental Capitalism Changes

While the structural position of intermediaries persisted, developmental capitalism transformed how they operated. Colonial kepala had managed through explicit racial hierarchies – Chinese foremen supervising Chinese coolies, Tamil kangany recruiting from specific Tamil villages, each group locked into occupational categories that the colonial state openly enforced. A Chinese kepala's authority derived from dialect, clan affiliation, and often secret society membership. Workers obeyed because alternatives barely existed: return to debt-ridden villages or face violence from brotherhood enforcement. The colonial state saw nothing contradictory in organizing labour through racial categories while extracting value for the metropole.

Singapore's developmental state faced a different legitimacy problem. The People's Action Party claimed to transcend colonial exploitation, building a nation where citizens advanced through merit rather than race, where development benefited Singaporeans rather than distant shareholders. Yet rapid development required the same intensive labour extraction – arguably more intensive given the scale of transformation planned. The solution wasn't eliminating exploitation but making it procedurally legitimate. Work permit categories that happened to channel Bangladeshis toward construction replaced racial assignments that explicitly designated Chinese for mining. Levy systems that made workers expensive to maintain replaced kepala violence that kept them in line. Dependency ratios that limited foreign worker percentages replaced colonial quotas that restricted Chinese immigration. Each mechanism achieved similar outcomes through bureaucratic procedures rather than racial proclamations.

The scale and complexity of coordination expanded dramatically. A colonial kepala might manage a hundred workers recruited from one or two villages in Fujian or Tamil Nadu, men who spoke the same dialect, practiced the same customs, understood the same threats and promises. By the 1990s, contractors coordinated thousands of workers drawn from what the 1995 Construction Industry Manpower Survey called "distinct niches" by nationality.[3] Malaysians dominated finishing trades at 49.6%, bringing carpentry and painting skills from Johor workshops. Thais concentrated in structural work, particularly as steel benders and concretors, their presence growing from virtual absence to 30.9% of the construction workforce within a decade. Indians and Bangladeshis, who barely featured in 1980s statistics, comprised

[3] Construction Industry Development Board. "Construction Industry Manpower Survey 1995." Singapore: CIDB, 1995.

9.3% and 8.3% respectively by 1995, concentrated in general labour categories that required the hardest physical work for the lowest pay.

This diversification made traditional kepala coordination impossible. A Hokkien-speaking foreman who had managed Malaysian Chinese workers through dialect networks and kinship obligations couldn't coordinate Thai welders who spoke no Chinese languages, couldn't navigate the village hierarchies that structured Bangladeshi work crews, couldn't read the caste dynamics that influenced Indian workers' relationships. New intermediaries emerged who could bridge these gaps – Malaysian Chinese who spoke Malay and could coordinate with Thai workers, Indian permanent residents who understood both Singapore's bureaucracy and South Asian labour networks, English-educated Singaporeans who could translate between government requirements and multilingual worksites. The "contractor" designation came to encompass this heterogeneous group, each managing different segments of an increasingly complex labour market.

The state's regulatory response to this complexity created the contemporary contractor as a specifically engineered position. The foreign worker levy system, introduced in the 1980s, transformed intermediaries from labour brokers into financial risk managers, calculating daily whether keeping a worker generated sufficient value to justify the monthly levy payment. Work permits that bonded workers to specific employers made contractors the essential interface between state bureaucracy and foreign labour – only they could navigate the applications, renewals, and transfers that kept workers legally employed. The Building and Construction Authority's establishment completed this formalization through graded licenses, financial requirements, and track record assessments that converted the kepala's personal authority into

bureaucratic credentials. What had been informal power derived from dialect and clan became formal authority derived from regulatory compliance.

### 2.4.2. What This Genealogy Reveals

The progression from Bugis traders through colonial kepala to contemporary contractors demonstrates that intermediaries emerge from specific structural conditions requiring mediation. The Bugis thrived where trading polities maintained overlapping jurisdictions, where forest collectors in Borneo needed to reach medicine markets in Canton, where Islamic law met customary exchange. These gaps were systematic features of how different value systems intersected. The kepala emerged when colonial capitalism needed to extract labour from populations it marked as racially inferior – British administrators couldn't speak Hokkien, couldn't navigate secret society hierarchies, couldn't access village recruitment networks. The state created the kepala through immigration ordinances and indenture laws, even while condemning them as "unscrupulous crimps."

The contractor represents the developmental state's creation of intermediary positions through regulatory architecture. Perhaps "engineering" overstates the intentionality – the process appears more accumulative, each policy response to immediate pressures creating conditions that made intermediaries increasingly necessary. The 1975 Ministry of Labour report reveals this process unfolding. While condemning the kepala system's "inherent disadvantages," the state maintained "implicit subsidies" through CPF exemptions for foreign workers. Officials acknowledged this was preferential treatment – "other sectors in the economy are not so exempted" – justified because "HDB had to construct housing units rapidly."[4] The foreign worker levy system introduced in the 1980s transformed intermediaries into financial risk

[4] Ministry of Labour, Singapore. "Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry in Singapore." December 1975, p. 53.

managers, calculating whether each worker generated value exceeding monthly levy costs. Work permits that bonded workers to specific employers made contractors the legal interface between state bureaucracy and foreign labour. The Building and Construction Authority's establishment in 1999 completed this formalization through contractor registration systems, grading frameworks, and technical qualifications that converted informal authority into bureaucratic credentials.

The contractor emerged through accumulation rather than evolution. Many contractors never were kepala – they emerged from the new coordination needs that labour diversification created. When construction shifted from Malaysian workers to Thai, Bangladeshi, and Indian populations in the 1980s, new intermediaries emerged who could navigate these differences: Malaysian permanent residents who spoke multiple languages, Indian citizens who understood South Asian labour hierarchies, English-educated Singaporeans who could translate between bureaucratic requirements and worksite realities. These diverse figures all became "contractors" through state frameworks that created a unified category from heterogeneous origins.

Each phase of modernization multiplied intermediary functions, contradicting assumptions about institutional rationalization. The end of indenture made kepala more essential as they became debt managers orchestrating credit across transnational space. Singapore's independence added formalization requirements – business registration, tax compliance, safety certification – that created new coordination needs atop existing ones. The shift to non-traditional source countries in the 1980s required intermediaries for each nationality's specific management. By 1995, the Construction Industry Manpower Survey documented elaborate specialization: Malaysians dominated finishing trades, Thais concentrated in structural work,

Indians and Bangladeshis in general labour.[5] Each group required different coordination mechanisms, different dormitory arrangements, different management strategies. The state's 1982 goal – achieving "an industrialized building industry... thus eliminating the use of foreign workers" – failed completely.[6] By 1995, foreign workers comprised 85.2% of construction labour. The attempt to eliminate intermediaries had multiplied them.

The developmental state's specific innovation was incorporating intermediaries into state architecture. Colonial authorities dealt with kepala who derived authority from secret societies the British couldn't control, dialect networks that operated beyond colonial jurisdiction, credit systems that functioned through verbal agreements no court could enforce. Singapore eliminated these parallel structures while absorbing their functions into regulatory frameworks. Contemporary contractors operate through the state. Their authority comes from BCA licenses, their power from managing work permits, their necessity from navigating regulations that only specialists understand. When the Ministry of Manpower prosecutes "errant contractors" for dormitory violations, it strengthens the overall system by demonstrating regulatory oversight while maintaining the frameworks that make contractors essential.

This incorporation makes state-created positions appear as market outcomes. Contractors seem to emerge naturally from construction demand. The work permit system that bonds workers to employers appears as immigration control. The levy system that makes workers expensive to maintain seems like fiscal policy. Dormitory regulations that enable ethnic segregation present as safety standards. The developmental state achieved what colonialism couldn't: making

[5] Construction Industry Development Board. "Construction Industry Manpower Survey 1995." Singapore: CIDB, 1995, p. 24.
[6] Public Works Department. "Report on Industrialization of the Building Sector." Singapore: PWD, 16 July 1982, p. 1.

systematic exploitation appear as business decisions, transforming structural violence into market transactions, converting political choices into economic necessities.

### 2.5. Conclusion

The comparison of different intermediary figures across historical periods in Singapore – from the Bugis traders in the pre-colonial era, to the Chinese kepala and Tamil kangany in the colonial period, to the modern contractor in the post-colonial era – allows us to examine the diverse conditions under which intermediation operates. This comparison highlights recurrent patterns: each era produces intermediaries to manage its specific contradictions, though the forms these take vary according to historical conditions. The progression shows multiplication and differentiation of intermediary types rather than their gradual elimination through modernization.

The Bugis operated within tributary and mercantile economies, accumulating through price differentials between markets and maintaining positions between different political authorities. They were intermediaries within pre-capitalist formations. The kepala and kangany, by contrast, emerged when colonial capitalism needed to manage wage labour – they extracted value by controlling workers as commodities, managing debt relationships that bound labour to capital, and mediating the contradictions of "free" labour that was simultaneously coerced. Contemporary contractors extend this capitalist intermediation, managing foreign workers through visa categories and levy systems that create similar dependencies through bureaucratic rather than explicit racial mechanisms.

Each figure was shaped by specific institutional landscapes. The Bugis traders navigated the fluid and overlapping authorities of pre-colonial polities. The kepala operated within colonial racial hierarchies that segregated Chinese, Indian, and Malay populations into distinct labour

categories. The modern contractor works within Singapore's developmental state, whose elaborate regulatory frameworks – work permits, safety requirements, dormitory standards – create new contradictions at every turn. The state's formalization generates the very informality it claims to eliminate: each regulation produces gaps between official requirements and practical necessities, spaces where contractors become indispensable for making the system function.

This dissertation demonstrates how intermediaries play essential roles in capitalist economies, particularly where significant contradictions exist between different requirements, populations, or systems. Intermediaries bridge these gaps while extracting value from their position between worlds. The specific forms change – from Bugis managing between sultanates to contractors managing between state regulations and migrant workers – yet the structural position persists. Intermediaries proliferate because capitalism consistently generates contradictions between what it requires and what it can accomplish, between its ideological promises and material practices. These patterns suggest that modernization multiplies rather than eliminates the need for human mediation, that institutions create the very gaps they claim to close.

Singapore's contractors extend this colonial innovation, transformed through bureaucratic categories. The developmental state's elaborate hierarchies represent capitalism's consistent response to its consistent problem: extracting maximum value while maintaining order, pursuing accumulation while preventing explosion. Each layer of contractors, subcontractors, and foremen manages specific tensions between state promises and market demands, between formal regulations and operational necessities. The persistence of these figures across centuries and systems points toward something structural. Wherever capitalism generates contradictions between its requirements and its capabilities, intermediary positions emerge to manage them.

# 3: Constructing Contractors: Class Formation and Developmental Contradictions, 1965-1990s

## 3.1. The Accident and the System (1982)

The accident happened on a Tuesday in 1982. Seventeen-year-old Mr. Wee was securing scaffolding on a construction site when the platform gave way, sending him tumbling onto concrete below. As he drifted in and out of consciousness in the taxi racing to the hospital, his supervisor repeated a story to the emergency staff: "Fell down at home." The lie worked. Sixteen stitches later, Mr. Wee learned the details second-hand, when his head had cleared and the supervisor recounted it almost sheepishly, as if the deception embarrassed him more than the accident itself. Questions would have been asked, forms filled, someone might have noticed that Mr. Wee was underage, working without permits on a site that operated in the grey zones between state planning and market implementation.

Forty-five years later, Mr. Wee traces the pale scar across his scalp while examining building samples in his air-conditioned office. "I was scared not just because I nearly died," Mr. Wee tells me in Mandarin. "I was scared because if the government found out, my supervisor would lose his license, and I cannot work anymore. My family still needed money."

I met Mr. Wee through my father's networks. When I explained my research on contractors, he made an introduction: "My daughter studying construction industry, can you talk to her?" That's how I found myself in Mr. Wee's Tampines office in March 2023, surrounded by material samples and project files spanning four decades. Over six months, I accompanied him to worksites, supplier warehouses, and the coffee shops where contractors gather to share

intelligence about projects and payments. His trajectory from underage worker to established contractor captured the patterns I was tracing across my fieldwork.

The supervisor's lie points to systematic accommodation. The hospital staff who recorded "home accident," the insurance clerk who processed it, the site manager who never reported it, all participated in maintaining fictions that allowed development to proceed. This calculated informality was how Singapore actually built itself. The state proclaimed workplace safety while depending on contractors who hired underage workers. It mandated permits while relying on informal labour. It celebrated rule of law while functioning through protective lies everyone recognized as necessary.

The structural conditions of rapid development created these contradictions. Singapore needed to build 600,000 HDB units, entire industrial estates, the MRT system – infrastructure at scales and speeds that formal channels couldn't achieve. Main contractors needed workers delivered daily without permanent employment costs. Workers needed jobs despite lacking documentation. These incompatible requirements generated systematic gaps between developmental ambitions and institutional capacity.

Contractors emerged from these gaps through structural necessity. They absorbed the contradictions between what development demanded and what institutions could provide. Mr. Wee represents a transitional generation between the kepala system analysed in Chapter 2 and the formalized contracting industry that would consolidate by the 1990s. His supervisor still operated through kepala-like arrangements: recruiting through dialect networks, managing through personal authority, protecting workers from official scrutiny while extracting value from their vulnerability.

By the late 1970s, however, traditional kepala coordination was becoming impossible. Construction sites now mixed Malaysian Chinese commuting from Johor, Singaporeans displaced from kampongs, and Thai workers who would transform the industry's composition. The 1975 Ministry of Labour report documented this emerging diversity: "The construction industry employs workers from Malaysia (65%), Singapore citizens (20%), and other sources including Thailand (15%)."[7] No single foreman could navigate the linguistic and cultural differences these populations represented. The colonial kepala had managed Chinese workers from specific Fujian villages, men bound by debt and dialect into stable gangs (Trocki, 1990: 94-126). This new diversity demanded different forms of coordination.

Colonial authorities had formally regulated and licensed labour contractors like the kangani while tolerating their exploitative practices as essential to the plantation economy (Kaur, 2004; Ramachandran, 1994). Singapore's developmental state couldn't afford such explicit accommodation. It needed legitimacy as a modern nation while depending on practices violating its own regulations. The solution was systematic ignorance, creating regulatory frameworks detailed enough to demonstrate governance while maintaining gaps where violations could occur.

This chapter follows three movements. First, it examines the pathways through which men like Mr. Wee entered construction – family networks, technical education, state programs – showing how exclusion from English-educated professional tracks created opportunities in construction's informal spaces. Second, it traces the 1980s boom that transformed these

[7] Ministry of Labour, Singapore. "Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry in Singapore." December 1975, p. 42.

scattered individuals into a recognizable class with shared characteristics, practices, and spaces. Third, it demonstrates how contractors absorbed the contradictions between state planning and market flexibility, making rapid development possible through practices the state couldn't acknowledge.

### 3.2. Pathways into Contracting

#### 3.2.1 The Structural Conditions

Singapore in 1965 faced an impossible conundrum. The newly independent nation needed to rehouse hundreds of thousands of people displaced from kampongs and shophouses while simultaneously building industrial estates to attract foreign investment, port facilities to maintain entrepôt trade, and schools, hospitals, and infrastructure for a population that would double within a generation. The Housing Development Board set ambitious targets; completing 54,430 units in its first five-year building program.[8] Each unit required coordination across dozens of trades, thousands of workers, supply chains stretching from Malaysian quarries to Indonesian timber mills.

The state lacked almost everything this transformation required. No domestic construction industry existed at the scale needed. The Public Works Department employed a few hundred engineers and inspectors who could oversee projects but couldn't build them. Local builders operated through small family workshops equipped for shophouse renovations, not twenty-five story apartment blocks. The workforce itself was fragmenting: kampong dwellers being cleared had construction skills but no formal organization, Chinese-educated workers faced exclusion

[8] Housing and Development Board, *Annual Report of the Housing and Development Board* (Singapore: HDB, 1965), 10. (Call no. RSING 711.4095957 SIN-[AR])

from English-language civil service expansion, Malaysian workers could commute daily but might not stay if conditions improved across the Causeway.

Mr. Wee's family embodied these structural dislocations. When I first heard his story, sitting in my uncle's kitchen during Chinese New Year 2022, a year before I would meet him, it came as fragments. "You know Wee ah, the contractor? His father kena arrested by ISD. Hock Lee bus riots. Two weeks in jail." My uncle, himself a retired site supervisor, was explaining how construction became refuge for the politically suspect, the linguistically excluded, the educationally marginalized. "Those days, government job cannot get, English not good enough for office work, what else can do? Construction lor."

This casual dinner conversation sent me searching for Mr. Wee. When I finally sat across from him in his office months later, the fuller story emerged. His father had been arrested during the 1955 Hock Lee bus riots, held for two weeks by Internal Security Department. "He was socialist, not communist," Mr. Wee clarifies quickly, a distinction that still matters seven decades later. Both parents were Barisan Sosialis members, attending meetings where they discussed building roads, improving village connectivity, always framed as material improvement for the community.

Mr. Wee shows me his father's journals, pulling a ziplock bag from his desk drawer. The pages, written in cursive Chinese that looks almost like hieroglyphs, date from 1969. Bus schedules, institutional logos, quoted fragments of Mao mixed with what reads like self-help mantras about enduring tough times, confidence in a better future. The arrest and political marking meant permanent exclusion from government employment. By 1974, the family of seven in their Upper Thomson kampong depended entirely on his mother selling soya milk at Holland

Village hawker centre. “I was the eldest son,” Mr. Wee states simply. At fifteen, he became a caddy at Singapore Island Country Club. The pay was good, the work was not difficult, and he had spare time to act as an underground bookie. But when a member suggested construction work, Mr. Wee recognized necessity disguised as opportunity.

The structural conditions that pushed Mr. Wee toward construction operated across thousands of families. A 1975 Ministry of Labour report documented what officials called “the construction industry’s unique labour characteristics”: workers entered through “kinship networks rather than formal recruitment,” learned through “apprenticeship rather than certification,” operated through “daily employment rather than permanent contracts.”[9] The report treated these as problems requiring modernization; they were actually solutions to contradictions the state couldn’t resolve.

The developmental state needed construction to happen immediately yet lacked institutions to organize such production. Direct employment would have required Central Provident Fund contributions, medical benefits, job security – costs that would have made rapid development impossible. The state needed workers to appear when projects demanded, disappear when they didn’t, absorb risks without becoming government liability. This created systematic openings for intermediaries. Someone had to recruit workers each morning without promising permanent employment, coordinate across trades without formal management structures, absorb the risks that made construction inherently unstable. Mr. Wee entered this emerging space through his uncle’s metalworking shop, learning through observation rather than instruction. The shop operated without licenses or age restrictions; a fifteen-year-old with family connections could

[9] Ministry of Labour, Singapore. “Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry in Singapore.” December 1975. Study Group Report. National Library Board, Singapore, pp. 23-24.

find work immediately. This informality was modernization's requirement, the only way to mobilize labour at the speed development demanded.

The pathways converging toward construction reflected broader exclusions. Language policies privileging English channelled Chinese-educated men toward trades where dialect networks functioned (Chua, 1995). Kampong clearances destroyed the vegetable plots and workshops that had sustained families, requiring wage labour for survival (Loh, 2013). Political purges removed entire families from state employment possibilities. These structural conditions produced contractors as surely as they produced public housing, emerging from gaps between what development required and what institutions could provide.

### 3.2.2. Multiple Routes, Single Destination

Construction drew men from across Singapore's social landscape through different pathways that converged on the same outcome: Chinese-educated or technically-trained Singaporeans excluded from professional advancement discovering entrepreneurial possibilities in building trades. These weren't coordinated channels but parallel responses to structural exclusions, each creating its own trajectory toward contractor status.

#### Family Networks: The Inheritance of Exclusion

Mr. Wee's path through his uncle's metalworking shop typified how family networks channelled men toward construction. After his father's arrest and political marking eliminated government employment possibilities, kinship connections provided the only available entry. "My uncle didn't really want to hire me," Mr. Wee admits. "Fifteen years old, no experience, family burden. But what choice? Cannot let brother's son starve."

The apprenticeship that followed operated through patterns anthropologists would recognize from guild systems worldwide: knowledge transmitted through observation rather than instruction, advancement measured by responsibility rather than certification, loyalty enforced through obligation rather than contract. Mr. Wee swept floors for months before touching equipment. He watched his uncle cut metal from across the workshop, memorizing angles and speeds. Once, he accidentally burned off his eyebrows with the welding torch, though he recounted that laughing.

This family-based transmission appeared repeatedly in my fieldwork. I first met Alex at Kim San Bistro, the smoky bar near Chinatown where contractors gather after work. Mr. Wee had brought me there one evening in April 2023, introducing me to his network with careful negotiations: "This one studying construction industry, help her can?" Alex, nursing a Tiger beer at the corner table contractors always claimed, traced how construction moved through his family like inherited property. Six brothers, five running aircon companies, each learning from those before. "My second and third brother started together," Alex explained, mapping the genealogy on a napkin already damp with condensation. "Kenny helped them first. When Kenny started his own business, he called me after army."

The pattern had its own logic. Brothers provided first jobs where mistakes wouldn't mean dismissal. Uncles offered apprenticeships when fathers couldn't afford school fees. Cousins got hired during busy periods, sometimes staying to become partners. Alex's father had worked as a driver while his mother took in sewing work at home. Alex's parents, raising eight children in a rented Kallang flat, had taught their sons early: "工资不出头" *(gong zi bu chu tou)* – wages won't get you ahead. "They wanted us to be entrepreneurs," Alex said, ordering another round for the table. "Because of the hardships they been through, they don't want us to go through."

None of the brothers reached university. The older ones couldn't afford it. By the time younger ones could, their brothers' success made education seem pointless. Alex left school after Secondary Two, seeing his brother's Honda Accord achieved without certificates. This calculation, repeated across contractor families, created systematic pathways from working-class marginalization to business ownership.

**Technical Education: The Promise and Disappointment**

The technical education pathway promised something different: formal credentials, systematic training, industrial employment with progression possibilities. Darren's story emerged over multiple encounters, first at Kim San Bistro where Mr. Wee introduced us, then in his own office months later when he trusted me enough to share fuller details.

"Darren very steady one," Mr. Wee had said by way of introduction that first evening. "Same industry but different generation." Darren, younger than most contractors at the bistro, had entered Singapore Technical Institute in 1980, drawn by the impression that "M&E was the trend. Impression is that M&E can find job easier." When I interviewed him properly in his Ubi office – surrounded by air-conditioning units awaiting installation – he explained the hierarchy within technical education that channelled students toward different futures. "Aircon is the low end, that's why I can get in," he said without bitterness. The program attracted "a mixture of more Malay students" whose grades were "very minimum," already marking it as a repository for those excluded from more prestigious tracks.

The curriculum exposed gaps between educational planning and industry reality. "The syllabus itself is very backdated," Darren recalls. "What we learn over there in 1980s, at that point in time, the market already got split and multi-split models, higher-end models. Down there we

are still doing refrigerator units. Basically are useless." This mismatch forced students to learn current technologies through work experience, making formal education a credential rather than genuine preparation. "During our time we don't have someone to guide us, to advise us, no mentor," he reflected, explaining how technical graduates had to navigate the industry alone.

The state's technical education initiatives operated through multiple institutions designed to channel specific populations toward construction. The Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB), established in the 1970s as the successor to the Industrial Training Board, coordinated construction skills training across various vocational institutes including Ponggol, Aljunied, Jurong, and Bukit Merah.[10] By 1981, VITB managed the Construction Trades Training Scheme that promised to transform "unemployed youths" into skilled construction workers through programs in carpentry, bricklaying, bar-bending, painting, and specialist trades like electrical wiring and pipe-fitting.[11]

The VITB's allocation criteria exposed the state's assumptions about who belonged in construction. The 1981 meeting notes between VITB, MHA, HDB, and MINDEF representatives recorded: "students should have a minimum height and built but that there were no other criteria or aptitude test. However applicants for the Electrical Wiring Course must be tested for colour blindness."[12] Physical size mattered more than intellectual capacity. The state imagined construction workers as bodies performing labour rather than minds requiring education. This corporeal sorting mechanism, measuring muscles rather than aptitude, reinforced the channelling of those deemed intellectually inferior toward construction trades

[10] "Minutes of Meeting on 'National Service in the Construction Brigade,'" 3 September 1981, MHA 012-81(T), pp. 112-115, National Archives of Singapore.
[11] Ibid., p. 113.
[12] "Ibid., p. 115.

while reserving electrical work, with its colour-blindness test suggesting technical precision, for those meeting minimal cognitive thresholds.

Mr. Han's trajectory showed another variation. I met him through Mr. Wee – they were kampung friends from Upper Thomson, had caddied together at Singapore Island Country Club as teenagers. "Both of us no money those days," Mr. Wee explained when arranging the introduction. I visited Mr. Han's office in Eunos one day, an older industrial shophouse with red-tiled roofs, old metal planks stacked against walls, drilling screech from neighbouring shops. A bougainvillea plant bloomed next to it. Mr Han traced his trajectory for me: N-levels, then Vocational and Industrial Training Board studying moulding, working as a mechanic for eight years, finally construction at twenty-eight.

"I didn't want to do shift work anymore," he explained, the bitterness still audible decades later. The promise of industrial employment had delivered its minimum: wages that barely covered expenses, advancement blocked without further credentials, permanent subordination to supervisors with diplomas. His friend convinced him it was time to "闯" (chuang), literally "to charge through," the verb suggesting both breaking barriers and accepting risks. "Mechanic, you work until old also mechanic. Construction, maybe can become boss."

This vocational-to-entrepreneurial pipeline operated parallel to family networks. Some contractors like Mr. Wee left Chinese-medium schools for construction. Others like Mr. Han entered through technical education that promised industrial employment but delivered only limited mobility. Both paths led to the same calculation: better to risk entrepreneurship than accept permanent subordination.

**State Programs: Creating Workers, Producing Entrepreneurs**

In order to attract more locals to join the construction industry, the state invested over $4 million SGD in advertising material, partnering with secondary schools and vocational institutes to launch Construction and You seminars which highlighted the benefits of joining the industry to of-age youths, and launching television adverts which reinvented the construction worker as a 'hero' of the nation.



Construction Focus

"Construction and YOU" programme launched

*Top: Seminars gave teachers a better understanding of viable construction careers for young people.*

*Inset: Ms Tang... teachers can direct students to rewarding careers in construction.*

TO kick off the "Construction and YOU" programme promoting careers in construction to the public, CIDB and the Ministry of Education (MOE) recently held two seminars for teachers.

The aim of the programme is to increase awareness and

ager of Manpower Planning and Policies Unit, who covered career opportunities in construction.

"Construction provides our young people with a promising path for career growth. Students have many avenues

Image 3.1: "Construction and YOU" programme launch

Source: *Construction Focus*, CIDB, National Library Board Singapore.



MANPOWER FOCUS

# Macho men as models

Posing for the TV commercial was a first for many staff.

"PERSUADING macho men to submit to the make-up artist was quite a task," reveals Ms Cheong Yoke Lan, a senior officer with CIDB's Manpower Planning and Policies Unit who coordinated the shooting of the Board's 40-second television commercial to persuade young people to choose a career in the construction industry.

In addition to the screen tests to establish that they were

photogenic, the people
made more "presentabl
she added.

Nearly all the model
organisations which ha
be used. Only a few pr
was no choice, like the

The commercial, wh
into four sequences corr
has four motifs represer
the **electrical plug** (re
aspects of construction
buildings), the **power**
has reached a high level
ing for today's craftsma
tion) and the **tee-squar**
the draughtsman to the

"We tease the mind
action with the benefit
Director of the Manpow

"The first teaser has
of the National Stadium
starting and an MRT tra
third has a hand turning
springs into life. The fi
handed over followed by
won the United Nations
ends with the rewards
family."

(continued from page 1)
quality of life. It is an industry committed to building a better

Figure 3.2: Marketing Construction Masculinity

Source: *Construction Focus*, CIDB, National Library Board Singapore.

These ads entailed 40-second commercials of construction workers as 'macho men', appealing to traditional notions of masculinity and physical strength, and aimed to sell the imaginary of a construction worker as a 'hero'... Construction trade trainees were hailed as 'commandos' of the blue-collar workers. They were among the 'blues of the blue', and were taken to prove that 'not all of young Singaporeans shun hard work'.

The campaigns promoting construction work as heroic service shows how the state recognised that voluntary recruitment alone couldn't supply the workforce that rapid development demanded. Despite $4 million in advertising and elaborate efforts to rebrand construction workers as 'commandos of the blue-collar workers,' Singapore continued to face chronic labour shortages in the building trades. Young Singaporeans remained reluctant to enter an industry

associated with dangerous working conditions, low wages, and limited prestige, even as the state's infrastructure ambitions required massive expansion of construction capacity.

The state's response was characteristically direct: if persuasion couldn't generate sufficient workers, conscription would. The Construction Brigade was established as a specialized vocation within Singapore's compulsory military service, alongside traditional military roles like infantry and navy. The Brigade's establishment reflected urgent manpower concerns. As Dr Ahmad Mattar noted in 1979, "the construction industry is a skill-intensive industry" yet it suffered "a chronic shortage of labour" with the industry "disproportionately dependent on foreign workers."[13] The Brigade emerged as a direct response: young National Servicemen would receive "extensive prefabrication training" to become "pioneers of a new generation of Singaporean construction workers trained to handle modern construction technology."[14] Official documents celebrated their comprehensive training in "Masonry, Bar-bending, Building Carpentry or Painting" during two-year programs that combined institutional instruction with on-site experience.[15]

The Construction Brigade addressed a fundamental contradiction in Singapore's development strategy: the state needed massive construction capacity to achieve its infrastructure ambitions, yet construction work remained unattractive to young Singaporeans despite promotional campaigns. By integrating construction training into compulsory National Service, the state could guarantee a steady supply of workers with basic skills while providing young men with

[13] Ahmad Mattar, "Speech by Dr Ahmad Mattar, Chairman Vocational and Industrial Training Board, at the Certificate Presentation Ceremony of the Joint HDB/PWD/VITB ES Training Scheme at the PUB Auditorium, Somerset Road, on Saturday, July 28, 1979, at 11 a.m." National Archives Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/am19790728s.pdf.
[14] "Construction Brigade: Building the Nation Through National Service," Pioneer Magazine, July 1981, p. 12.
[15] Ahmad Mattar, "Speech by Mr Ahmad Mattar, Chairman, Industrial Training Board and Parliamentary Secretary (Education) at the Inaugural Meeting of the Third Term of Office of the Construction Trade Advisory Committee on Wednesday, 2 Mar 77 at the Hotel & Catering Training School at 1300 hours." National Archives Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/am19770302s.pdf.

viable career pathways after military service. Those completing Construction Brigade service emerged with technical training, work experience, and clear opportunities for advancement in a booming industry.

Internal documents reveal the haste behind this scheme. The 1981 Ministry of Labour representative noted they "first heard of the formation of the Construction Brigade through the press", suggesting the program emerged from political decision rather than coordinated policy.[16] This bureaucratic surprise indicates how desperately the state needed construction labour, bypassing normal consultation to conscript workers through whatever mechanism seemed viable. The scramble explains the program's incoherence: framed as civil defence while serving labour provision, managed by Home Affairs while affecting labour policy, training soldiers to become workers.

The state's framing of the Construction Brigade as civil defence rather than labour provision hints at the legitimacy problem that conscripted construction work posed. Ministers Chua Sian Chin and Teh Cheang Wan insisted at a 1981 press conference that the Brigade was "to augment national defence and NOT primarily to ease the acute labour shortage."[17] Yet internal documents tell a different story. The Ministry of Labour's representative noted they "first heard of the formation of the Construction Brigade through the press on 10 Oct 81," suggesting even relevant ministries weren't consulted about this supposedly strategic defence initiative.[18] The civil defence justification allowed the state to conscript labour while avoiding accusations that

[16] "Notes of Meeting on the Construction Brigade," 24 October 1981, MHA 012-81(T), p. 8, National Archives of Singapore.
[17] "VC Construction Brigade Enlistment on 5 Oct 81," 5 October 1981, MHA 012-81(T), National Archives of Singapore, p. 55.
[18] "Notes of Meeting on the Construction Brigade," 24 October 1981, MHA 012-81(T), p. 8.

NS meant "conscription of labour" and eschew public criticism that using servicemen for construction was 'repugnant to the concept of military national service.'"[19]

The state's rhetoric around the Brigade revealed deeper anxieties about labour and modernization. Lee Yiok Seng proclaimed Brigade graduates were "our only assurance that construction development can be met, not by resorting to more use of labour, but by higher productivity."[20] The Industrial Training Board's surveys found that trainees "adapted rather well to their jobs" with "positive work attitudes toward hard work and adverse working conditions."[21] Yet by 1984, despite 635 graduates from the Construction Trades Training Scheme, the industry still comprised only 40% local workers.[22]

The racial composition of the Construction Brigade reveals how the developmental state's attempts at labour force creation intersected with existing racial hierarchies to produce unintended outcomes. The first intake in October 1981 comprised "54 Malays (57.5%), 3 Indians, 37 Chinese" out of 94 enlistees, a dramatic overrepresentation of Malays who constituted only 15% of Singapore's population.[23] Their educational backgrounds and previous occupations reinforced this sorting: most had only Primary 1 or 2 education, with work histories reading like an inventory of precarity: "oven repairer, dispatch rider, cargo-hand, unemployed,

[19] Cheng Tim Pin, "Threat to NS concept," The Straits Times, 21 July 1981, MHA 012-81(T), p. 168, National Archives of Singapore
[20] Lee Yiok Seng, "Speech by Mr Lee Yiok Seng, Senior Parliamentary Secretary (National Development), at the Opening of the Construction Industry Training Centre (CITC) at 10.5 KM Upper Serangoon Road on Friday, 25 May 1984 at 10.00 AM." National Archives Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lyse19840525s.pdf.
[21] Ahmad Mattar, "Speech by Dr Ahmad Mattar at the Certificate Presentation Ceremony," July 28, 1979.
[22] Ahmad Mattar, "Address by Dr Ahmad Mattar Chairman Vocational and Industrial Training Board, at the Inaugural Luncheon of the Fourth Term of Office of the Construction Trade Advisory Committee at the Board Room, VITB, Ayer Rajah Road on Tuesday, 26 June 1979 at 1.00 pm." National Archives Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/am19790626bs.pdf.
[23] "VC Construction Brigade Enlistment on 5 Oct 81," MHA 012-81(T), National Archives of Singapore, p. 55.

painter, porter, cleaner, car washer."[24] The state channelled its most marginalized citizens toward construction, assuming they had no better options.

This racial channelling produced a paradox that became clear over nasi padang at a Eunos hawker centre in 2023. Adam, my Malay boss at Super Cool, gestured around the coffee shop filled with Chinese contractors. "You notice or not, how many Malay contractors you see? Can count on one hand." The Construction Brigade had funnelled Malays into construction training at rates nearly four times their population proportion, yet four decades later, they remained virtually absent from contractor networks. Where had all the Malay Construction Brigade trainees gone?

The answer shows how racial capitalism operates through differentiated pathways even within state programs designed for equal opportunity. The developmental state could conscript Malay bodies for construction labour through NS obligations, where the coercive power of military service ensuring compliance. It couldn't, however, provide the accumulation mechanisms that transformed Chinese construction workers into contractors. Business formation required dialect networks for supplier credit, clan associations for emergency capital, village connections for reliable workers. The Construction Brigade taught Malays to bend steel bars and lay bricks. It didn't teach them Hokkien for negotiating with suppliers, provide introductions to towkays who controlled subcontracts, or offer entry to evening drinking sessions where real deals materialized.

The exclusivity of these networks became clear during a tense moment in 2023. Adam and I were driving to submit a tender in his BMW when he began complaining about Super Cool's

[24] Ibid.

owner, a friend of Mr. Wee's who collected sports cars including the Lamborghini I'd see in the parking lot each morning. The commercial affairs department had to pay a fixed monthly cut regardless of deals brought in, a structural extraction that infuriated Adam. "Why don't you just start your own company?" I asked. He laughed bitterly. "You need capital lah. Where to get? Bank won't lend unless you have assets already." His BMW, his comfortable salary were golden handcuffs. "My pay not bad, can afford this car, but cannot afford to start business."

Adam's position captured how racial capitalism operates through differentiated access to accumulation. He managed complex projects, understood the industry intimately, possessed every technical competency. What he lacked was access to capital. While Singapore strategically avoids publishing SME ownership data by race, the visible landscape tells its own story. Walk through any industrial estate, scan contractor registries, attend industry association meetings, the Chinese presence exceeds demographic representation. This pattern reflects what Cedric Robinson (1983) identified as racial capitalism's core mechanism: differentiation in accumulation possibilities rather than absolute exclusion. Credit required collateral that colonial and post-colonial policies had concentrated among Chinese families. Supplier relationships depended on trust networks built through dialect groups. Even rotating credit associations operated within ethnic boundaries, pooling capital among those who shared languages and origins (Mak, 1995).

The Construction Brigade had trained Malays in construction skills while the mechanisms for becoming contractors – credit access, equipment financing, supplier networks – remained embedded in Chinese kinship structures operating parallel to state control. While Adam could manage projects with technical excellence, he couldn't become a contractor because technical excellence meant nothing without capital access. The Brigade produced workers; Chinese

kinship networks produced contractors. The state's attempt to create construction workers through conscription had inadvertently reinforced the ethnic stratification that made Chinese contractors indispensable intermediaries, managing Malay and Indian workers whose structural exclusion from business ownership was built into the very networks that enabled Chinese entrepreneurship.

This discontinuity between training and entrepreneurship exposes the limits of developmental state intervention when racial capitalism structures opportunity. Evans (1995) theorized embedded autonomy as bureaucratic competence combined with business connections, but he missed how those connections themselves were racially structured. Singapore's Chinese contractors didn't simply have better networks; they had the only networks that mattered for business formation. The state could create Chinese contractors through exclusion from English-educated professions, pushing them toward construction where dialect networks provided competitive advantage. The same exclusion pushed Malays toward construction without providing parallel accumulation mechanisms. They entered through conscription rather than kinship, trained in skills rather than business practices, graduated into an industry where their racial position precluded advancement beyond wage labour. Adam's exceptional success required navigating spaces where he remained perpetually singular, developing relationships across ethnic boundaries that most Malay Brigade trainees couldn't access. The developmental state's Construction Brigade had attempted to create workers through military discipline while the actual production of contractors happened through ethnic networks that operated beyond state reach.

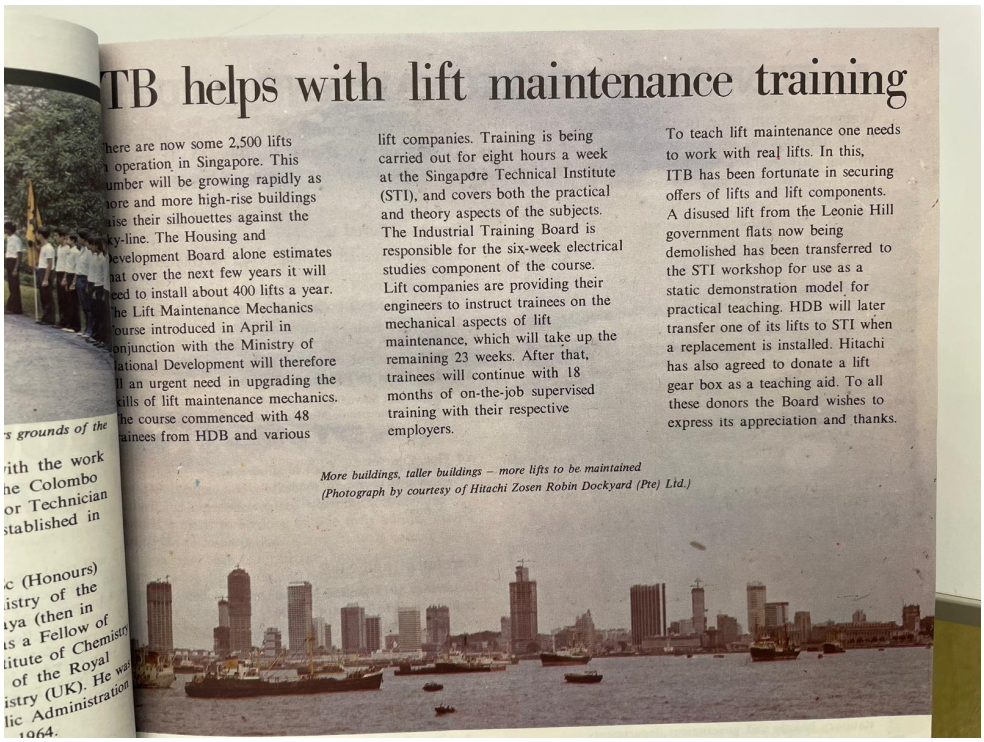
The Construction Trades Training Scheme offered another pathway, providing monthly allowances during two-year programs combining classroom instruction with site experience.

Trainees earned $180 monthly in their first year, $220 in their second; enough to contribute to household expenses while learning.[25] The scheme aimed to create a stable workforce of skilled Singaporean craftsmen who would reduce dependence on foreign labour. The actual pathways into contracting often proved more circuitous than these programs imagined, shaped by social pressures that made construction entrepreneurship appear as the only route to respectability for Chinese-educated men. Mr. Wee's trajectory captured these calculations. As a caddy at Singapore Island Country Club, he earned decent money, enjoyed flexible hours, spent weekends partying across the Causeway in Johor. When courting his future wife, a secretary at a pharmaceuticals firm, the social calculations became clear. "Cannot marry if I'm just caddy," he explained. "Her parents won't accept. Must show I can be proper husband, have future."

He left the golf course for a construction site where he earned less money, worked gruelling hours under a shifty boss (now owner of an L1 company worth many millions). A caddy remained permanently service class, handling other people's leisure. A construction worker could become a contractor, transform from employee to employer, achieve the towkay status that validated masculine success in Chinese kinship systems. His calculation reflected what thousands of Chinese-educated men discovered: construction was one of few industries where someone without English, without credentials, without inheritance could still become a boss.
This pathway emerged during what Mr. Wee calls the "golden days" – construction on the MRT was just starting, shopping malls like Marina Square and Raffles City erupting everywhere. Middle-class Singaporeans suddenly wanted renovations, they could afford them. You finished one project, three more waited. Minister Teh documented this explosion: construction value rose from $0.9 billion in 1970 to $3.7 billion by 1979.[26] The multiplier effects cascaded through

[25] Construction Industry Development Board, "Construction Manpower Development Initiatives," Singapore: CIDB, 1983, p. 7.
[26] Teh Cheang Wan, "Address at the Conference on Urban Development in the 1980s," 20 November 1980, National Archives Singapore.

the economy. Each mall needed air-conditioning contractors, each MRT station required electrical specialists, each HDB block demanded elevator installers. Technologies that seem mundane now – lifts, escalators, central air-conditioning – created entirely new specializations. A contractor who learned to install elevators in 1982 could build an empire by 1990. Mr. Wee entered construction precisely when these intermediary positions were crystallizing: after the kepala system had dissolved, before the industry fully formalized, during the brief window when a former caddy could become a millionaire contractor.



TB helps with lift maintenance training

here are now some 2,500 lifts operation in Singapore. This umber will be growing rapidly as ore and more high-rise buildings ise their silhouettes against the ky-line. The Housing and evelopment Board alone estimates hat over the next few years it will ed to install about 400 lifts a year. he Lift Maintenance Mechanics ourse introduced in April in onjunction with the Ministry of ational Development will therefore ll an urgent need in upgrading the kills of lift maintenance mechanics. he course commenced with 48 ainees from HDB and various lift companies. Training is being carried out for eight hours a week at the Singapore Technical Institute (STI), and covers both the practical and theory aspects of the subjects. The Industrial Training Board is responsible for the six-week electrical studies component of the course. Lift companies are providing their engineers to instruct trainees on the mechanical aspects of lift maintenance, which will take up the remaining 23 weeks. After that, trainees will continue with 18 months of on-the-job supervised training with their respective employers.

To teach lift maintenance one needs to work with real lifts. In this, ITB has been fortunate in securing offers of lifts and lift components. A disused lift from the Leonie Hill government flats now being demolished has been transferred to the STI workshop for use as a static demonstration model for practical teaching. HDB will later transfer one of its lifts to STI when a replacement is installed. Hitachi has also agreed to donate a lift gear box as a teaching aid. To all these donors the Board wishes to express its appreciation and thanks.

*More buildings, taller buildings – more lifts to be maintained*
*(Photograph by courtesy of Hitachi Zosen Robin Dockyard (Pte) Ltd.)*

Figure 3.3: Technical Training and Urban Transformation

Source: *Construction Focus*, CIDB, National Library Board Singapore.

The state's training schemes formalized what was already happening through these pressures. They taught technical skills to men already committed to becoming contractors rather than remaining workers. Mr. Wee's regret about starting late, lamenting how he had "wasted my youth when construction was booming", captures how his generation approached construction as a pathway to ownership. The developmental state had inadvertently created conditions where

contractors became essential intermediaries, and for a brief period, those positions remained open to men like Mr. Wee who possessed the social networks and cultural knowledge to navigate between worlds, even lacking formal credentials. This window would close as the industry formalized, making Mr. Wee's generation possibly the last to achieve such transformation.

### 3.2.3. The Unintended Convergence

These pathways – family networks, technical education, state programs – weren't designed to create contractors. Families simply needed survival strategies. Technical institutes aimed to supply industrial workers. State programs sought to reduce foreign labour dependence. Yet all three channels produced the same outcome: men equipped with construction knowledge who understood that ownership offered the only real advancement possible.

The convergence reflected structural conditions rather than individual ambition. English-language requirements excluded Chinese-educated men from civil service careers. Diploma inflation meant technical certificates that once guaranteed middle-class employment now led only to working-class wages. Political surveillance eliminated government employment for families with any leftist associations. Construction emerged as the space where these exclusions became opportunities. By 1980, the contractor was becoming a recognizable social type: Chinese-educated or technically-trained, excluded from professional paths, entering construction through necessity disguised as opportunity, aspiring to business ownership rather than wage employment.

The convergence of multiple state policies in the 1970s channelled specific populations toward construction without any coordinated plan to create a contractor class. Each policy addressed its own administrative logic: language reform for nation-building, urban renewal for

modernization, foreign worker controls for political stability. Their intersection produced systematic exclusions that made construction entrepreneurship one of the few viable paths for economic advancement.

Language policies implemented in 1966 established English as the medium of instruction, positioning it as the language of administration, commerce, and social mobility. The closure of Nanyang University in 1980 formalized what had been happening for years: the systematic marginalization of Chinese-educated Singaporeans from professional advancement.[27] A 1975 Ministry of Labour study documented the consequences: blue-collar workers earned initial wages "not much higher than what a newly recruited clerk, with secondary school education, can earn."[28] Chinese-educated men found themselves locked out of civil service careers their dialect-speaking predecessors had accessed. Mr. Wee's trajectory exemplified this exclusion. His Chinese-medium education meant that despite intelligence and ambition, government employment remained permanently inaccessible.

Kampong clearances simultaneously created construction demand and displaced labour. Between 1965 and 1985, the state cleared over 400,000 people from villages and resettled them into HDB flats. These clearances destroyed more than physical structures. They eliminated entire economic ecosystems – the vegetable plots, chicken coops, provision shops, and informal workshops that had sustained families for generations. Mr. Wee's family lost their Upper Thomson home alongside their father's street-sweeping position, their extended family's mutual support systems. Displaced kampong residents faced immediate pressure to find wage

[27] Ministry of Education, Singapore. "Report on the Ministry of Education 1978." Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1979, pp. 15-16.
[28] Ministry of Labour, Singapore. "Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry in Singapore." December 1975. Study Group Report. National Library Board, Singapore, p. 18.

employment. Construction sites proliferated across the island, offering daily-rated work that required no English, no certificates, no formal qualifications. Just the willingness to labour.

The state's foreign worker policies made permanent employment economically unviable for contractors. The 1975 Ministry report documented the state's calculated accommodation: "implicit subsidies" through CPF exemptions for foreign workers that "other sectors in the economy are not so exempted."[29] This preferential treatment had clear purpose: "HDB had to construct housing units rapidly and the arrangement would make contractors much more aggressive in securing a steady inflow of labour." The foreign worker levy system introduced in the 1980s formalized this arrangement. Contractors paid monthly levies that made maintaining permanent workforces prohibitively expensive. The dependency ratio regulations meant contractors could employ foreign workers only as long as projects lasted. These policies made subcontracting the only economically rational response, fragmenting employment into chains of temporary arrangements that only intermediaries could coordinate.

This strategic creation of intermediary positions operates alongside another state technique for managing contradictions: transforming political problems into technical ones. Tania Li (2007) calls this "rendering technical", the process by which development interventions convert complex political-economic problems into bounded technical problems that appear solvable through expert knowledge and institutional design. Development programs identify deficiencies (lack of skills, missing infrastructure) and propose technical solutions (training programs, capacity building) that experts can deliver. What gets excluded are the political relations, historical processes, and structural inequalities that created these "deficiencies." The rendering technical succeeds precisely by delimiting what can be discussed and intervened upon, making messy political struggles into manageable administrative tasks.

[29] Ibid., p. 53.

Li's framework illuminates how Singapore's officials managed construction's labour crisis through technical diagnosis rather than political analysis. The 1975 Ministry of Labour report performs this transformation when it identifies construction's problem: "In Singapore, about 60% of our foreign workers are in production and related work, transport-equipment operations and general labour. In the construction industry 50% of the workers are foreigners. The jobs these foreigners hold can be filled by Singaporeans. The Singapore Government has to continue to relax its work permit policies because Singaporeans refuse such jobs."[30] The report transforms this refusal, a political statement about dignity, wages, and social value, into a technical problem of "white collar mentality" requiring vocational training. Why do Singaporeans refuse work that Malaysians accept? The answer appears briefly before vanishing: blue-collar workers earn initial wages "not much higher than what a newly recruited clerk, with secondary school education, can earn." The structural reality that construction work offers no advancement, no security, no social respect dissolves into discussions of curriculum reform and skills training. The political economy of labour, where citizenship determines who must accept degradation for survival, becomes invisible through its translation into human resource management.

Minister Ong Pang Boon's 1975 speech to employers articulated the fundamental paradox that would make contractors permanently necessary. Singapore needed to modernize into a "technological society," yet modernization itself created populations who refused the labour that development required. "Why do Singaporeans prefer soft and clerical jobs?" Ong asked, immediately answering: education had successfully created workers for "Government offices

[30] Speech by Mr. Ong Pang Boon, Minister for Labour at the Annual Dinner of the Singapore Employers' Federation on Saturday, 18th October, 1975 at the Island Ballroom, Shangri-La Hotel @ 8.00 PM," National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/19751018_0005.pdf.

and business houses" while fostering "a white-collar mentality that scorned technical work and manual labour."[31] The very success of modernization – producing educated citizens – undermined its material requirements.

The state's response revealed its dependence on intermediaries to manage this contradiction. Ong acknowledged that despite 20,000 citizen retrenchments, "the demand for foreign labour has continued" because "Singaporeans refuse such jobs." The government would "continue to relax its work permit policies" while maintaining "implicit subsidies" through CPF exemptions for foreign workers in construction.[32] These policies didn't solve the paradox; they institutionalized it. If citizens wouldn't do construction, and if foreign workers couldn't own businesses, someone had to coordinate between these incompatible realities.

This someone became the contractor. The state couldn't force citizens into construction; Ong admitted that in a "command economy" this might be possible "but at a very high cost to individuals and productivity."[33] It couldn't grant foreign workers permanent rights without threatening political stability. Contractors emerged at precisely this impossibility, managing foreign workers the state needed but couldn't acknowledge needing, coordinating labour that development required but modernization had taught citizens to refuse. The wage differentials Ong documented – trade certificate holders earning barely more than clerks – ensured this pattern would continue. Why would educated Singaporeans accept construction work when the state's own development had created better alternatives? The answer was they wouldn't, making intermediaries who could manage foreign labour not a temporary expedient but a permanent requirement of developmental capitalism.

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

The contradictions Ong articulated reflect deeper tensions within the developmental state model itself. Developmental states pursue rapid industrialization through state-guided investment and human capital formation (Johnson, 1982; Amsden, 1989). Yet this very process creates a developmental paradox: the more successful the state is at education and modernization, the less willing its citizens become to perform the labour that development requires.

This paradox manifests differently across developmental contexts, but always requires intermediary solutions. South Korea resolved it through the chaebol system, where large conglomerates internalized both high-skilled design and low-skilled assembly within single firms, using internal labour markets to manage the contradiction (Amsden, 1989). Taiwan's solution involved family-based SMEs that could flexibly shift between formal and informal labour arrangements (Hamilton and Kao, 2017; Greenhalgh, 1988). Japan famously developed the dual economy – lifetime employment for core workers in large firms while subcontractors absorbed irregular labour needs (Gordon, 1985).

Singapore's resolution was distinct: the state created a permanent foreign workforce managed through citizen intermediaries. Unlike Korea's internalization or Taiwan's familiarization, Singapore externalized the contradiction through immigration policy. The state could pursue first-world wages for citizens while maintaining third-world labour costs for construction. But this required contractors as essential mediators. They translated between English regulations and Bengali instructions, citizen entitlements and foreign precarity.

The contradiction went deeper than labour supply. The developmental state's legitimacy rested on two incompatible promises: delivering rapid physical development (requiring cheap, flexible labour) while ensuring citizen prosperity (requiring high wages and job security). Contractors absorbed this impossibility into their business models. They hired foreign workers at wages citizens wouldn't accept, managed them through conditions citizens wouldn't tolerate, yet produced the infrastructure citizens demanded. When accidents occurred, contractors absorbed liability. When regulations tightened, contractors found workarounds. When citizens complained about foreign workers, contractors became the buffer.

Ong's proposed solutions – wage adjustments, attitude surveys, vocational education – couldn't resolve these structural contradictions. As he admitted, even trade certificate holders earned barely more than clerks. The state could proclaim its intention to create a "blue collar mentality" while simultaneously building universities that promised white-collar futures. Every policy deepened the paradox: better education created citizens who refused construction work, requiring more foreign workers, necessitating more contractors to manage them. The developmental state didn't fail to modernize construction; it succeeded in creating conditions where only intermediaries could manage the contradictions between modernization's promises and requirements.

The interaction between these policies created cascading effects. Language exclusion meant Chinese-educated men couldn't access stable employment in expanding government bureaucracies or multinational corporations. Kampong clearances eliminated subsistence alternatives, making wage work necessary for survival. Foreign worker regulations made permanent employment impossible to sustain. Each policy narrowed options until construction entrepreneurship emerged as one of the few remaining possibilities for economic advancement.

This convergence wasn't planned. Housing officials focused on building flats quickly. Education bureaucrats pursued bilingual policies for national integration. Labour administrators managed foreign worker numbers for political stability. No coordinating body intended to create a contractor class. Their combined policies systematically channelled Chinese-educated men, displaced kampong residents, and technical school graduates toward the same destination.

The unintended nature of this convergence demonstrates how structural conditions rather than deliberate design produce class formation. The state created contractors through exclusions that made other possibilities impossible. This differs from developmental states like South Korea (Woo, 1991), where chaebols emerged through deliberate industrial planning, or Japan, where MITI guided specific sectors toward global competitiveness (Chalmers, 1982; Okimoto, 1989). Singapore's contractors emerged from gaps between policies, thriving precisely in spaces the state couldn't directly manage.

The convergence also produced lasting patterns. Once established, contractor networks became self-reproducing. Successful contractors hired relatives, trained fellow dialect speakers, brought in kampong neighbours. Alex's six brothers didn't independently decide on construction. Each followed pathways the previous brother had established. These networks created their own gravitational pull, drawing in others facing similar exclusions. By the time the state recognized contractors as essential to development, the class had already consolidated through channels the state never intended to create.

### 3.3. The Transformation of Labour Organization

#### 3.3.1. The Gendered Transition

The erasure of samsui women from Singapore's construction history marks one of the industry's most complete transformations. These Cantonese women from Sanshui district, who dominated construction labour from the 1930s through 1960s, left no trace in the contractor class that emerged after independence. Their red headscarves became iconic symbols of Singapore's early building efforts, yet their expertise never translated into business ownership or management positions.

The samsui women operated through the banchan system, where female headwomen recruited workers from specific villages in Guangdong, arranged their passage, and supervised their work.[34] Every morning at Upper Chin Chew Street, hundreds gathered for daily wage assignments. They mixed concrete by hand, carried materials up bamboo scaffolding, worked alongside male carpenters and bricklayers. Contemporary accounts celebrated their industriousness: documentary films captured them hauling cement bags up rickety ladders, celebrating them as one of the "most hardworking" people in Singapore.[35] The state even memorialized them with a statue at Sungei Road. Yet when construction transformed in the 1960s, samsui women disappeared entirely from the industry.

Their exclusion happened through multiple mechanisms operating simultaneously. The shift from low-rise shophouses to high-rise HDB blocks required different technologies. Manual concrete mixing gave way to automated batching plants. Tower cranes replaced shoulder poles.

[34] Kelvin E.Y. Low, "Chinese Migration and Entangled Histories: Broadening the Contours of Migratory Historiography," Journal of Historical Sociology 27, no. 1 (2014): 75-102.
[35] "The Samsui Women," directed by Angie Silva, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, 1987.

Prefabrication moved work from sites to factories. These changes didn't inherently exclude women. They operated heavy machinery in factories, managed complex logistics in other industries. Instead, the gendered transition reflected deliberate choices about who could become contractors.

Business registration requirements assumed male heads of household. Construction companies needed bank loans that required property collateral, assets married women couldn't legally control until the Women's Charter amendments. The Construction Brigade recruited only male National Servicemen. Technical education programs at VITB and polytechnics enrolled overwhelmingly male students. Industry associations like SCAL operated as male networks, conducting business in spaces – evening drinking sessions, golf clubs, KTV lounges – that systematically excluded women.

The gendered logic extended beyond individual exclusion to reshape construction work itself. The kepala system that samsui women knew – daily wages, collective labour, direct employment – gave way to subcontracting chains that required different forms of capital. Social capital accumulated through drinking sessions where deals were struck. Financial capital accessed through male-dominated banking networks. Political capital built through National Service connections and grassroots organizations. Women possessed none of these currencies in sufficient quantities to enter contracting.

The scale transformation from single-story kampongs to twenty-five-story HDB blocks created new positions: coordinating between trades, managing machinery, supervising specialized workers. These roles were coded masculine from inception. Site supervisors needed to "control" workers; implicitly male authority over implicitly male subordinates. Project

managers had to negotiate with government officials, union representatives, supplier cartels – all male-dominated institutions. The very language of construction management assumed masculine subjects performing masculine authority.

By 1970, women had vanished from construction sites. The 1975 Ministry of Labour report on construction manpower doesn't mention female workers at all.[36] The industry that samsui women had helped build now operated as if they'd never existed. Parliamentary Secretary Eugene Yap's1982 recollection crystallized the gendered transformation: "I hope that these women have been replaced by the lorry-loaded cement mixers and those tower cranes that we so commonly see these days rising high over construction worksites and not by the large number of unskilled labour from non-traditional labour sources."[37] His hope captured modernization's fantasy: technology eliminating degrading work rather than simply reassigning it to more vulnerable populations.

### 3.3.2. What Changes from Kepala System

The transformation from kepala to contractor involved more than terminology. It marked a fundamental shift in how labour intermediaries derived authority and managed workers. The colonial kepala operated through explicit racial hierarchies backed by imperial force. The modern contractor navigates bureaucratic categories maintained through regulatory compliance. Same structural position – managing labour for capital – but fundamentally different mechanisms of power.

[36] Ministry of Labour, Singapore. "Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry in Singapore." December 1975. Study Group Report. National Library Board, Singapore.
[37] Eugene Yap, Parliamentary Secretary (Labour), "Speech at the Seminar on Metal Scaffoldings," Shangri-La Hotel, 14 April 1982, National Archives of Singapore. Available at: https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/ygce19820414s.pdf

Colonial kepala derived authority from three sources that post-independence contractors couldn't access. Secret societies provided enforcement mechanisms. The Ghee Hin or Hai San could ensure compliance through violence that colonial authorities tolerated as long as production continued.[38] Debt bondage created economic chains. Workers who owed passage money, housing fees, and accumulated interest couldn't leave without destroying their families' creditworthiness. Explicit racial segregation meant Chinese kepala managed Chinese workers, Tamil kangany managed Tamil workers, each group locked into occupational categories the colonial state openly enforced.

The 1965-1975 transitional period exposed the confusion this transformation created. Government documents used "contractors and kepalas" interchangeably, sometimes writing "contractors/sub-contractors/kepalas" as if officials couldn't distinguish between categories.[39] This categorical confusion reveals more than bureaucratic imprecision. The slippage between "contractors and kepalas" in official documents captures what Ann Stoler (2008) calls the "epistemic anxiety" of colonial and postcolonial administrations – the inability to fix subjects into stable categories precisely when such fixing becomes most urgent. The kepala represented racialized labour management that independent Singapore officially rejected; contractors performed nearly identical functions through different mechanisms. Officials writing "contractors/sub-contractors/kepalas" documented the impossibility of distinguishing between categories that remained functionally equivalent despite nominal transformation. The racial hierarchies that structured kepala authority continued through citizenship classifications and work permit systems. The bureaucratic confusion about whether someone was a contractor or kepala masked a deeper continuity: both figures managed racialized labour through

[38] Carl A. Trocki, Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
[39] Ministry of Labour, Singapore. "Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry in Singapore." December 1975, p. 31.

combinations of debt, obligation, and strategic protection from state scrutiny. The categorical instability in these documents marks the state's inability to fully transform the structures it inherited, even as it changed their names.

The men caught in this categorical confusion were living through the transformation. Those who had recruited through dialect networks now registered companies with ACRA. Those who had managed through debt relationships now filed work permit applications. The authority once derived from secret society membership now required BCA grading and safety certificates. They inhabited both systems simultaneously, maintaining kepala practices while adopting contractor procedures, speaking dialect in morning coffee shops while submitting English documentation to ministries, managing through personal obligation while calculating foreign worker levies.

Modern contractors operate through fundamentally different mechanisms. Citizenship categories replaced racial classifications. The state created hierarchies – citizens, permanent residents, work permit holders – that determine wages, housing, and permanence possibilities. These categories appear administrative rather than racial, yet they achieve similar segregation. Bangladeshi workers concentrated in construction, Filipino workers in domestic service, Malaysian Chinese in finishing trades. The pattern looks coincidental rather than enforced. Business registration replaced secret society membership as the source of legitimacy. Contractors need ACRA registration, BCA grading, financial audits – bureaucratic credentials that make exploitation appear procedural. A colonial kepala's authority was personal and violent; a modern contractor's authority is institutional and documented. Paper trails replace physical coercion.

Regulatory compliance transformed how contractors manage contradictions. Colonial kepala absorbed tensions through their bodies, facing violence from both workers and planters when production failed. Modern contractors absorb tensions through documentation: maintaining files that show regulatory compliance while operating through violations those same regulations make necessary. They keep double books, one for MOM inspections, another for actual operations. They produce phantom workers who exist on paper to meet quota requirements while actual workers labour without permits.

The foreign worker levy system exemplifies this transformation. Colonial authorities managed labour through explicit racial quotas – limiting Chinese immigration when politically threatening, importing Indian workers when economically necessary. Contemporary authorities achieve similar control through market mechanisms. Levies make workers expensive to maintain, dependency ratios limit foreign percentages, work permits bond workers to employers. The system appears race-neutral while producing racial outcomes.

Yet continuities persist beneath institutional changes. Contemporary contractors still recruit through ethnic networks: Bangladeshi workers from specific districts, Thai workers through Bangkok agencies, PRC workers via Fujian connections. They still manage through debt, though now structured as recruitment fees, training bonds, and accommodation charges rather than passage money. They still operate in spaces between regulations and reality, though now those spaces are created by bureaucratic complexity rather than colonial neglect.

The transformation from kepala to contractor demonstrates how capitalism adapts its forms while maintaining its functions. The structural position – intermediaries who extract value from managing labour as commodity – remains constant. The mechanisms evolve with political

conditions. Colonial capitalism operated through explicit racial hierarchies and personal violence. Developmental capitalism operates through citizenship categories and bureaucratic violence. Both systems require intermediaries to manage their contradictions. Both produce the same outcome: value extracted from workers permanently excluded from its benefits.

These patterns of labour coordination through intermediaries resonate with contemporary arrangements in other developmental contexts. Matan Kaminer's (2024) ethnography of Thai migrant workers in Israel shows how states manage contradictions between capitalist imperatives and colonial ideologies through migration regimes. Israel's bilateral agreements channel Thai workers through approved agencies, work permits bond them to specific employers, and regulatory requirements make brokers indispensable for recruitment and management. These arrangements emerged as solutions to a specific contradiction: the agricultural sector's need for exploitable labour that wouldn't challenge the settler colonial order. The resulting migration regime ensures Thai workers remain temporary and politically neutral while sustaining agricultural production by delegating responsibility to contractors and intermediaries.

Singapore's transformation from kepala to contractor followed similar logics of strategic delegation. The colonial kepala had operated through explicit racial authority backed by imperial force – Chinese kepala managing Chinese workers, Tamil kangany managing Tamil workers, each locked into occupational categories the colonial state openly enforced. The post-independence contractor navigates bureaucratic categories that achieve similar segregation through citizenship rather than race. Work permits bond Bangladeshi workers to employers just as debt bondage once bound Chinese coolies to kepala. Foreign worker levies create cost calculations that ensure temporary employment just as colonial pass systems prevented

permanent settlement. The mechanisms evolved – from personal violence to bureaucratic violence, from secret society enforcement to regulatory compliance – while the structural position remained constant: intermediaries who extract value from managing labour as commodity.

### 3.4. The Boom and Class Formation

#### 3.4.1. The Scale of Transformation

The 1980s construction boom transformed scattered labour intermediaries into a recognizable contractor class. The numbers tell part of the story: construction expenditure tripled from S$2.5 billion in 1980 to S$8 billion by 1990.[40] Registered contractors quadrupled from 2,000 to 8,000.[41] The value of contracts exceeded S$10 billion by 1982, when construction contributed 8.2% of GDP.[42] These weren't gradual increases. They were explosive transformations that created unprecedented opportunities for accumulation.

The state drove this expansion through massive infrastructure projects such as the MRT system and the expansion of Changi Airport. The HDB accelerated its building program, constructing 166,000 units between 1981 and 1985 – more than the previous decade combined.[43] Each project cascaded into subcontracting opportunities. An MRT station needed excavation specialists, concrete suppliers, electrical contractors, finishing trades. A single HDB project could support dozens of subcontractors.

[40] Building and Construction Authority, "Construction Demand and Output Statistics," Singapore: BCA, 1991, p. 12.
[41] Construction Industry Development Board, "Registry of Contractors Annual Report 1990," Singapore: CIDB, 1991, p. 8.
[42] Teh Cheang Wan, "Speech by Mr Teh Cheang Wan, Minister for National Development, at the Conference on Urban Development in the 1980s," November 20, 1980, National Archives Singapore.
[43] Housing Development Board, "Annual Report 1985/86," Singapore: HDB, 1986, pp. 23-24.

The Core Contracting Scheme, introduced in 1982, marked the state's attempt to formalize this expansion. Selected contractors received guaranteed workloads – 3,000 units over three years – in exchange for employing professional staff and training Construction Brigade workers.[44] The scheme offered 5% price premiums and interest-free equipment loans. Eighteen contractors qualified initially, representing the state's vision of a professionalized industry: well-capitalized firms with permanent workforces replacing kepala with temporary gangs.

The state's protection of contractors extended beyond subsidies to active market management. Officials promised contractors would "be deployed to five-star contractors initially," ensuring Construction Brigade labour went to established firms rather than new entrants.[45] When pressed about expanding beyond elite contractors, HDB representatives admitted that "as the CB grows in size, it might not be practicable to do so", acknowledging the state's preference for channelling resources to existing contractor networks even as it proclaimed open competition.[46]

This preferential allocation of Construction Brigade labour to "five-star contractors" exposes how developmental states actively construct market concentration rather than promoting competition. The conventional understanding of developmental capitalism, particularly in Evans's (1995) formulation of embedded autonomy, assumes states balance between bureaucratic competence and business connections to achieve efficient outcomes. Yet Singapore's deliberate channelling of subsidized labour to established contractors demonstrates what Amsden (1989) only partially captured in her analysis of Korean chaebols: developmental states don't merely "pick winners" – they systematically exclude potential competitors from

[44] Teh Cheang Wan, "Address by Mr Teh Cheang Wan at the Signing Ceremony for Core Contracting," March 2, 1982, National Archives Singapore.
[45] "Notes of Meeting on the Construction Brigade," 24 October 1981, MHA 012-81(T), p. 10, National Archives of Singapore
[46] Ibid.

accessing the resources necessary for market entry. The state's admission that expanding beyond elite contractors "might not be practicable" as the program grew reveals the structural logic: concentration serves developmental goals more effectively than competition.

This contradicts both neoliberal assumptions about market efficiency and developmental state literature's claims about meritocratic resource allocation. Where Wade (1990) argued Taiwan succeeded through fostering competitive small enterprises, Singapore's construction sector shows the opposite strategy – using state resources to entrench existing contractors while raising barriers for new entrants. The Construction Brigade became a mechanism for what Harvey (2003) calls "accumulation by dispossession," though operating through inclusion rather than exclusion: established contractors accumulated state-subsidized labour while potential competitors were dispossessed of opportunities to enter the market. This wasn't market failure or bureaucratic capture. It was deliberate policy recognizing that rapid development required stable, capable contractors who could deliver projects reliably. The developmental state chose oligopolistic efficiency over competitive markets, using programs ostensibly designed to address labour shortages to actually reinforce contractor hierarchies. The fiction of open competition – maintained through tender systems and registration procedures – obscured the reality of state-managed concentration that made rapid construction possible.

Private sector expansion paralleled public growth. Property developers, flush with liquidity from CPF liberalization, launched massive projects. Marina Square, Raffles City, Suntec City – each development created cascading opportunities. Every tower needed curtain wall specialists, aircon contractors, marble suppliers. The boom created niches within niches. Contractors who specialized in toilet waterproofing could support entire extended families.

### 3.4.2. Consolidation as a Class

The boom years transformed scattered individuals into a coherent class with shared characteristics, spaces, and practices. The contractors who emerged weren't random entrepreneurs. They were overwhelmingly Chinese-educated or dialect-speaking men who entered through family networks, worked extraordinary hours, and reinvested profits immediately into equipment and connections. Their consolidation happened through informal institutions that operated parallel to official business structures.

Family and kinship structured the emerging contractor businesses. Mr. Wee brought in his younger brother-in-law as a general worker, his older-brother-in-law cousin as a safety supervisor, his wife to manage accounts. Alex's six brothers each started separate companies but shared workers, equipment, and contracts depending on who had excess capacity. Family members could be trusted with cash transactions that never appeared in official books. Relatives would work eighteen-hour days during project rushes without demanding overtime. Kinship networks provided credit when banks wouldn't lend, labour when workers were scarce, silence when inspectors investigated.

The work itself demanded extraordinary hours that only family businesses could sustain. Mr. Wee routinely worked from 6 AM site inspections through midnight supplier coordination. "Sleep four hours enough already. Project cannot wait." Weekends meant catching up on paperwork, maintaining equipment, planning next week's deployments. The rhythm allowed no rest. Projects overlapped, workers needed daily supervision, problems required immediate solutions. Contractors who tried maintaining work-life balance quickly found themselves outbid by those who didn't.

Coffee shops became the nervous system of contractor networks, circulating information that determined success or failure. Over kopi-o and cigarettes, they traded intelligence: which developers paid promptly, which suppliers had material shortages, which officials conducted surprise inspections. The information was time-sensitive and relationship-specific. A contractor who learned about a competitor's cash flow problems could poach their workers. One who heard about upcoming tenders could position themselves advantageously. Evening drinking sessions at Kim San Bistro served different functions. After 7 PM, when construction noise restrictions kicked in, contractors gathered to negotiate deals impossible during office hours. The dim lighting and Tiger beer created atmospheres where formal contracts gave way to handshake agreements. Said Mr. Wee over a can of beer, "Cannot do business in office. Must drink together, then can trust."

These spaces operated through unwritten codes everyone understood. Information shared at morning coffee was reciprocal; those who only listened without contributing found themselves excluded. Evening drinking required careful calibration: enough alcohol to demonstrate sincerity, not so much that negotiations suffered. Karaoke sessions at KTV lounges cemented relationships through performed vulnerability. Singing badly together created bonds that survived project disputes.

The relationships formed in these spaces transcended simple business categories. "Sometimes competitor, sometimes partner" became the industry's operating principle. The same contractor who underbid you on Tuesday might subcontract work to you on Thursday. Morning rivals became evening collaborators when projects exceeded individual capacity. These fluid relationships required constant management through gifts, favours, and calculated reciprocity. Mr. Wee sent Chinese New Year hampers to competitors, attended their children's weddings,

visited their hospitalized parents. The gestures were investments in relationships that might prove profitable later.

Golf clubs provided another tier of networking, though one accessible only after significant accumulation. Membership could cost several hundred thousand, more than most contractors' annual profits. Yet those who gained entry found opportunities that justified the expense. Developers golfed there, as did ministry officials, bank directors, and supplier bosses. Eighteen holes created relationships that translated into approved loans, expedited permits, and preferential pricing.

The state inadvertently reinforced class consolidation through its regulatory requirements. BCA grading systems created clear hierarchies, creating grades that determined which contracts firms could pursue (Ofori, 1993). Higher grades required paid-up capital, professional staff, and track records that took years to accumulate. The system meant established contractors faced little competition from below while competing intensely among themselves. Each new requirement raised entry barriers while protecting those already established.

The contractors who thrived within these protections understood precisely how foreign worker policies secured their position. One humid evening at Kim San Bistro, smoke from neighbouring tables mixing with the smell of Tiger beer, Mr. Wee introduced me to Mr. Lim. Forty years in the industry had taught Mr. Lim caution; his first question was whether I was "writing for an article" that might bring MOM trouble. Only after multiple reassurances about anonymity did he relax enough to explain the economics of his knocking, washing, and painting business.

“I have to pay $2k for a foreign worker’s wages, for a local, I must pay them at least $3k,” he said in Mandarin, stirring his beer with obvious satisfaction. “Once I hired a Singaporean before, but they went behind my back to potong [steal] work. Went directly to clients, promised lower prices.” The memory still irritated him decades later. Foreign workers, he explained, “are better than Chinese [Singaporean] workers” precisely because they could never transform from employee to competitor. Work permits prohibited business registration, bank accounts, property ownership. A Bangladeshi worker with twenty years’ experience remained as legally precarious as yesterday’s arrival.

What did it mean that contractors preferred workers who could never challenge them? The shift from Malaysian to Bangladeshi workers had intensified this dynamic in ways Mr. Lim understood intimately. Malaysians commuted daily across the Causeway, maintained Johor networks, shared linguistic and cultural familiarity that sometimes enabled them to start their own firms. Bangladeshis arrived debt-bonded from villages Mr. Lim could name but not locate on maps. They depended on contractors for everything: permits that tethered them to single employers, dormitory beds in industrial estates, even the hawker centre meals they could barely afford. This total dependency wasn’t an unfortunate side effect – it was the architecture of contractor security.

The boundaries proved more porous than regulations imagined, though Mr. Lim described the porosity with bemused admiration rather than alarm. “Singapore is a foreign worker’s paradise,” he said, explaining how workers increasingly coordinated their own informal operations. “They will tell you, you give this job directly to me, I give you a good price, but you must hire the trucks for me.” Workers pooled resources, formed crews, negotiated with clients, performing every contractor function except the ones that required citizenship. They

couldn't rent trucks without local guarantors, couldn't receive payments without bank accounts they couldn't open, couldn't sign contracts they weren't legally permitted to enter. Even as Mr. Lim complained about workers organizing independently, he understood he profited from being the necessary legal fiction that made their informal businesses possible. The more sophisticated foreign workers became at navigating around regulations, the more indispensable contractors became as the license-holders and permit-signatories who enabled that navigation.

This arrangement illuminates something specific about how Singapore's developmental capitalism operates through citizenship regimes. Aihwa Ong (2006) writes about "graduated sovereignty," the differential treatment of populations according to their value to capital. She traces zones of exclusion and inclusion, showing how states sort populations into those who deserve protection versus those available for exploitation. Singapore's work permit system appears to exemplify this sorting: citizens accumulate, foreigners labour, clear boundaries maintained through visa categories. Yet following Mr. Lim's account suggests something more complex. The zones don't simply exist; they require active management by intermediaries who profit from translation between them. Contractors emerge precisely at these interfaces, not as accidental beneficiaries but as structurally necessary figures who make the whole system function.

The racial dimensions operate through administrative choreography rather than explicit exclusion. Cedric Robinson (1983) argued capitalism develops through differentiation rather than homogenization, maintaining hierarchies that enable differential exploitation. Singapore achieves this differentiation through citizenship categories that appear racially neutral while producing predictable ethnic outcomes. The state doesn't bar Bangladeshis from business ownership; work permits do. The system maintains procedural legitimacy while ensuring

Chinese Singaporeans become contractors managing South Asian workers. Mr. Lim's workers might coordinate entire projects, manage crews with expertise exceeding his own, negotiate prices with sophistication learned over decades, yet remain perpetually "foreign workers" while he remains permanently "contractor," positions fixed by citizenship rather than capability.

The state's foreign worker policies simultaneously promise to reduce dependency through ever-rising levies while ensuring permanence through permit restrictions that make alternatives impossible. The contradiction generates precisely the conditions where contractors become essential: managing workers who possess every skill except legal permission to use them independently, coordinating labour that the state needs but cannot acknowledge needing, maintaining the fiction that Singapore is reducing foreign worker dependency while construction depends entirely on their presence.

The class consolidation created internal hierarchies that contractors themselves articulated with startling clarity. Over lunch at a zi char restaurant near the airport in 2023, two contractors mapped out their generation's social structure. The constant roar of planes taking off and landing punctuated our conversation, their shadows flickering across the plastic tables Ah Kow, whose brother ran Super Cool where I'd briefly worked, knew Mr. Wee through Kim San Bistro though he didn't golf. Teck Seng was the towkay of a large A1 firm building BTOs across Singapore. They were kampung friends from the same Thomson primary school, neighbours who'd grown up together. They couldn't have looked more different – Ah Kow tall and fair, Teck Seng short and tanned – their playful banter suggesting decades of shared history.

“Our generation got three tiers,” Teck Seng explained, talking with his hands. “Tier one went overseas on government scholarships, came back as civil servants. Tier two went local uni, then MNCs or GLCs. Tier three never went uni, worked at SMEs.” He pointed to himself and Ah Kow. “We’re tier three. Bottom tier.” The matter-of-fact designation startled me. These men had built thousands of HDB units, accumulated considerable wealth, employed hundreds of workers. Yet they consistently referred to themselves as “those at the bottom.”

Ah Kow elaborated on their interactions with tier one. “The civil servants very snobbish. When we go for meetings, they don’t even look at us properly. Talk to their engineers, ignore the contractor.” He mimicked the dismissive glance of a bureaucrat examining paperwork while avoiding eye contact. “They think we’re uneducated, cannot speak proper English. But we build their flats, their offices, everything.” A plane roared overhead, momentarily drowning his words. He waited, then continued. “They need us but they don’t respect us.”

This self-positioning reflected more than individual perception. It captured how the contractor class understood their structural location: economically successful yet socially marginalized, essential to development yet excluded from its elite circles. The three-tier taxonomy emerged from lived experience of differential treatment, accumulated microaggressions, systematic exclusions from spaces where “proper” English and overseas degrees determined belonging.

The paradox was striking. These contractors commanded resources that many civil servants couldn’t access – multiple properties, luxury cars, country club memberships. Teck Seng’s firm held contracts worth hundreds of millions. Yet in their own assessment, economic capital couldn’t purchase social recognition. They remained tier three, bottom tier, those whose children might escape through education but who themselves would always be marked by their

origins. The planes overhead, carrying businessmen and bureaucrats to meetings in Jakarta and Shanghai, seemed to underscore the distances that separated tiers, distances that money alone couldn't traverse.

By 1990, the contractor class had distinctive characteristics visible to anyone familiar with the industry. They drove Toyota Crowns or Mercedes E-Classes – expensive enough to signal success, not so ostentatious as to attract tax attention. They wore gold Rolex watches that served as portable collateral for emergency loans. They spoke Hokkien mixed with construction English, creating a dialect incomprehensible to outsiders. They lived in landed properties in Serangoon Gardens or Thomson, close enough to sites for dawn inspections. Their children attended Anglo-Chinese School or St. Andrew's, establishing networks for the next generation.

### 3.4.3. State Accommodation

Market downturns demonstrated how the state protected its contractor ecosystem. During the 1985 property crash, construction contracts awarded fell from $10.3 billion in 1983 to $4.2 billion in 1985.[47] The state responded by accelerating public projects. As Lee Yiok Seng noted in 1986, despite "severe problem of excess capacity," the government maintained construction momentum through public sector demand.[48] The logic was transparent: without contractors, development would halt.

The state's response to the 1985 crash revealed how central construction remained to developmental ideology. Despite construction contracts falling from $10.3 billion in 1983 to $4.2 billion in 1985, Minister Lee Yiok Seng insisted at the 1986 CIDB dinner that

[47] Lee Yiok Seng, "Speech at CIDB Annual Dinner," March 15, 1986, National Archives Singapore.
[48] Ibid.

"construction is an important sector for our national development. We must have a core of good workers, skilled and dedicated to contribute to nation building."[49] The contradiction was stark: even with massive excess capacity and local unemployment, contractors still applied for foreign workers because Singaporeans refused construction work. The state's solution – yet another training scheme offering $300 monthly allowances – repeated the same fantasy that technical interventions could resolve structural contradictions.

This rhetoric of construction as nation-building wasn't unique to Singapore. Developmental states consistently frame infrastructure as patriotic duty to obscure the exploitative conditions enabling rapid construction. South Korea's Saemaul Undong movement in the 1970s mobilized rural populations to build infrastructure through anti-communist rhetoric, using the language of voluntary self-help to mask state coercion and political surveillance, while massive rice subsidies bought political loyalty to Park Chung-Hee's authoritarian regime (Doucette and Müller, 2016). China's danwei system conscripted workers for massive projects like the Third Front Construction from 1964-1980, framing industrial relocation and gruelling construction work as defending the nation against foreign invasion (Meyskens, 2020). Indonesia's New Order regime appropriated *gotong royong*, traditional mutual assistance, to extract unpaid infrastructure labour, transforming community practice into state-directed construction framed as national development (Bowen, 1986). The ideological work is similar across contexts: transforming degrading labour into patriotic sacrifice, converting exploitation into contribution.

Singapore's version had a distinctive contradiction. Other developmental states could mobilize their own populations through nationalist appeals. Singapore needed foreign workers who

[49] Ibid.

couldn't be motivated by nation-building rhetoric. This gap created the specific need for contractors as ideological translators. They performed nation-building for the state while managing foreign workers through pure economic coercion. Lee's insistence on building "a core of permanent skilled workers" during a crisis that had exposed their absence revealed the fantasy's persistence. The state needed the fiction of citizen construction workers even as reality demanded foreign labour managed through intermediaries.

The state created regulations while maintaining these "implicit" arrangements – visible enough for contractors to depend upon, deniable enough to preserve bureaucratic legitimacy. The contradiction between modernization rhetoric and operational reality became institutionalized. Officials could announce plans to eliminate foreign workers while maintaining the very subsidies that made their employment profitable.

This structural accommodation reveals something specific about Singapore's developmental model. The state didn't simply fail to modernize construction, it actively maintained the conditions that made modernization impossible. Each policy intervention created new forms of informality. The Core Contracting Scheme, designed to eliminate subcontracting, actually formalized it by guaranteeing work that contractors knew they would subdivide. The foreign worker levy, intended to reduce dependency, created financial calculations that made temporary employment more profitable than permanent hiring. These weren't unintended consequences; they were predictable outcomes of policies that addressed symptoms while preserving underlying structures. The state needed construction to happen quickly and cheaply. Contractors made this possible by absorbing contradictions into their business models, speaking the language of modernization while practicing what modernization supposedly replaced.

### 3.4.4. Cultural Crystallization: Phua Chu Kang

As discussed in the introduction, Phua Chu Kang, the fictional contractor from the 1997-2007 television sitcom, became Singapore's most recognizable representation of the contractor figure. By the late 1990s, just as contractors had consolidated as a class, PCK crystallized their ambiguous position in Singapore's cultural imagination. Gurmit Singh's portrayal captured what had emerged through the boom years: yellow boots marking construction work, exaggerated Singlish encoding multilingual technical knowledge, gold chains representing portable assets during cash crunches. PCK embodied the contractor's fundamental contradiction – wealthy yet uncouth, successful yet permanently inferior to English-speaking professionals who might earn less but possessed cultural legitimacy. The sitcom's treatment performed important cultural work by turning this contradiction into comedy. Making contractors laughable neutralized their challenge to official narratives that economic advancement would naturally produce cultural transformation.

As Mr. Wee observes, "Everyone knows someone like PCK. Make good money from construction, drive nice car, but people still look down on him because no proper education." The character matters because he flattened contractors' complexity into catchphrases while making them culturally legible, their real histories – decades shouting over machinery, managing through dialect networks, navigating between incompatible systems – obscured behind the comedic stereotype that both celebrated and contained their success.

PCK's success-without-respectability captured a specific anxiety within Singapore's developmental project. The state had promised that economic advancement would produce cultural transformation – that prosperity would naturally lead to English fluency, that wealth would generate cosmopolitan sophistication, that success would embody meritocratic

achievement. Contractors violated every aspect of this narrative. They prospered through dialects the state tried to eliminate. They accumulated through networks that privileged kinship over merit. They succeeded while remaining everything the state claimed development would transcend.

The sitcom's treatment of this contradiction, turning it into comedy, performed important cultural work. By making contractors laughable, it neutralized their challenge to official narratives. PCK could be rich, but his yellow boots marked him as permanently inferior to the English-speaking professionals who might earn less but possessed cultural legitimacy. The show taught audiences to read class through aesthetic markers that transcended economic position. A civil servant with proper English ranked above a contractor with millions. This hierarchy, naturalized through laughter, protected the state's civilizing claims even as contractors' success undermined them.

### 3.5. Conclusion

This chapter has traced how Singapore's contractor class emerged from a specific convergence of exclusions and opportunities during the developmental transformation of the 1970s-80s. The protective lie that saved seventeen-year-old Mr. Wee, where his supervisor claiming he "fell at home" to avoid scrutiny, captures the calculated informality through which this class formed and persists. Why did construction produce this particular configuration of intermediaries – Chinese, male, emerging in this period, persisting despite decades of modernization efforts? The answer illuminates how developmental states inadvertently create the very intermediaries they claim to eliminate.

Why do contractors persist despite decades of state attempts to eliminate them? The foreign worker system made them permanently necessary. The shift from Malaysian to Bangladeshi

workers intensified their intermediary function. Workers who arrived debt-bonded, prohibited from business ownership, deportable regardless of tenure, needed contractors to exist legally in Singapore. Even as workers like Mr. Lim's crews coordinated informal operations, they required contractors' licenses, permits, and bank accounts to function. The state's policies simultaneously promised to reduce foreign worker dependency through levies and quotas while ensuring its permanence through work permit restrictions.

This pattern challenges how we understand developmental success. Evans (1995) argued that embedded autonomy, capable bureaucracies maintaining business connections, explained East Asian development. But Singapore's construction boom depended on something different: systematic gaps where formal institutions couldn't reach, managed by intermediaries whose authority derived from ethnic networks operating beyond state control. The state didn't achieve development despite these informal arrangements. It required them, channelling specific populations toward intermediary positions through policies that appeared racially neutral while producing predictable ethnic outcomes.

Why Chinese contractors specifically? The answer extends beyond exclusion from English-language professions. Chinese kinship structures provided rotating credit associations, dialect networks enabled supplier relationships, clan associations offered emergency capital. The Construction Brigade channelled Malays into construction training at four times their population proportion, yet they lacked access to these accumulation mechanisms. Adam's golden handcuffs – earning enough for a BMW but unable to access capital for business formation – captured how racial capitalism operated through differentiated access to entrepreneurship. Technical competence meant nothing without ethnic networks that enabled business formation.

The contractors who emerged from these contradictions achieved what seemed impossible – transforming exclusion into opportunity, marginalization into accumulation. Yet their success embedded them permanently in structures they couldn't transcend. They remain "tier three, bottom tier" despite their wealth, essential yet inferior, managing contradictions that define Singapore's construction industry. Their persistence demonstrates that developmental capitalism doesn't eliminate informality through institutional strength but incorporates it through intermediaries who operate precisely where formal institutions fail.

These contractors achieved remarkable transformations – former caddies becoming millionaires, kampong boys driving Mercedes, Chinese-educated men excluded from office jobs now commanding million-dollar projects. Their consolidation as a class during the 1980s boom seemed to resolve the state's construction labour crisis. Yet their very success in managing contradictions – coordinating foreign workers the state needed but couldn't acknowledge, maintaining informality within bureaucratic frameworks, operating through kinship networks modernization promised to eliminate – created new tensions. What happens when the state intensifies efforts to formalize what contractors had learned to manage through informal means? How do contractors maintain profitability when regulations designed to reduce foreign worker dependency make those same workers increasingly expensive? If contractors emerged from regulatory gaps, what occurs when the state attempts to close those gaps through ever more elaborate governance frameworks?

The next chapter traces how contractors responded to these pressures through increasingly creative practices that transformed regulatory compliance into its own form of accumulation. The game of cat and mouse that emerged shows how governance itself generates the

informality it claims to eliminate, requiring ever more sophisticated forms of intermediation between state fantasy and construction reality.

## 4: The Architecture of Informality

The coffee shop near Kaki Bukit industrial estate operates on construction rhythms. By 2 PM, when I meet Jimmy there through Mr. Wee's introduction, the morning crowd of contractors negotiating daily worker deployments has given way to a quieter afternoon shift. Jimmy arrives ten minutes late, apologizing while pulling out a chair – tall and wiry, wearing faded sports shoes and a polo shirt with his company logo embroidered on the pocket. Mr. Wee had prepared me: "Jimmy very honest one, he'll tell you everything." Within minutes of sitting down, after ordering kopi-o and lighting a cigarette, Jimmy begins explaining what everyone in the industry knows but rarely articulates to outsiders.

"I can tell you honestly, most of the Singaporeans in my company, they are all random aunties." He leans forward, voice dropping though the nearest occupied table is three stalls away. "I find them at the coffeeshop, all the auntie, *yi ma* (maternal aunt), *gu che* (paternal aunt), even my own mother. I tell them, I give you CPF every month. If someone from the CPF board calls you and asks you what you do at my company, just tell them you do part-time cleaning at my factory." The absurdity of his own fiction makes him laugh. "So if the CPF board really calls then they might discover that I have 10 cleaning aunties at my factory!"

His neighbours at the industrial park "are all doing this." The practice is so normalized he frames it as rational necessity: "It's illegal, but what choice do I have? If the government insists on coming up with such laws, then you can't blame the business owners for resorting to such tactics. There are simply no Singaporeans willing to do this job."

This admission opens a window into how Singapore's construction industry actually functions. The phantom workers Jimmy describes exemplify a broader pattern this chapter traces:

contractors systematically transform regulatory requirements into sources of profit through informal practices that operate in the grey zones between compliance and violation. Jimmy runs a successful woodworking business in one of Singapore's older industrial estates, employs fifteen workers, drives a Mercedes he parks conspicuously outside the coffee shop. His practices emerge from calculated business logic within one of the world's most capable bureaucracies.

The developmental state literature positions bureaucratic competence as central to East Asian success. Evans (1995) traces developmental achievement to embedded autonomy, where capable bureaucracies combine with strategic business connections. Johnson (1982) documents how MITI guided Japan's industrial transformation through institutional coordination. Wade (1990) credits Taiwan's success to coherent policy implementation by professional civil servants. Singapore exemplifies this model: its civil service consistently ranks among the world's most efficient, its corruption indices among the lowest, its regulatory enforcement among the most stringent. The CPF board that Jimmy references maintains databases tracking every citizen's employment history and contribution patterns. The Ministry of Manpower cross-references work permit applications with tax records, conducts surprise site inspections, deploys biometric systems at dormitory entrances.

Yet here sits Jimmy, explaining how his mother and various aunties enable his woodworking operations by existing solely in CPF contribution records. The sophistication of Singapore's bureaucracy – dependency ratios calculated to decimal points, work permit categories specified across dozens of occupations, levy rates adjusted quarterly based on economic conditions – generates the precise contradictions that make phantom workers necessary. The state mandates that contractors employ one Singaporean for every five foreign workers in basic-skilled

positions. Jimmy knows, the state knows, everyone knows that Singaporeans refuse construction work. The cleaning aunties solve this impasse through documentary fiction that maintains regulatory compliance while enabling actual operations.

Through the coffee shop's open sides, I can see the material infrastructure these contradictions produce. Stacks of rebar lean against chain-link fences, cement trucks navigate the narrow roads between workshops, a tower crane swings loads at a nearby construction site. Kaki Bukit itself embodies these patterns: industrial land the state designated for production rather than speculation, built rapidly in the 1980s through the very practices Jimmy describes, now housing thousands of SMEs that depend on phantom workers to maintain real operations. The aunties who never set foot in these workshops helped build them, at least on paper. Their phantom labour enables the actual workers, mostly Bangladeshi and PRC nationals on work permits, who cut wood, operate machinery, fabricate the components that become Singapore's built environment.

This chapter argues that practices like Jimmy's phantom workers constitute the actual infrastructure through which Singapore's construction industry operates. Following contractors through their various informal arrangements, I trace how these practices emerge from regulatory design rather than institutional failure. The term "informal" here requires precision. I'm examining practices that exist in the interstices of formal regulation – some technically illegal (like phantom workers violating employment laws), others occupying grey zones (like MYE trading that violates policy intent while exploiting regulatory gaps), still others operating through selective enforcement (like worker rentals that officials acknowledge but tolerate). What unites these practices is their systematic nature and their necessity for the industry's functioning. They operate through established networks, follow predictable patterns, and

generate consistent profit margins. The MYE system, introduced to control foreign labour, becomes a tradable commodity worth $3,000 per person. Work permit restrictions create rental economies where contractors loan workers for $100 per day. Dependency ratios produce phantom workers whose CPF contributions cost less than actual salaries would. Each regulatory intervention generates new opportunities for informal arbitrage that contractors transform into business models.

### 4.1. The Regulatory Production of Informality

#### 4.1.1. The MYE System: From Control to Commodity

The Man-Year Entitlement system emerged in 1999 from the state's attempt to control what officials perceived as contractors' excessive reliance on foreign labour. The Ministry of Manpower designed the system with apparent bureaucratic elegance: allocate quotas based on project value and duration, distribute them through main contractors, create scarcity that would force productivity improvements. A firm with a $10 million project might receive 100 man-years, deployable as 100 workers for one year or 50 workers for two years. The state could control total foreign worker numbers while allowing market flexibility in deployment.

The practice of trading labour allocations predated the MYE system. As early as 1983, the Ministry of Labour was 'cracking down on construction companies which moonlight as employment agencies by supplying workers to other contractors.' More troublingly, 'work permit holders who were allowed in as construction workers, were known to have turned employment agents themselves to supply other foreign workers.'[50] The MYE system formalized quotas that contractors had already been informally trading for decades."

[50] "Crackdown on builders who trade in workers," The Straits Times, 14 December 1983, p. 9.

Yet within months of implementation, contractors had transformed these regulatory instruments into tradable commodities. Eric, a cement subcontractor, explained the economics when I visited his factory in Sungei Kadut, that industrial periphery where Singapore keeps what it needs but doesn't want to see. The drive there took me past rows of prefabricated structures housing concrete suppliers, timber merchants, marble cutters – the material guts of the construction industry. Eric's factory occupied one of these units, its rusty roof and peeling paint suggesting a lease nearing expiration, that peculiar temporariness that marks Singapore's industrial estates where twenty-year JTC leases create permanent impermanence.

The first thing that hit me was the sound: machinery whirring, the rhythmic thud of compression, metal on metal. Piles of sand gathered in one corner, technical mortar stacked under tarpaulin in another. A sign at the entrance warned in four languages that no alcohol was permitted, while a vending machine offered four varieties of Red Bull among eight total drinks. The contrast captured something essential: the formal prohibition of intoxication alongside the informal enabling of exhaustion. Eric's office sat above the factory floor, dust settling on every surface despite constant cleaning.



Figure 4.1: The Material Guts

Green tarpaulins covering stored materials in industrial estate alleyways. These hidden spaces between workshops constitute Singapore's construction industry's back-end infrastructure, operating away from the gleaming city-state's public image.



Figure 4.2: Eric's Sungei Kadut Warehouse

Prefabricated warehouses housing concrete suppliers, timber merchants, and marble cutters. The peeling paint and rusty roofs mark leases nearing expiration.




Figure 4.3. Documentary Labour

Administrative office showing the mundane bureaucratic work – tender documents, permits, compliance forms – that enables informal practices. The hand sanitizer marks this as fieldwork during Singapore's pandemic period.




Figure 4.4: Mapping the Workforce Hierarchy

Safety instructions in English, Mandarin, Tamil, and Bengali. The quadrilingual signage maps citizenship stratifications: English for regulatory compliance, Mandarin for contractors, Tamil and Bengali for the workers these instructions govern.




Figure 4.5: The Exhaustion Economy

Vending machine at Eric's cement factory offering four varieties of Red Bull among eight total drinks. The proliferation of caffeinated beverages enables the extended work hours

construction's irregular rhythms demand, while the posted prohibition against alcohol marks formal boundaries around informal exhaustion.

"Every time I need manpower, I always ask Madam Tan," Eric explained, gesturing at the workers below. "I don't know where she got all this lobang, but somehow, she always has men. Workers confirm will have; only question is, at what price?" The price had stabilized at approximately $3,000 per man-year by 2023, suggesting a mature market with established pricing mechanisms. Madam Tan and others like her operated as specialized brokers in what everyone acknowledged as an underground market that functioned with remarkable efficiency. Eric's factory illuminated the physical reality behind these paper transactions. The workers Madam Tan supplied didn't simply materialize; they moved through networks of dormitories, agents, and contractors, each taking their cut. The men loading cement below us might have work permits tied to a main contractor building an MRT station, subcontracted to a concrete supplier, then "rented" to Eric when his orders spiked. The MYE that authorized their presence had been transformed from regulatory instrument to tradable commodity, its value extracted at each exchange.

The state knew about this trading. A 1999 Ministry of Manpower circular to all contractors explicitly warned against selling MYEs, demonstrating official awareness within the system's first year.[51] Yet the market persisted and expanded. By 2023, every contractor I interviewed admitted to either having purchased man-years or knowing someone who did, discussing prices and suppliers as openly as they discussed cement costs or steel prices.

[51] Ng Boon Yian, "Not a 'new' problem: Phantom workers," Today, 21 July 2001, p. 2.

Evans's (1995) embedded autonomy framework positions bureaucratic competence combined with strategic business connections as the foundation of developmental success. Singapore's MYE system appears to exemplify this model: sophisticated quota calculations, detailed project assessments, comprehensive tracking systems. Yet this very competence produces the conditions for systematic rent-seeking. The state creates artificial scarcity through quotas. Scarcity generates value. Value creates markets. Markets require intermediaries to function.

Darren, the air-conditioning contractor, traced the system's perverse incentives through a specific example. "You know the China construction firm everyone talks about? Their whole business model is MYE arbitrage." The firm would deliberately underprice tender bids to win major projects with high MYE allocations. The construction contract might generate minimal profit or even losses. The real value came from selling excess man-years on the black market. "They bid for MRT projects knowing they'll get hundreds of man-years. Sell half, cover your losses. Sell more, pure profit."

The transformation of MYEs into both commodity and gift illuminates how contractors operate as intermediaries between different value systems. As commodities, man-years trade at market prices determined by supply and demand. As gifts, main contractors distribute them to loyal subcontractors to maintain networks. The same man-year might be a $3,000 commodity in one transaction and a relationship-building gift in another.

This dual nature extends Tsing's (2009) analysis of supply chain capitalism, where value emerges from connecting incompatible systems. Singapore's contractors profit from translating between regulatory quotas and labour markets. Yet contractors don't simply connect different value systems; they transform the regulatory apparatus itself into a value-generating

mechanism. The MYE system, designed to control labour, becomes infrastructure for accumulation.

Walking through Eric's factory made these abstractions concrete. The land itself embodied the contradictions – industrial estates on twenty-year leases that discouraged automation investment, as Eric explained while showing me the German equipment he couldn't justify purchasing. "Each machine must be designed for the specific factory layout. If JTC doesn't renew our lease, the machines become scrap metal." The workers operating the current machinery occupied a curious position between skilled and unskilled. Eric trained them to operate equipment to save on technician costs, yet classified them as general workers to maintain lower levy rates. "They know how to run the machines," he admitted, "but officially they're just general workers."

The state's response to MYE trading demonstrated calibrated tolerance. Officials would periodically announce crackdowns, prosecute egregious cases, issue warnings. A 2009 enforcement operation netted 38 individuals and 3 companies.[52] The penalties – fines up to $15,000 and maximum 12-month jail terms – seemed substantial. Yet relative to the profits involved, they represented acceptable business risks. More tellingly, the state never modified the MYE system to eliminate trading possibilities. They maintained a structure that generated profitable violations while periodically performing enforcement to maintain legitimacy.

### 4.1.2. Creating Scarcity, Generating Markets

Darren's air-conditioning firm occupies a corner unit in an industrial estate off Ubi Road, one of those two-story concrete structures that house Singapore's SME ecosystem. I visited him

[52] "Director pleads guilty," Today (2nd Edition), 14 August 2009, p. 8.

there in March 2023, and again in August 2023, navigating past workshops fabricating ducting systems, warehouses storing industrial fans, and offices coordinating ACMV installations across the island. His office walls displayed BCA certifications and safety awards, the formal credentials that mark legitimate contractors. Over instant coffee in paper cups, Darren explained how the MYE system had fundamentally distorted construction economics.

"You know why tender prices make no sense anymore?" He pulled up a spreadsheet on his laptop, showing recent project bids. "Look at this – same specifications, same timeline, but the prices vary by 30-40%. The lowest bidder isn't trying to win the construction job. They're trying to win the man-years." He then told me about a China construction firm that had perfected this strategy. "They'll take a loss on the actual building. Tender price maybe 10% below cost. But if they get 500 man-years for an MRT project, sell 300 on the black market at $3,000 each, that's $900,000 profit before they pour any concrete." Their entire business model reversed conventional logic; they pursued projects with the highest MYE allocations rather than highest profit margins. Tender prices became loss leaders for quota acquisition.

The practice transforms regulatory instruments into private assets through mechanisms that David Harvey (2003) might recognize yet wouldn't quite capture. Harvey traces accumulation by dispossession through privatization of public resources: water systems, genetic materials, common lands. Singapore's contractors demonstrate accumulation through administrative arbitrage. The state creates quotas as migration control tools. Contractors transform these administrative allocations into tradable commodities, extracting value from the regulatory apparatus itself. This speaks directly to how intermediaries function in developmental capitalism: they profit from maintaining the contradictions between what regulations promise and what operations require.

The mechanics of this transformation illuminate how contractors operate as essential intermediaries. A main contractor bidding for government projects deliberately underprices their tender – $50 million for work costing $55 million. The loss makes sense only through MYE maths. Major infrastructure projects carry hundreds of man-year entitlements. The contractor retains minimal quotas for skeleton crews, then sells excess allocations through intermediary networks. At $3,000 per man-year, selling 300 quotas generates $900,000 in arbitrage profit before any construction begins.

Darren traced how this practice cascades through subcontracting chains, demonstrating contractors' role in managing the citizenship hierarchies that structure Singapore's labour regime. "Say I need to install ACMV for their project. I can't get workers without man-years. So I buy from them or their agents at $3,000 each. That cost gets passed to my tender price. The main con is basically taxing their own subcontractors through MYE control." The circularity is striking: main contractors lose money on construction, profit from selling quotas to subcontractors, then pay inflated prices that incorporate those quota costs. Value gets extracted at each exchange while maintaining the fiction of competitive bidding.

The standardized price masks how MYEs circulate through multiple registers of value simultaneously. When main contractors distribute quotas below market rates to regular subcontractors, they create what anthropologists recognize as gift debt – obligations that cannot be discharged through simple repayment (Mauss 1925; Graeber 2011). The subcontractor who receives discounted MYEs enters into a relationship where future reciprocity remains deliberately undefined. This ambiguity generates its own value. The gift creates temporal bonds that extend across project cycles, ensuring labour availability during rush periods, acceptance

of delayed payments, and flexibility in work arrangements. The same MYE that trades at $3,000 in anonymous transactions becomes incommensurable when embedded in these ongoing relationships (Appadurai, 1986).

This dual circulation, as alienable commodity and inalienable gift, transforms a bureaucratic instrument into social infrastructure . The Ministry of Manpower designed MYEs to quantify and control labour allocation. Instead, contractors converted this regulatory mechanism into a hybrid system where calculative market logic and gift reciprocity operate through identical documents. The informal economy depends on this duality. Pure commodity exchange would make the system too rigid for construction's temporal demands; pure gift relations would make it too particularistic for large-scale coordination. The MYE's ability to shift between these modes of valuation enables the informal practices that reconcile regulatory constraints with operational requirements.

The state's procurement preferences enable this arbitrage. Government evaluators, pressured to minimize public expenditure, award contracts to the lowest qualified bidder. They might note aggressive pricing but interpret it as competitive efficiency rather than quota speculation. The winning contractor then subcontracts actual work to others who must purchase back the very man-years needed to supply workers. Public infrastructure gets built through these circular transactions where quotas extracted from projects return to the same projects at inflated prices. The state maintained calibrated ignorance about the market. Officials denounced MYE trading publicly, conducted periodic enforcement, prosecuted flagrant violations. Yet they preserved the fundamental structure enabling trading. They could allocate quotas directly to subcontractors, require biometric employment confirmation, implement real-time tracking. Singapore has deployed similar technologies for electronic road pricing and pandemic contact

tracing. Their absence from MYE enforcement suggests strategic forbearance rather than technical impossibility.

This forbearance reflects how intermediaries solve problems the state cannot officially address. Construction's irregular rhythms cannot fit rigid annual quotas. Trading allows contractors to smooth these fluctuations without the state admitting its system's inadequacy. The black market provides operational flexibility while maintaining the political fiction of controlled migration. Contractors absorb this contradiction into their business models, transforming regulatory failure into profit opportunity. The MYE market thus demonstrates how Singapore's developmental capitalism functions through intermediaries who manage contradictions between regulatory ambition and operational necessity. The $3,000 per man-year price represents the value of this transformation: the premium for converting bureaucratic allocations into fungible commodities while maintaining the fiction of regulatory control.

### 4.2. The Mechanics of Value Extraction

#### 4.2.1. Renting Workers: Risk as Profit

The practice of "renting" workers emerges from a temporal contradiction built into Singapore's work permit system. Foreign workers arrive bonded to specific employers for two-year periods, their legal presence tethered to a single company's sponsorship. Yet construction operates through irregular rhythms: a shopping mall renovation might need fifty workers for demolition, ten for the long months of finishing work, then thirty for the final sprint. This mismatch between bureaucratic time and construction time creates an elaborate rental economy where contractors loan workers to each other, transforming regulatory rigidity into profitable flexibility.

Mohan explained this system to me during a break at a shopping mall renovation site in 2023, standing amid the detritus of demolished shopfronts while his two workers continued hacking tiles in the next unit. The drilling provided a steady percussion to our conversation. Unlike most contractors I encountered in the Chinese-dominated industry, Mohan was Indian Singaporean, born here, his parents' death during his childhood pushing him through a series of jobs: coffeeshop boy, gardener, finally hacking contractor. He managed exactly two workers, both from his ancestral Tamil Nadu, a deliberate minimalism that structured his entire business model. "I used to have ten workers," he said, wiping concrete dust from his hands. "But ten workers means you need projects every month to cover their salaries, dormitory fees, levy payments. Two workers, I can manage. When I need more, I borrow."

The economics of borrowing revealed themselves through Mohan's careful calculations. His two permanent workers cost $1,100 monthly in salary, plus $700 in levy payments, $200 for dormitory beds, roughly $100 for transport; about $2,100 total per worker per month. This meant $70 per day whether they worked or remained idle in dormitories. A borrowed worker cost $100 daily, paid only for actual workdays. During busy periods, Mohan might borrow eight additional workers for two weeks, paying $11,200 in rental fees. Keeping those same eight workers permanently would cost $16,800 monthly even during slack periods. The difference represented pure risk transfer – from Mohan to whoever maintained those workers year-round.

Mohan's worker rental calculations illuminate a counterintuitive dynamic: regulatory boundaries generate profit independent of physical distance. Xiang Biao (2007) documented Indian IT contractors extracting value from "body shopping", moving engineers between Hyderabad and Sydney to capture wage differentials between national labour markets. Mohan

performs structurally identical arbitrage within Singapore's five hundred square kilometres. Both profit from temporal mismatches (IT projects needing specific expertise for three months, construction sites needing demolition crews for two weeks) and regulatory rigidities (visa restrictions, work permit bonds).

The analytical insight lies in recognizing that value emerges from navigating bureaucratic boundaries, not geographic ones. Singapore's work permit system creates internal borders as impermeable as international frontiers. A Bangladeshi worker legally bound to one employer cannot work five kilometres away without violating immigration law, a violation that makes Mohan's coordination as valuable as transnational placement. The $30 daily premium Mohan charges (rental at $100 versus employment at $70) prices this regulatory friction. Xiang's IT contractors capture similar margins through more elaborate logistics but fundamentally identical arbitrage – profiting from mismatches between where labour is and where capital needs it to be, mediated through citizenship categories that determine who can work where. Singapore demonstrates how developmental states engineer profitable intermediation within their own borders by creating regulatory boundaries as rigid as those between nations.

This speaks to what Harvey (1989) documented about flexible accumulation – capitalism's shift from integrated Fordist firms to fragmented production networks. Harvey traces the structural transformation, showing how large manufacturers broke into subcontracting chains, how permanent employment gave way to temporary contracts. Yet he leaves the coordination mechanism relatively opaque. How do these fragments actually function together? Singapore's worker rental system provides one answer: contractors create informal markets that redistribute both resources and risks according to each firm's capacity to bear them.

Jason, an electrical subcontractor, mapped the interdependencies that make renting necessary. We sat in his windowless office in an industrial estate while he explained construction's temporal complexity. "The job schedule is very tight. You work as subcontractor on a project, you won't be the only one on site. You cooperate with other trades – aircon, plumbing, ceiling works. If other people delay, you cannot start work. But if you don't complete in time, the main con will give you problems." These cascading dependencies create labour needs that spike and collapse unpredictably. A two-week delay in concrete work leaves electrical contractors idle. When work resumes, compressed deadlines might require double the normal crew. Maintaining permanent staff for peak demand would bankrupt most subcontractors.

The rental arrangements require trust networks that extend beyond simple market transactions. Mohan maintains relationships with about ten contractors, including Mr. Wee, who provide steady work and loan workers when projects surge. "It's not official rental," Mohan clarified, conscious of legal complications. "They're still employed by the original company. But they work at my site, under my supervision, I pay the daily rate to their boss." The lending contractor trusts Mohan won't poach workers or mistreat them. Mohan trusts he'll receive capable workers who won't disappear mid-project. These reciprocal vulnerabilities bind contractors into networks that function through reputation rather than contract.

Chong San's story revealed what happens when these arrangements fail. The tiling contractor had leased workers to another company during a slow period, telling them: "You can either go home, or you can work for another company." When the receiving company failed to pay wages, one worker complained to MOM. The incident exposed the legal fiction underlying rental arrangements – Chong San remained the official employer despite the worker performing labour elsewhere. At the MOM office, the officer's response captured the state's ambiguous

relationship to these practices. “He was very rude to the worker,” Chong San recalled, describing how the official threw papers, dismissed evidence, showed visible hostility. Yet privately, the same officer advised: “You better settle privately with him.” Chong San paid the wages himself. “The other company didn’t pay him, so I had no choice. The worker is registered under my firm.”

This incident illuminates the cascading vulnerabilities embedded in rental arrangements. The state maintains formal employment relationships – workers remain legally bound to permit-holding employers regardless of actual work location. This fiction enables the rental system while preserving regulatory legitimacy. When violations surface, individual contractors absorb liability rather than systemic practices facing scrutiny. Chong San’s payment protected his own reputation while stabilizing the broader network. If workers couldn’t trust payment through rental arrangements, the system would collapse.

The state’s knowledge of these practices surfaces in official documents with striking candour. Mr. Dhanabalan acknowledged in Parliament that the Ministry was “quite aware that there are contractors who have excess workers, who lend, as it were, workers to other contractors.”[53] Rather than prohibition, officials chose accommodation. When setting foreign worker ratios, the Ministry decided different ratios for different construction trades would be “too complicated” and settled for a uniform ratio, allowing “market forces” to determine distribution.[54] Those market forces manifested as rental networks that officials recognized yet chose to tolerate.

[53] Mr S. Dhanabalan, Minister for National Development, statement during Budget debate on Ministry of National Development, *Singapore Parliament Reports*, vol. 59, sess. 1, sitting 10, col. 801 (11 March 1992), https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=008_19920311_S0002_T0003.
[54] Ibid., col. 653.

This tolerance reflects how worker rental solves problems the state cannot officially address. The work permit system ensures political control: workers remain deportable, cannot change employers freely, depend on permit holders for legal status. Yet construction's variable demands require flexibility that rigid bonding prohibits. Rental networks square this circle, maintaining formal compliance while enabling operational adaptation. Contractors profit from managing this contradiction, charging premiums that price the value of flexibility itself – the ability to scale without bearing employment risks, to access workers without maintaining them, to promise delivery without permanent capacity.

Classical theories of the firm assume companies seek optimal size to minimize transaction costs (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1985). Contractors resist optimization because fragmentation generates profit. Mohan keeps two workers instead of ten because each rental transaction creates opportunities for margin extraction, risk pricing, and relationship cultivation impossible with permanent employment. This extends brokerage theory beyond coordinating existing fragments (Stovel and Shaw, 2012). Contractors actively maintain gaps as business strategy, profiting from inefficiencies they create.

The rental system demonstrates how contractors create and maintain fragmentation as a business strategy rather than simply coordinating existing fragments. They deliberately keep operations lean, maintaining minimal permanent crews while depending on rental networks for surge capacity. This extends beyond Eccles's (1981) quasi-firms – stable networks that repeatedly collaborate while remaining legally separate. Singapore's contractors fragment their own operations strategically, transforming apparent weakness into competitive advantage. The $100 daily rental rate versus $70 employment cost represents more than simple markup. It prices the contradictions of Singapore's construction industry – between regulatory control and

operational flexibility, between political legitimacy and economic necessity, between the fantasy of regulated migration and the reality of mobile bodies moving between sites according to rhythms no bureaucracy can predict.

### 4.2.2. Phantom Workers: Citizenship as Resource

The phantom workers populating Jimmy's payroll – his mother, various aunties, coffee shop regulars who exist only in CPF contribution records – illuminate a specific mechanism through which citizenship itself becomes commodified. These documentary citizens solve a mathematical problem: regulations require one Singaporean for every five foreign workers, but Singaporeans refuse construction work. The solution transforms citizenship from political status into rentable resource, where the ability to maintain a CPF account generates monthly income without performing any labour.

The practice works through administrative choreography that only citizens can perform. Jimmy pays CPF contributions for his phantom worker, roughly $200-300 monthly per person, depending on the declared salary. The "workers" receive these contributions in their CPF accounts, money they cannot immediately withdraw but which accumulates toward retirement savings. In exchange, they agree to lie if questioned, claiming they perform part-time cleaning or administrative work. The arrangement benefits both parties: Jimmy maintains his foreign worker quota for a fraction of actual salary costs, while the phantoms receive retirement contributions without working. Citizenship becomes an asset generating passive income through documentary existence.

This commodification extends Robinson's (1983) argument that capitalism develops through differentiation rather than homogenization. Robinson traces how European capitalism emerged by incorporating different populations at different terms: Irish as racialized labour, Jews as

financial intermediaries, Slavs as agricultural workers. Each group's incorporation maintained rather than eliminated difference, creating hierarchies that enabled differential exploitation. Singapore's phantom worker system demonstrates how contemporary capitalism achieves similar differentiation through citizenship categories that appear racially neutral while producing predictable ethnic outcomes.

The mechanics matter. Only citizens and permanent residents possess CPF accounts, the documentary infrastructure that enables phantom existence. Work permit holders, predominantly Bangladeshi, Indian, and PRC nationals, cannot access this system regardless of skills, experience, or tenure. A Bangladeshi worker with twenty years of construction expertise cannot be a phantom worker. A Singaporean auntie who has never entered a construction site can be. The distinction operates through administrative categories rather than explicit racial classification, yet produces consistent ethnic patterns. Chinese Singaporeans overwhelmingly become phantom workers for Chinese contractors, their shared dialect networks enabling trust required for illegal arrangements.

Lisa Lowe's (2015) analysis of colonial sedimentations within liberalism helps explain this administrative production of difference. Lowe demonstrates how colonial divisions between human and less-than-human don't disappear but get rearticulated through immigration law and citizenship categories. Colonial regimes operated through explicit racial hierarchies: Chinese as traders, Malays as farmers, Indians as labourers. Contemporary Singapore achieves similar stratification through visa categories: Employment Pass for professionals, S-Pass for mid-skilled, Work Permit for "unskilled" labour. These categories appear technically neutral, determined by salary and qualification thresholds. Yet they consistently channel Bangladeshis toward construction work permits while Europeans receive Employment Passes. The phantom

worker phenomenon reveals how citizens monetize their position within this hierarchy, extracting rent from documentary privileges that work permit holders cannot access.

The historical emergence of phantom workers traces through archival documents that reveal state awareness alongside systematic tolerance. As early as 1986, newspapers reported "phantom employees" appearing in construction company records. The methods were sophisticated.[55] In 1988, Chyan Engineering created a list of 27 phantom workers to circumvent the requirement that employers hire 'at least one local worker for every three foreign workers.' The scheme only surfaced when 'one of the phantoms wrote to the press in October 1985 complained that his name used without his consent.'[56] This accidental discovery pattern, violations surfacing through worker complaints rather than systematic detection, would persist for decades.

Permanent Secretary Ngiam Tong Dow acknowledged the government knew contractors were 'paying CPF contributions to phantom Singapore employees to get around restrictions on employing foreign workers.'[57] The practice intensified whenever the state tightened foreign worker ratios. In 1987, when the dependency ratio shifted to 1:1, contractors dismissed the policy as unrealistic and immediately began recruiting phantoms.[58] Each regulatory tightening produced new waves of documentary citizens.

The 2009 case of Tay and Lim exposed the systematic nature of phantom worker operations. Their network registered senior citizens in their 80s, young students, even dead people on company payrolls. They collected IC copies, submitted CPF contributions, created elaborate

[55] "The 'phantom' employees," The Straits Times, 9 August 1986, p. 12.
[56] "Labour cheats exposed by 'phantom'," The Straits Times, 26 July 1988, p. 12
[57] "The 'phantom' employees," The Straits Times, 9 August 1986, p. 12
[58] "Phantom Workers: Directors Face Charges," The Straits Times, 18 November 1987, p. 3.

paper trails showing employment. Once work permits were approved, these phantom workers were "transferred" between companies in the group. The sophistication suggested long-established practice rather than desperate innovation. The penalties when caught – $15,000 fines, 12-month maximum jail terms – represented acceptable business risks relative to profits involved.

What does it mean that citizenship itself becomes rentable? The phantom worker arrangement transforms political membership into economic asset, where the documentary privileges of citizenship generate income separate from any productive activity. This differs from conventional understandings of citizenship as rights and obligations. The phantom workers perform neither rights nor obligations. They don't vote based on construction interests, don't participate in civic life as workers, don't contribute labour to national development. They simply exist in databases, their documentary presence enabling others' physical labour.

The arrangement reveals something specific about how racial capitalism operates in postcolonial contexts. Classical racial capitalism, as Robinson analysed it, operated through explicit racial exclusions: slavery, colonialism, apartheid. Contemporary Singapore achieves similar stratification through citizenship categories that maintain procedural legitimacy while producing racial outcomes. The state doesn't prohibit Bangladeshis from being phantom workers through racial policy. Work permit regulations make it administratively impossible. The effect remains the same: Chinese Singaporeans accumulate through documentary existence while Bangladeshi workers labour without accumulation possibilities.

The gendered dimensions of phantom workers deserve attention. Jimmy's list – "yi ma, gu che, even my own mother" – consists entirely of older women. These aunties represent a specific

demographic: Chinese-educated women excluded from formal employment by language policies, age discrimination, and gendered labour markets. Their phantom work provides modest retirement income through CPF contributions they otherwise couldn't access. The arrangement transforms marginalization into opportunity, where exclusion from formal employment becomes an asset for documentary employment.

The state's relationship to phantom workers demonstrates calibrated tolerance rather than regulatory failure. Officials possess comprehensive databases tracking CPF contributions, employment records, and work permit applications. Data analysis could easily identify suspicious patterns: companies with dozens of elderly "cleaners," workers who never appear on site access logs, contribution patterns inconsistent with actual employment. The Ministry of Manpower's sporadic crackdowns prove they can detect phantom workers when they choose. Their choice to tolerate the practice most of the time suggests strategic forbearance.

This forbearance makes sense once we understand phantom workers as solving problems the state cannot officially acknowledge. The dependency ratio assumes Singaporeans will supervise foreign workers, maintaining the fiction that citizens participate in construction. Phantom workers preserve this fiction through documentary presence while enabling the foreign worker employment that construction requires. The state gets regulatory compliance on paper, contractors get workforce flexibility in practice, citizens get CPF contributions without labour. Everyone benefits except the foreign workers whose precarity subsidizes this arrangement – their work permits cost more due to phantom worker expenses, their wages shrink as contractors recoup CPF contributions, their vulnerability increases as the illegal arrangements creating their employment make them deportable for any infraction.

The phantom worker phenomenon thus demonstrates how citizenship categories structure informal economies in ways that transcend simple legality or illegality. Citizens can engage in documentary fraud because their citizenship provides protection. Even when caught, they face fines rather than deportation. Permanent residents occupy intermediate positions, sometimes recruited as phantoms but bearing greater risks. Work permit holders cannot participate except as the labourers whose employment phantom workers enable. These differentiated possibilities for illegality reveal how racial capitalism operates through administrative categories rather than explicit racial exclusions, achieving similar stratifications through procedural means that maintain legitimacy while producing inequality.

These informal practices – MYE trading, phantom workers, worker rentals – demonstrate the specific mechanisms through which contractors function as essential intermediaries in Singapore's developmental capitalism. Each practice shows a different aspect of this intermediary function. MYE trading shows contractors converting administrative instruments into market commodities. Phantom workers show them monetizing citizenship as a resource for managing regulatory compliance. Worker rental shows them fragmenting operations to create coordination opportunities.

### 4.3. The Stratification of Informality

The informal practices structuring Singapore's construction industry don't operate equally across different categories of residents. Instead, they follow precise hierarchies determined by citizenship status, creating graduated access to profitable violations that mirrors the differentiated rights Aihwa Ong (2006) traces in her analysis of graduated sovereignty. Where Ong demonstrates how states treat populations differently based on their perceived value to capital, Singapore's construction industry shows how these differential treatments extend into

informal practice itself. Citizens, permanent residents, and work permit holders don't simply occupy different legal statuses; they access entirely different repertoires of informal possibility.

### 4.3.1. Citizens: The Documentary Operators

Singapore citizens monopolize the most profitable and least risky forms of informal practice: those operating through documentation rather than physical presence. Jimmy's phantom workers exemplify this privilege. Only citizens and permanent residents possess CPF accounts, the bureaucratic infrastructure enabling documentary employment. A citizen auntie can earn $200-300 monthly in CPF contributions without entering a construction site. She risks, at most, a fine if caught. Her citizenship protects her from deportation, imprisonment remains unlikely for elderly women claiming confusion about employment details, and contractors bear primary liability for false declarations.

The documentary practices available to citizens extend beyond phantom employment. Citizens can register construction companies, obtaining licenses that become platforms for multiple informal operations: trading MYEs allocated to their firms, submitting parallel tender documents, maintaining double accounting systems. Mr. Lim at Kim San Bistro operates through this documentary privilege. His citizenship allows him to hold contracts, sign permits, maintain bank accounts that enable every other informal practice in the chain. Foreign workers might coordinate entire projects, manage crews, negotiate with suppliers, yet they cannot perform the single documentary act – company registration – that would make them contractors rather than workers.

This monopoly on documentation creates specific accumulation opportunities tied directly to citizenship. When the state tightens foreign worker quotas, citizens profit by selling their documentary existence as phantom workers. When MYE allocations create artificial scarcity,

citizens profit by trading quotas only they can legally receive. When projects require formal contracts, citizens profit by signing documents that legitimate work performed entirely by others. Each regulatory requirement assuming citizen participation becomes an opportunity for citizens to extract rent from their documentary privileges.

### 4.3.2. Permanent Residents: The Supervisory Operators

Permanent residents and Malaysians occupy intermediate positions in the informality hierarchy, able to supervise and coordinate informal practices without bearing full documentary responsibility. The Malaysian foremen I observed at construction sites exemplified this positioning. They managed commercial operations, coordinated tender submissions, supervised workers, yet couldn't own the companies that would make these activities fully profitable. Their informal practices operated through supervision rather than documentation: managing workers they knew were borrowed through informal arrangements, coordinating projects using phantom workers they hadn't declared, overseeing operations based on MYEs the company would trade rather than use.

The supervisory practices available to PRs generate moderate profits with moderate risks. A PR foreman might manage informally borrowed workers, earning higher wages than regular workers but far less than the contractor profiting from the rental arrangement. If caught, the PR faces potential loss of residency status – more severe than citizens' fines but less immediate than work permit holders' deportation. This intermediate precarity positions PRs as supervisors who coordinate informal practices while creating some distance between citizen contractors and direct management of illegal arrangements, whether by design or as an emergent consequence of the citizenship hierarchy.

S-Pass holders I encountered occupied similar intermediate positions, though with greater constraints. They supervised work gangs that included informally employed workers, coordinated between legal employers and actual work sites, managed daily operations that documentary practices enabled. Yet their employment remained tied to specific employers, their residency contingent on maintaining salary thresholds, their mobility limited by visa conditions. They participated in informal practices as middle management rather than principals, earning premiums for coordination while bearing risks of status loss.

### 4.3.3. Work Permit Holders: The Objects of Informality

Work permit holders can only be operated upon – they are the objects rather than subjects of informal practices. A Bangladeshi construction worker cannot be a phantom worker because he lacks CPF access. He cannot trade MYEs because he cannot receive allocations. He cannot rent workers because he cannot employ others. He cannot even legally rent himself – his work permit bonds him to a specific employer, making any work elsewhere technically illegal regardless of arrangements made above him.

This exclusion from profitable informal practice creates particular vulnerabilities that structure the entire system. When Chong San rented his workers to another company that failed to pay wages, the workers bore the immediate cost – no wages despite completed work. When phantom workers inflate employment costs, workers' wages shrink to compensate. When MYE trading raises the price of legal employment, workers pay through recruitment fees, salary deductions, deteriorating dormitory conditions. Every profitable informal practice in the system ultimately extracts value from workers positioned as objects rather than agents of informality.

The gradations within work permit holders add further complexity. Malaysian workers, able to commute daily across the Causeway, maintain some autonomy. They can change employers more easily, maintain networks in both countries, sometimes transition to S-Pass or PR status. Thai workers on two-year contracts have less mobility but more than Bangladeshi workers who arrive debt-bonded from recruitment fees. PRC workers occupy varying positions depending on skills and connections. These micro-hierarchies within the work permit category create different degrees of vulnerability to informal extraction.

The pricing of different informal practices maps directly onto citizenship hierarchies. A phantom worker (citizen) earns $200-300 monthly for documentary existence. A supervisor managing informal operations (PR or S-Pass) might earn a $500-1000 premium monthly. A contractor trading MYEs (citizen) profits $3000 per transaction. Meanwhile, an informally employed worker (work permit) often pays for the privilege – through recruitment fees, salary deductions, or simple non-payment – of being informally operated upon.

These differentiated prices reflect both risk and exclusivity. Citizens face minimal risk for maximum profit because only they can perform documentary practices. PRs bear moderate risk for moderate profit, their supervisory practices requiring presence and participation. Work permit holders bear maximum risk for negative profit, paying to access employment that violates their visa conditions. The system creates a precise economy where informality itself stratifies by citizenship, each practice priced according to who can perform it.

#### 4.3.4. Connecting to Developmental Capitalism and Racial Citizenship

This stratification of informality demonstrates how developmental states create rather than eliminate informal economies, structuring them through citizenship categories that produce racialized outcomes without explicit racial policy. The Singapore state doesn’t prohibit

Bangladeshis from phantom work through racial exclusion but through administrative requirements – CPF accounts, business registration, documentary privileges – that only citizens can access. These administrative categories achieve what colonial racial hierarchies accomplished more explicitly: Chinese Singaporeans systematically become contractors managing South Asian workers who can never challenge their position.

This connects directly to how contractors function as essential intermediaries in developmental capitalism. They don't simply bridge between state and market or formal and informal; they manage hierarchies of informality that generate value through differentiated access to profitable practices. Their position at the apex of these hierarchies, able to perform all categories of informal practice while managing others' more limited violations, makes them indispensable. The state depends on contractors to absorb the contradictions between its competing imperatives: maintaining legitimacy through regulatory control while enabling rapid development through flexible labour, promising citizen employment while depending on foreign workers, proclaiming rule of law while requiring systematic informal practices.

This analysis advances the understanding of intermediaries beyond conventional brokerage theory. Contractors don't simply connect different actors or translate between incompatible systems. They actively maintain the citizenship hierarchies that structure informal economies, profiting from the graduated access to informality that these hierarchies create. Their essential function includes managing who can engage in which informal practices, ensuring that citizens accumulate through documentation, PRs coordinate through supervision, and workers remain available for exploitation. The informal economy they coordinate constitutes the actual infrastructure through which Singapore's developmental capitalism operates – structured, stratified, and systematically producing the inequalities that make rapid development possible.

The racial dimensions of this system operate through administrative categories rather than explicit ethnic policies. Work permit allocations consistently channel workers along ethnic lines – Bangladeshis toward construction, Filipinos toward domestic work, PRC nationals toward service sectors. These patterns, while appearing to emerge from technical criteria like salary thresholds and skill classifications, produce predictable ethnic stratifications. Every construction site displays this hierarchy: Chinese contractors supervising Bangladeshi workers, with Malaysian or PRC intermediaries managing daily operations.

Singapore's graduated informality thus operates as infrastructure for developmental capitalism rather than deviation from it. The state creates sophisticated regulatory frameworks – dependency ratios, levy systems, quota allocations – that generate systematic informal practices. The theoretical implications extend beyond Singapore's specific case. Developmental states don't eliminate informality through institutional strength; they structure it through citizenship categories that create graduated access to profitable violations. This challenges both the developmental state literature's emphasis on bureaucratic competence (Evans 1995, Wade 1990) and informality studies that treat informal economies as undifferentiated spheres (Hart 1973). Singapore's construction industry demonstrates how strong states engineer informal economies that are carefully stratified, systematically structured, and essential rather than residual to developmental success. Contractors emerge as the essential intermediaries who manage these hierarchies, coordinating between different levels of informal possibility while maintaining the documentary fictions that preserve regulatory legitimacy.

This graduated informality extends the theoretical terrain of intermediary studies in specific ways. The brokerage scholarship traced in the introduction moved from seeing intermediaries

as transitional (Wolf, 1956, Boissevain, 1974) to recognizing them as constitutive (Stoler, 2002, Björkman, 2015) to understanding them as enabling capitalism's contradictions (Tsing, 2009, Kaminer, 2024). Singapore's contractors demonstrate something further: intermediaries who architect entire informal economies stratified by citizenship, where the ability to violate becomes itself a form of capital. The phantom worker earning CPF contributions, the PR supervisor managing illegal operations, the Bangladeshi worker subjected to violations – each occupies a precise position in what might be understood as an economy of illegality, where citizenship determines not just rights but whether one profits from violations or bears their costs.

### 4.4. State Knowledge and Strategic Accommodation

#### 4.4.1. What the State Knows

The Singapore state's relationship to informal practices in construction operates through documented awareness rather than ignorance. James Scott's (1998) influential argument in "Seeing Like a State" posits that high modernist schemes fail because states cannot perceive the informal practices essential to actual functioning. States create simplified, legible maps of reality – standardized forests, geometric cities, official employment records – that miss the complex informal arrangements through which societies actually operate. Yet Singapore's archives tell a different story. Officials see informal practices clearly, document them comprehensively, and choose selective tolerance rather than elimination.

The parliamentary record provides striking evidence of state knowledge. In 1989, Minister Dhanabalan acknowledged that the Ministry was "quite aware that there are contractors who have excess workers, who lend, as it were, workers to other contractors who need these

workers."[59] The phrasing matters; "lend, as it were" signals awareness that this lending violates work permit conditions while maintaining plausible distance through linguistic qualification. He continued: "We in the Ministry at one time did consider allocating different ratios of foreign workers depending on the type of construction activity. But this is very complicated and we decided in the end to settle for one ratio for all, and allow market forces to determine how the workers should be distributed."[60] Those "market forces" were the rental arrangements officials knew violated regulations. The Ministry chose simplified administration over accurate control, creating gaps they understood contractors would exploit.

This knowledge extends back to construction's earliest transformations. A 1975 Ministry of Labour report documented with bureaucratic precision the informal practices structuring the industry: "In Singapore, the kepala or labour-only sub-contractor system is widely practiced... The kepala system has worked in Singapore because it is uneconomical for main contractors to have a permanent workforce."[61] The report's authors understood exactly why informality persisted – permanent employment would make construction prohibitively expensive – yet recommended maintaining the system while gradually formalizing it.

Contemporary enforcement patterns demonstrate continued awareness. The 2009 MYE trading crackdown that netted 38 individuals wasn't random discovery but targeted enforcement. The Ministry of Manpower's press release noted they had "conducted surveillance over several months" and "gathered extensive evidence of systematic trading networks."[62] They knew who

[59] Mr S. Dhanabalan, Minister for National Development, statement during Budget debate on Ministry of National Development, *Singapore Parliament Reports*, vol. 59, sess. 1, sitting 10, col. 801 (11 March 1992), https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=008_19920311_S0002_T0003.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ministry of Labour, "Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry in Singapore," December 1975, pp. 31-32, National Library Board Singapore.
[62] Another man charged with abetting wife in phantom worker scam," Today, 26 August 2009, p. 34

was trading, at what prices, through which networks. The interesting question isn't why this particular crackdown occurred but why such crackdowns remain exceptional.

The state's knowledge operates through multiple channels of surveillance and documentation. The Controller of Work Permits maintains databases tracking every foreign worker – their employers, dormitory addresses, worksite assignments. The CPF Board records every contribution, creating trails of phantom workers whose employment patterns would be obviously suspicious to any algorithm checking for anomalies. The Building and Construction Authority requires daily reports of worker deployments on major projects. These systems generate comprehensive data about who works where, for whom, under what arrangements.

Private acknowledgments sometimes exceed public positions. Chong San's encounter with the MOM officer demonstrated this gap between official stance and operational knowledge. The officer who "threw papers" at the complaining worker, performed hostility toward the violation, then privately advised Chong San to "settle privately." This wasn't one rogue officer but systematic practice. Multiple contractors described similar experiences – public denunciation followed by private accommodation. The officers know which violations matter (those generating public complaints or media attention) and which to ignore (those enabling industry functioning).

This strategic accommodation reflects deeper calculations about developmental priorities. The state needs construction to happen quickly and cheaply to maintain Singapore's competitive position. Eliminating informal practices would require either accepting much higher construction costs (if using legal local labour) or acknowledging dependence on foreign workers (if formalizing current arrangements). Neither option serves political interests. Instead,

officials maintain what might be understood as calibrated illegibility, seeing clearly while claiming partial blindness, knowing precisely while acting imprecisely, documenting comprehensively while enforcing selectively.

Scott (1998) argues states fail when they cannot see informal practices that make their schemes functional. Singapore's state sees these practices comprehensively – through parliamentary acknowledgments, ministry reports, enforcement data – yet chooses strategic tolerance. The issue isn't legibility but the political economy of enforcement. Making informal practices fully legible would require choosing between contradictory imperatives: maintaining legitimacy through rule of law versus enabling development through regulatory flexibility. The state's solution is to see clearly while enforcing selectively, maintaining documentation of violations while allowing their continuation, creating elaborate surveillance systems while deploying them strategically.

This pattern extends beyond construction to suggest something fundamental about how developmental states operate. Strong bureaucratic capacity doesn't eliminate informality; it enables states to see informal practices clearly enough to manage them strategically. The Singapore state knows exactly which contractors trade MYEs, which employ phantom workers, which rent workers illegally. This knowledge becomes power – the ability to crack down when politically necessary while tolerating when economically essential. Contractors understand this dynamic perfectly. They operate informally knowing the state sees them, calculating that their violations serve state interests enough to avoid consistent enforcement. The informal economy persists through this mutual knowledge – the state knows contractors violate regulations, contractors know the state knows, both know the other knows, yet the

system continues because it serves both parties' interests while maintaining sufficient ambiguity for political legitimacy.

### 4.4.2. The Politics of Non-enforcement

#### The Technical Tendering of Political Problems

While Chapter 3 examined how training programs shaped contractor class formation, here I analyse how these same technical interventions generated the informal practices contractors manage. The Singapore state's response to construction labour shortages demonstrates how technical interventions generate the very informal practices they ostensibly seek to eliminate. Tania Li's (2007) concept of "rendering technical" traces how development programs convert complex political-economic problems into bounded technical problems amenable to expert intervention. Development identifies deficiencies – lack of skills, inadequate training, missing infrastructure – and proposes solutions – capacity building, vocational education, certification schemes. What gets excluded from this technical framing are the political relations and structural inequalities that created these "deficiencies." Singapore's construction sector exemplifies this process, then extends it: technical solutions don't resolve political problems but displace them into informal practices that contractors manage.

The fundamental political problem appeared starkly in the 1975 Ministry of Labour report: "Singaporeans refuse such jobs" in construction despite unemployment.[63] Minister Ong Pang Boon elaborated the contradiction at the 1975 Singapore Employers' Federation dinner: education had successfully created workers for "Government offices and business houses" while fostering "a white collar mentality that scorned technical work and manual labour."[64]

[63] Ministry of Labour, "Manpower Problems in the Construction Industry," December 1975, p. 17.
[64] "Speech by Mr. Ong Pang Boon, Minister for Labour at the Annual Dinner of the Singapore Employers' Federation," 18 October 1975, National Archives of Singapore, Press R/1975/Oct/18.

The state's own modernization project – universal education, English-language instruction, meritocratic advancement – had produced citizens who viewed construction work as degrading. This was a political problem about dignity, social status, and the meaning of development itself.

The state's response systematically converted this political problem into technical deficiencies. The Construction Industry Development Board launched training schemes offering certificates in bar-bending, formwork, and concrete finishing. The Vocational and Industrial Training Board created apprenticeship programs with monthly stipends. The Construction Brigade conscripted National Servicemen into building trades. Each intervention reframed citizen refusal as skills deficit rather than structural rejection. If Singaporeans wouldn't do construction, the logic went, perhaps trained Singaporeans would.

The technical solutions failed predictably. A 1984 review found that despite 635 graduates from construction training schemes, local participation remained below 40%.[65] Even with financial incentives – $300 monthly training allowances, guaranteed employment, progression pathways – citizens continued refusing construction work. The technical rendering couldn't address the underlying political reality: construction work signified failure in Singapore's meritocratic hierarchy.

Phantom workers emerged as the informal solution to this irresolvable political problem. They allowed the state to maintain the fiction that Singaporeans participated in construction while enabling the foreign worker employment that actual building required. Jimmy's aunties collecting CPF contributions solved what no amount of technical training could: the political impossibility of acknowledging that development depended entirely on foreign workers doing

[65] VITB Annual Report 1984, "Construction Training Outcomes," p. 45, National Archives of Singapore.

work citizens refused. The informal practice preserved political legitimacy while enabling economic functioning.

**SCAL's Political Mobilization**

The 1989 Thai worker repatriations demonstrated how political mobilization by contractors could override technical regulations, revealing the power dynamics underlying selective enforcement. The state had repatriated over 10,000 Thai construction workers for immigration violations, creating immediate labour shortages that threatened project completions.[66] The technical regulatory system – work permits, quotas, enforcement – had functioned as designed, removing workers who violated immigration rules. Yet the political-economic consequences proved unacceptable.

The Singapore Contractors Association Limited (SCAL) mobilized immediately. The SCAL President met directly with the Thai Ambassador, bypassing normal diplomatic channels.[67] The Executive Committee requested emergency meetings with the Construction Industry Development Board, Housing Development Board, and Ministry of Labour. Within days, SCAL's President was invited to write directly to Minister Lee Yock Suan, explaining contractors' position on the "foreign worker problem." This was political intervention at the highest levels.

SCAL's arguments were explicitly political rather than technical. They warned of construction delays affecting public housing, threatening the state's core legitimacy promise. They highlighted potential diplomatic tensions with Thailand, a regional partner. They mobilized

[66] "Govt relaxes quota on foreign construction workers," The Straits Times, 18 April 1989, p. 29.
[67] "Thai envoy seeks solution to foreign workers problem," Business Times, 7 April 1989, p. 20. Microfilm Reel NL16529.

member companies to document projected losses, creating economic pressure. The association's power came from its concentrated representation of capital interests – the major contractors who actually built Singapore's infrastructure – rather than any technical expertise about labour management.

The state's response revealed how quickly political pressure could override technical regulations. Within two weeks of SCAL's mobilization, the government announced multiple concessions. Work permit processing would be expedited from three months to two weeks.[68] The dependency ratio of 1:1 (one foreign worker per local worker) would be reviewed for "flexibility." Most remarkably, the 9,800 repatriated Thai workers would be allowed to return on "amnesty" with priority over other applicants.[69] The technical violations that had justified their deportation suddenly disappeared through political accommodation.

The speed of this accommodation revealed the state's operational priorities. The Construction Industry Development Board doubled its staff from three to six persons to process the surge in applications. Within two weeks, CIDB approved more than 2,000 foreign work permits – for the very workers just deported.[70] The Thai ambassador had initially proposed government-to-government labour arrangements to bypass problematic agents, but CIDB deflected this to SCAL, arguing contractors would be more well-versed about the needs of the industry. This delegation of diplomatic labour relations to a trade association demonstrated how deeply the state relied on contractors not just for construction but for managing the foreign worker system itself.

[68] "Govt relaxes quota on foreign construction workers," The Straits Times, Gerry de Silva, 18 April 1989, p. 29.
[69] Ibid., p. 26.
[70] Relief in sight for construction industry," Business Times, 18 April 1989, p. 1.

SCAL's political intervention demonstrates how intermediaries shape rather than respond to regulatory environments. The brokerage literature traced in the introduction positions intermediaries as navigating structures others create. Colonial compradors operated within imperial trade monopolies they couldn't challenge (Trocki, 1990). Contemporary labour brokers manage migration flows through policies they don't influence (Xiang, 2007). Singapore's contractors actively reconstruct regulatory frameworks through political mobilization. When SCAL secured amnesty for 10,000 deported Thai workers, allowing them to return with priority despite their violations, they didn't adapt to immigration rules but negotiated exceptions that preserved formal regulations while enabling informal workarounds. The state maintained its deportation policies on paper while creating the "one-off concession" that effectively nullified them. This political capacity to secure exceptions through organized pressure marks a fundamental difference in intermediary power. Colonial brokers depended on imperial patronage that could be withdrawn arbitrarily (Butcher, 1979). Neoliberal labour brokers operate through temporary licenses states revoke when politically expedient (Jones, 2014). Singapore's contractors mobilize collective capital through SCAL to make the state dependent on their cooperation. This structural leverage, the ability to make their interests synonymous with national development, transforms intermediaries from marginal figures into essential infrastructure whose demands generate "flexibility" in otherwise rigid rules.

This episode established patterns that persist today. When contractors mobilize politically – through SCAL, through connections to ministers, through threats of project delays – enforcement softens. The technical regulatory apparatus remains in place, creating elaborate frameworks of quotas, levies, and restrictions. Yet these technical mechanisms yield consistently to political pressure when contractors demonstrate that enforcement would disrupt development.

**The Productivity Paradox**

The state's decades-long campaign to improve construction productivity exemplifies how technical framings perpetuate rather than resolve political contradictions. Since the 1980s, successive initiatives have promised to reduce foreign worker dependence through technical improvements – mechanization, prefabrication, digitalization. The Building and Construction Authority's Construction Productivity Roadmap (2010) set targets for 2-3% annual productivity growth.[71] Each program reframes political dependence on foreign workers as technical deficiency in productivity methods.

Yet, productivity in construction has remained stagnant or declined despite these investments. From 2000 – 2009, construction productivity growth averaged only 0.4% per year.[72] The technical solutions – automated equipment, digital planning systems, prefabricated components – exist and function. Contractors purchase them, often with government subsidies, then continue employing foreign workers at previous levels. The machinery sits idle while workers perform tasks manually. The political reality persists: productivity improvements would reduce employment for foreign workers whose presence, while politically problematic, remains economically essential.

Contractors understand this paradox. During my fieldwork, several explained their calculations regarding automation. "Government give grant to buy machine," one noted, "so we buy. But machine need skilled operator, maintenance, specific conditions. Foreign worker more flexible, can do many things, no breakdown." The technical frame assumes contractors seek efficiency.

[71] Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, "Speech at Opening of the Third Singapore Construction Productivity Week," 31 July 2013, Ministry of Finance Singapore, https://www.mof.gov.sg/news-publications/speeches/Speech-By-Mr-Tharman-Shanmugaratnam-Deputy-Prime-Minister-Minister-For-Finance-At-Opening-Of-The-Third-Singapore-Construction-Productivity-Week.
[72] Ibid.

The political economy ensures they seek flexibility – the ability to scale up for projects, down during slumps, sideways into different trades as markets shift. Foreign workers provide this flexibility.

Industry leaders had long warned about these contradictions. In 1994, when the government proposed raising levies from $40 to $440 for unskilled workers, SCAL President Kong Mun Kwong questioned whether "applying a pricing mechanism in an imperfect market was the perfect solution" to the problem of the construction industry's heavy reliance on unskilled workers. He said, "Singapore keeps applying that measure to the problem. But it's quite hard to know if it's having the desired effect, given the unknown number of 'phantom' or illegal workers on the construction site."[73] Higher levies, he argued, would simply make illegal hiring more profitable: 'When the reward is sufficiently high, the temptation is to hire even more such workers.' His prediction proved accurate. Each levy increase correlated with expanded black markets rather than reduced foreign worker dependence.[74]

Indeed, contractors justified the use of illegal workers by arguing that cost pressures were high, as competition was stiff, and profit margins were narrow. Other contractors argued that they were "forced" to turn to illegals because of the tight ceilings imposed.[75] The Minister for Home Affairs Mr Wong Kan Seng referred to these reasons as "cop-outs", citing data that contractors found to be employing illegal foreign workers had not breached their 1:5 ceiling then.[76] Instead, contractors' belligerence was attributed to their desire to avoid the levy – "The economics of it is the root of their desire to beat the system," said Mr Wong. By 1995, the levy for both skilled and unskilled workers had risen significantly, thus creating a large gap between the "real" wage

[73] Higher foreign worker levy 'may backfire', The Straits Times, 1 December 1994, p. 36.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Illegal workers: Stemming the tide, Straits Times (Overseas ed), Zuraidah Ibrahim, 4 November 1995, p. 14.
[76] Ibid.

of the worker and the wage costs employers had to pay. The combination of levies and the unequal bargaining power of "illegal" workers meant wage differences between "legal" and "illegal" workers could be significant – while a plasterer who could earn $1500 legally would be only be paid about $600 a month as an illegal, thus saving employers not just the $200 levy (for skilled workers) but an additional $700 on pay.[77]

Minister Wong diagnosed the problem correctly – economics drove violations – but the state's response ignored its own diagnosis. Rather than reconsidering levies that created $900 monthly savings per illegal worker, officials intensified enforcement while raising levies further. The contradiction was deliberate. The state maintained policies producing profitable violations, then managed illegality through selective crackdowns. Each enforcement operation performed regulatory competence while preserving the economic incentives generating violations. What officials called contractor "belligerence" was rational response to policy contradictions the state engineered but refused to resolve.

The rendering technical thus operates as a cycle. Political problems (citizens won't do construction) get converted to technical deficiencies (lack of skills/productivity). Technical solutions (training/mechanization) fail to resolve political problems. Informal practices (phantom workers/illegal employment) emerge to manage what technical solutions cannot. The state sees these informal practices, occasionally enforces against them, but ultimately tolerates them because they solve the original political problem while maintaining technical legitimacy. Contractors profit from managing this cycle, transforming each technical intervention into new opportunities for informal practice.

[77] Ibid.

This analysis extends Li's framework by showing how rendering technical doesn't simply depoliticize development problems; it displaces them into informal domains that intermediaries manage. The state can claim to be addressing construction's challenges through technical improvements while contractors handle the political reality through informal practices. This division of labour, where the state maintains legitimacy through technical programs, and where contractors enable functioning through informal violations, makes both parties dependent on the arrangement's continuation. The politics of non-enforcement thus reflects deeper structural dependencies where technical legitimacy requires informal functionality, making contractors essential intermediaries between political impossibilities and economic necessities.

### 4.5. Networks of Informality

#### 4.5.1. The Geography of Informal Labour

In the 1990s, a bus stop near Woodlands became something more than a transit point. Located kilometres from the Causeway that bridges Singapore to Malaysia, it transformed each dawn into an informal labour exchange. Darren described this to me in his Ubi office, surrounded by air-conditioning units awaiting installation, his voice carrying the matter-of-factness of someone recounting established history. "Workers crossed from Malaysia on social visit passes – supposed to be tourists, visiting family. By 5 AM, maybe 6, they're waiting at this bus stop. Malaysian Chinese who knew construction, Thais who'd heard about opportunities, some Bangladeshi on tourist visas taking their chances."

Contractors would arrive in trucks, knowing exactly where to find immediate labour. The negotiations happened quickly, a choreography refined through repetition. Daily rates got settled in mixed languages – Malay, Mandarin, broken English – while workers assessed whether this contractor seemed reliable, whether that truck looked like it was heading to a safe

site. “You need workers urgently, you go there,” Darren explained. “Everyone knew about Woodlands.” The system operated through embodied knowledge rather than written rules. Workers learned which contractors paid promptly, what rates reflected desperation versus standard pricing.

Twenty kilometres south, Serangoon market hosted another node in this geography. Mohan had used this pickup point in 2000, before his six-month imprisonment for hiring undocumented workers made him more cautious. “Through a friend, I got to know about Serangoon. These workers come on tourist visas, sit around waiting at what we called the depot.” The word “depot” suggested infrastructure – a regular location with known functions, operating hours, established practices.

These gathering points formed a parallel system to the state’s official foreign worker infrastructure. The Ministry of Manpower maintained work permit application centres in austere government buildings, their fluorescent-lit halls filled with forms and queue numbers. The informal pickup points operated in the half-light of dawn, under trees and bus shelters, through handshakes and verbal agreements. Official channels required weeks of processing, medical examinations, security clearances. The bus stops provided bodies ready to work within minutes. Both systems functioned simultaneously, each aware of the other, maintaining boundaries that allowed coexistence.

### 4.5.2. The Architecture of Parallel Markets

By 2023, the MYE trading network had evolved characteristics that mirror formal commodity markets. The stable price of $3,000 per man-year suggested equilibrium between supply and demand, with sufficient participants to enable price discovery. Specialized brokers like Madam

Tan, whom Eric described as always having “lobang,” operated with professional consistency that marked her as infrastructure rather than mere participant.

This market sophistication demonstrates how contractors construct parallel institutions that serve functions the formal system cannot acknowledge. The MYE black market processes thousands of transactions annually, moving millions of dollars, creating liquidity in what the state designed as non-transferable allocations. These transactions enable the construction industry to reconcile temporal mismatches – projects needing hundreds of workers for three months, then dozens for a year – that rigid annual quotas cannot accommodate. Contractors have built a market that solves problems the state created through regulatory design, profiting from their ability to maintain this parallel system alongside official compliance.

The phantom worker system similarly evolved institutional regularities that ensure predictable operation. Standard rates emerged through collective practice – $200-300 monthly CPF contributions calibrated to pass scrutiny while minimizing costs. Ideal phantom profiles became established knowledge transmitted through contractor networks. Scripts for potential questioning circulated as oral tradition, each contractor learning from others’ experiences with inspection. This systematization transforms individual violations into collective infrastructure, making phantom workers a reliable business input rather than desperate improvisation.

### 4.5.3. Value Through Translation

Contractors extract value through sophisticated code-switching between formal and informal registers. The same contractor submits English tender documents dense with technical specifications, coordinates workers in Tamil or Bengali, negotiates with suppliers in Mandarin, and shares intelligence with competitors in Hokkien. Each linguistic register carries institutional possibilities: English enables official business, dialects generate trust for sensitive

transactions, Tamil or Bengali manage labour relations. This multilingual capacity represents more than communication skill; it constitutes the technical expertise of intermediation itself.

The translation work extends beyond language to institutional registers. During morning coffee shop sessions, contractors share information about MOM enforcement patterns in dialect-coded warnings. By afternoon, they submit compliance documents to those same agencies they spent the morning evading. Evening drinking sessions at Kim San Bistro see them negotiating informal worker loans that their morning documentation explicitly prohibits. Each translation between formal compliance and informal functionality generates value – the ability to promise project completion through channels competitors cannot access, to maintain workforce flexibility that regulations prohibit, to operate efficiently within inefficient systems.

This positions contractors as essential intermediaries whose value derives from maintaining rather than resolving incompatibilities. The formal system provides legitimacy necessary for business operation: licenses, permits, contracts that make construction legally possible. The informal system provides functionality necessary for economic viability: flexibility, responsiveness, cost structures that make construction profitable. Contractors profit from preventing these systems' convergence, extracting rent from their position as sole translators between incompatible requirements.

### 4.5.4. Reproducing Systematic Dependencies

The parallel infrastructures contractors maintain have become so robust that both state and market depend on their continuation. Developers depend on informal worker rental systems to meet project deadlines that formal employment could never achieve. The state needs phantom workers to maintain the fiction of citizen participation while enabling foreign worker employment. Each dependency reinforces contractors' intermediary position.

This systematic entrenchment challenges conventional understandings of institutional development. Modernization theory assumes informal practices gradually formalize as institutions strengthen. Singapore's construction industry demonstrates the opposite. Informal practices have become more sophisticated, more essential, and more profitable as the state's regulatory apparatus has expanded. Every new regulation creates opportunities for informal arbitrage. Each enforcement campaign reinforces the value of knowing which violations matter when. The elaboration of formal rules multiplies the gaps that contractors monetize.

The complete failure of official targets underscores this permanence. In 1982, Lee Kuan Yew announced Singapore would achieve a 'wholly Singaporean workforce without any work permit holder by 1991.'[78] By 1992, the industry still employed 'more than 100,000 construction workers, overwhelmingly foreign,' with policies that could 'in theory at least, increase their number by another 60%.'[79] The state's abandonment of its zero-foreign-worker target reveals how informal practices had become so essential that even authoritarian planning could not eliminate them.

The permanence of these arrangements becomes clear through their temporal persistence. The Woodlands pickup point that Darren described operated through the 1990s. Serangoon market served similar functions into the 2000s. Today's WhatsApp groups and coffee shop networks represent technological updates to practices that have structured construction labour for decades. The specific locations and communication methods evolve while the fundamental pattern – parallel institutions managing what formal systems cannot – remains constant.

[78] "Target: Wholly Spore workforce," The Straits Times, 1 January 1982, p. 1.
[79] "Construction's salve," Business Times, 18 September 1992, p. 10.

This persistence demonstrates how contractors function as essential infrastructure for developmental capitalism. They manage contradictions between the state's competing imperatives through informal practices that enable both rapid development and political legitimacy. Their networks don't simply facilitate transactions between other parties; they constitute the actual mechanisms through which Singapore's construction industry operates. The coffee shops, WhatsApp groups, and evening drinking sessions form an institutional architecture as essential as government agencies or industry associations. Contractors create and maintain these parallel systems, profiting from their position as the only actors capable of operating across both formal and informal domains simultaneously.

### 4.6. Conclusion: Informality as Infrastructure

Singapore's contractors illuminate three theoretical advances in understanding intermediaries under developmental capitalism. First, against the brokerage literature's focus on bridging institutional gaps, this chapter demonstrates intermediaries who maintain gaps as profit sources. The separation between formal compliance and informal functionality becomes a condition contractors actively preserve rather than resolve. Second, extending racial capitalism scholarship that traces differentiation through explicit hierarchies (Robinson 1983) or administrative categories (Lowe 2015), Singapore shows how citizenship itself becomes commodified through informal practices. Only citizens can sell their documentary existence as phantom workers; only permit holders can be subjected to rental economies. Third, building on Tsing's (2009) supply chain capitalism where value emerges from translation between incompatible systems, Singapore's contractors transform regulatory instruments themselves into value-generating mechanisms. The MYE becomes a commodity, the work permit a rental asset, the CPF account a revenue stream.

These advances reposition intermediaries within developmental capitalism. Classical brokerage theory saw them as transitional figures awaiting institutional obsolescence (Wolf 1956; Boissevain 1974). Recent scholarship locates them at capitalism's margins, managing failures and gaps in global systems (Tsing 2009; Roitman 2005). Even scholars who recognized intermediaries' constitutive power maintained evolutionary assumptions about their eventual elimination. Stoler (2002) demonstrated how colonial clerks created the racial categories structuring imperial rule, yet positioned this as a historical process giving way to modern bureaucracy. Björkman (2015) showed Mumbai fixers producing political constituencies through water connections, generating the very networks they claimed to broker, yet framed this as institutional failure awaiting formalization.

Singapore's contractors constitute something different: essential infrastructure for developmental capitalism's core operations. The state deliberately engineers conditions making intermediaries indispensable. The MYE system creates artificial scarcity that becomes commodified. Dependency ratios assume citizen participation while knowing citizens refuse construction work. Work permit restrictions bond workers to employers while construction requires flexible deployment. Each regulation generates predictable violations that contractors transform into business models. The state sees these violations clearly, as documented throughout this chapter, yet maintains the regulatory structures producing them.

This deliberate production of informality serves specific functions. The state achieves contradictory goals simultaneously: maintaining political legitimacy through citizen employment requirements while depending on foreign workers, proclaiming rule of law while requiring systematic violations, promising worker protection while enabling exploitation that keeps costs competitive. Contractors absorb these contradictions into business practices that

maintain formal compliance alongside systematic violation. They bear risks of illegality while the state maintains plausible deniability. They manage foreign workers whose presence remains politically problematic yet economically essential.

The specificity of who becomes contractors reveals the citizenship hierarchies structuring this system. Citizens monopolize documentary violations – phantom workers, company registration, MYE trading. Permanent residents occupy supervisory positions, coordinating informal practices without bearing full liability. Work permit holders exist as objects of violation, subjected to rental economies and wage theft without recourse. These patterns emerge from citizenship categories that appear administratively neutral while producing predictable ethnic outcomes. Chinese Singaporeans become contractors managing Bangladeshi workers who cannot challenge their position, a hierarchy maintained through regulatory design rather than explicit racial policy.

The practices themselves demonstrate institutional sophistication. The MYE black market operates with price discovery, product differentiation, and credit arrangements mirroring formal commodity markets. Phantom worker systems have standardized rates, established profiles, rehearsed scripts ensuring predictable operation. Worker rental networks redistribute labour through normalized practices more efficient than formal mechanisms. These mature institutions have operated for decades, evolving greater sophistication as regulations expand.

Contractors profit from translating between parallel systems. They submit English tender documents while coordinating workers in Tamil. They maintain safety certifications while knowing actual practices violate every protocol. They present formal documentation for state inspection while operating through informal networks. This translation generates value – the

ability to underbid competitors constrained by compliance, to access projects through quota manipulations, to promise delivery through channels others cannot utilize. If formal and informal systems converged, if regulations matched reality, contractors would lose their intermediary function.

These informal practices require sophisticated coordination that transforms competition into selective cooperation. The same contractors who undercut each other in tender submissions loan workers during crises. Morning rivals become evening partners when projects exceed individual capacity. This paradox of competing while colluding structures Singapore's construction industry through mechanisms conventional market analysis cannot capture. What appears as illegal collusion – coordinated bidding, territorial agreements, information sharing violating competition law – actually enables the industry to function given its regulatory contradictions. Chapter 5 examines how contractors manage these collusive arrangements, maintaining sufficient competition to avoid scrutiny while coordinating enough to ensure mutual survival. These practices constitute another form of informal infrastructure, as essential to the industry's functioning as the MYE markets and phantom workers they coordinate.

## 5: Collusion

At 8am, the parking lot of Super Cool Airconditioning is packed with company vans. Migrant workers dressed in jeans and navy company polo shirts mill around, some squatting by the roadside, others standing in small groups around the few benches. In the distance, a caretaker offers joss sticks to a Hindu shrine, one of many makeshift altars scattered throughout this industrial estate on Singapore's periphery. This is a typical morning in Singapore's construction industry, where beneath the veneer of formal contracts and regulated competition lies a messier reality of personal relationships, informal agreements, and grey practices.

A month into my fieldwork at Super Cool, I was suddenly called into Adam's office to help prepare a tender document. The team was about to prepare for an upcoming tender, and they wanted my help. From the start, I was made aware that this was no ordinary tender document, nor was this an ordinary process. The invitation to tender was issued by an American firm, a multi-national company with premises around the world. Super Cool had in fact been managing their premises since 2013, conducting regular maintenance and repair services for their air-conditioning and also providing handymen services. The workers assigned to this team had been brought in from their various home countries for precisely this project, and now that the original contract had expired, their jobs were now on the line. Though Super Cool won this contract before, Adam explained that since then, there had been quite a few changes in the way contracts were awarded. Whereas only the Singapore branch office manager was in charge of selecting the local contractor, now, the American head office also wanted a say, and made the Singaporean branch manager introduce "proper procedures" like issuing a formal tender proposal contractors had to complete. In addition, contractors also had to attend interviews, which were common, and give presentations, which were less so. Furthermore, there was a big emphasis on ethics, a point which made me very curious.

After all, all my experience with those involved in the industry seemed to suggest that ethics was at the bottom of everyone's concerns, and if it was mentioned, it was mostly as a means for flashy CSR or as a way to cover their own asses. For an industry that revolved so much around "dollars and cents", a constant refrain in everyday conversations here, 'ethics' seemed to be the most unlikely criteria that could possibly surface in a tender document. The American client however seemed to pride itself on its commitments to ethics. Yet, I found the whole tender document absurd. After all, there was no way for the client to ascertain how "ethical" the contractors were, apart from relying on motherhood statements I drafted that talked about Super Cool's "commitment to harmony" and generic information on communication standards, escalation policies, and the occasional welfare events organized that were par for the course for any company. More cynically, I also thought that for all their lip service to ethics, the realities of an open, competitive tender invitation exercise would mean that contractors would be pressured to lower costs as much as possible in order to clinch the project. In fact, like most tenders, the price was weighted as the most important criteria, at 50%. Thus, I can't help but feel that ultimately, "dollars and cents" would still trump "ethics", making this whole exercise a pointless attempt at virtue-signalling.

I also had to draft a contractor's statement, ascertaining that all the information was true, and that Super Cool would accept all the terms and conditions listed in the RFP (Request for Proposal) without exception or reservation. The wording of the document troubled me. I thought it was unfair that Super Cool had to bear so much risk and liability without any possibility for recourse. I was reminded of what another interlocuter, Darren, also a towkay of an air-conditioning firm, previously told me, "We have to promise our customers the sun and moon, but what do they promise me? Nothing!" The requirement for Super Cool to sign a

statement accepting all the terms and conditions of the RFP without exception or reservation starkly illustrates the one-sided nature of many contracting relationships in the industry. By forcing contractors to bear all the risk and liability for the project, without any reciprocal commitments or safeguards from the client, this requirement creates a highly asymmetric and precarious situation for intermediaries.

From a moral economy perspective, this arrangement violates the basic principles of reciprocity, fairness, and risk-sharing that underpin many traditional economic relationships. In agrarian societies, for example, landlords and tenants were bound by customary obligations and moral expectations that ensured a degree of mutual support and protection in times of hardship. The unilateral nature of the RFP, in contrast, absolves the client of any moral responsibility towards the selected contractor, reducing the relationship to a purely transactional and legalistic one. This asymmetry in risk and liability creates a strong incentive for contractors to engage in collusive practices as a means of managing uncertainty and protecting their interests. Faced with the prospect of bearing all the downside risk of a project, contractors may feel justified in collaborating with competitors to fix prices, share information, or allocate markets, in order to reduce their exposure and ensure a predictable flow of work.

From a political economy perspective, the unequal distribution of risk and reward in the construction industry reflects broader power imbalances and structural inequalities within developmental states that depend on intermediaries to manage contradictions between formal regulations and operational demands. The ability of clients to dictate the terms of contracts and shift risk onto intermediaries is a function of their greater bargaining power and market position, which in turn is shaped by factors such as access to capital, political connections, and legal resources. The precarity and vulnerability of intermediaries, in contrast, is exacerbated

by the intense competition and low margins that prevail in the industry, as well as by the lack of effective legal protections and collective bargaining mechanisms. In this context, collusive practices can be seen as a form of informal regulation and risk-sharing, a way for intermediaries to level the playing field and assert some control over their economic fate.

Later, Adam calls me into his office to discuss the proposal. Adam's office is replete with photos of him on previous company trips, various certificates, and industry trophies he has accumulated. He sits me down in his sofa area and tells me, and as we go over the document, he sighs. "Previously, there was no need for these kinds of troublesome tender documents, but the guy tells me now the Americans have made changes. Now they want to go through the proper procedures, so the guy had to write this document." I am confused however how Adam knew about this, as this is an internal procedure. Adam looks shiftily around the room and checks to make sure the office door is closed, before telling me in low tones. "I went lunch with him yesterday," he says, explaining that the Singapore branch manager had already invited him for tea at a one-on-one meeting yesterday. "And why would he do that?" I blurt out, again, confused as to why the branch manager should want to meet a contractor privately, especially as the tender document specifically instructed that all communication was to be done over email. "Because he wants Super Cool to get," Adam says casually. "We've worked with them for so long, there's a kind of chemistry already. It's the upstairs, the American, bosses that are fussy, so now we have to write all of this."

"Look," Adam says, fishing around in his pocket. "He even handed me this." He takes out a thumb drive and plugs it into his desktop. "The indicative price, the timeline, all the necessary information is there," Adam says. "Isn't it illegal?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even. Adam looks at me, then turns back to the computer screen. "Yes," he says casually. "He even handed

me a thumb drive." Adam plugs the thumb drive into the computer and opens the documents inside in front of me. "This guy very daring," Adam says. The whole episode troubles me greatly, and as I return to my desk, I am still mulling over what Adam said, and my complicity in the whole process. The ironies of us writing about 'our commitment towards ethics' whilst participating in these practices was not lost on me.

It was only after I talked to several other contractors about various collusive practices that I was able to revisit this episode with renewed insight. These contractors, some of whom I discuss at length in the next section, regarded collusion with a rather blasé attitude, seeing it from the point of survival, or friendship, rather than as an unsavoury practice that was illegal or immoral. They explained that in some cases like this, when the senior management wanted to introduce an open tender invitation process, but when the local officers already had a contractor they like in mind, it was not uncommon for them to go out of their way to assist them through such means. In fact, some officers might even deliberately call up other contractors who are close friends and asking them for "phantom" quotations, who deliberately mark up their prices to ensure the officer's desired contractor wins. The fact that some local officers go out of their way to assist favoured contractors suggests that collusion is not simply a bottom-up phenomenon driven by the self-interest of contractors, but also a top-down one shaped by the preferences and actions of those in positions of power. The moral economy of collusion is therefore not separate from the formal structures and processes of the industry. The open tender system, ostensibly designed to promote fair competition and transparency, is used here as a tool for facilitating and legitimizing collusive behaviour, by creating a veneer of procedural regularity while allowing for the informal manipulation of outcomes behind the scenes.

Anthropological studies of corruption, patronage, and gift exchange in various cultural and institutional contexts (Haller and Shore 2005; Ledeneva 2006) show how practices that are seen as corrupt or inefficient from a purely economic or legal standpoint can be rationalized and legitimized through cultural norms and social obligations. For example, Haller and Shore (2005) argue that the exchange of gifts and favours among politicians and businessmen in many societies is not simply a matter of individual greed or lack of integrity, but is rooted in traditions of hospitality, honour, and mutual aid. Similarly, Ledeneva (2006) shows how the informal practice of "blat" in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, involving the use of personal connections to access scarce goods and services, was not merely a survival strategy or a form of corruption, but also a way of building social capital in the face of a dysfunctional state bureaucracy. Gupta (2012) too argues that corruption is not a deviation from normal politics, but is embedded in the everyday practices and relationships through which the state is constituted and reproduced. Likewise, collusive practices can therefore be seen as a way of mitigating the inherent uncertainties and moral hazards of the construction industry, in a context where formal regulations and legal protections are seen as inadequate or unreliable.

As I helped draft ethical commitment statements while surrounded by evidence of bid-rigging, I realized I was witnessing something more complex than simple corruption. The same Adam who violated tender protocols also agonized over worker welfare, refusing contracts that would exploit his employees and worrying about the fourteen men whose jobs depended on winning this bid. The local branch manager who handed over confidential information did so not for personal gain but to maintain a relationship built over years of reliable service. Yet Adam's moral positioning also served strategic purposes he may not have fully articulated. His reputation for "taking care of workers" generated loyalty that reduced turnover and training

costs. His refusal of certain corrupt practices distinguished him from competitors who might eventually face prosecution. His genuine concern for the fourteen workers was inseparable from his concern for the client relationship their continued employment would preserve. Moral reasoning and economic calculation were not opposed but intertwined, each reinforcing the other in ways that makes their separation analytically misleading.

This chapter examines how collusion emerges from contractors' essential intermediary functions within Singapore's developmental capitalism. Where Chapter 4 analysed how contractors manage vertical relationships with the state through informal practices like phantom workers and MYE trading, this chapter traces horizontal coordination among competitors – sharing confidential information, coordinating bids, allocating markets. Through ethnographic analysis of Adam's story and that of Darren, another contractor I met through the informal networks that bind Singapore's construction industry, I argue that collusive practices cannot be understood simply as market failures or individual corruption. Instead, they emerge from the intersection of moral economies – systems of reciprocity, loyalty, and obligation – with the structural pressures contractors face as intermediaries who must coordinate between incompatible institutional demands.

Drawing on anthropological approaches to moral economy (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976) and political economy perspectives on capitalist development, I show how contractors navigate between competing moral claims: obligations to workers, loyalty to business partners, and survival pressures within highly competitive markets. Rather than treating moral and political economy as opposed frameworks, I demonstrate how they intersect in the daily practices of intermediation, where personal relationships become economic resources and ethical calculations shape business strategy.

This analysis contributes to broader debates about how developmental capitalism depends on intermediaries who coordinate across fragmented production networks. By examining collusion not as deviance but as a product of specific moral-political configurations, the chapter shows how Singapore's development model depends on forms of coordination that operate both within and beyond formal market mechanisms – coordination that formal institutions cannot provide but developmental success requires.

### 5.1. Adam's Story: The Tender Process

The stakes of the project were made clear to me by Denpo, who calls me into the private meeting room later that afternoon under the auspices of an "interview". Once the wooden sliding door was shut, Denpo proceeds to rant about work. "Adam really, really wants to get this project," Denpo explains, he is worried about what will happen to the men if they fail to do so. Currently, they have 14 staff attached to this project, and if they fail to be re-awarded this tender, the men will have to be let go. "This is why he is so panicked about the wording, about the documents," Denpo concludes. I was confused about why the failure to clinch this project would lead to the removal of these workers, and Denpo explained that of the 14 men, only the 2 supervisors were trained in AC/MV (air-conditioning and mechanical ventilation) systems. The remaining 12 were essentially glorified handymen who could not be easily redeployed to other projects within Super Cool as they lacked technical training. While they would do their best to help the 12 men secure internal transfers, it was also contingent on the other departments wanting to hire them. As such, both Adam and Denpo were fretting about the futures of these workers, stressing about the outcomes of renewing this project.

The next morning, I found Adam on the smoking balcony, coffee in hand, staring pensively at the construction cranes moving materials across the skyline. The tender deadline loomed, but

he remained tormented by pricing decisions that had kept him awake all weekend. The confidential pricing information showed their competitors had been working at $798,000 for five years. But COVID-19 had driven up material and labour costs significantly. Yulia's calculations indicated they needed $870,000 to make even a modest profit; at $800,000, they would barely break even.

"I'm afraid of making the wrong decision," Adam admitted, pulling out his pink identity card to show me his recent birthday, a celebration he'd been too stressed to enjoy. Adam's dilemma reflected the precarious position of intermediaries in Singapore's construction ecosystem. Like the peasants in Scott's Southeast Asian studies, contractors prioritized survival and the welfare of dependents over profit maximization. But unlike traditional peasant communities, contractors faced competing moral claims from multiple directions: upward to clients and company owners, downward to workers, and laterally to industry peers. The pressure intensified when Adam realized Yulia had miscalculated, basing projections on eleven workers instead of fourteen. "Now you know how this is done," Adam said with a wry smile, though his anxiety was palpable. He made me promise to keep quiet when Yulia called, indicating the sensitivity of pricing information even within the company. This was an example of local knowledge (Geertz, 1979), where insider information constituted a form of social capital essential for survival in uncertain markets.

Adam's moral reasoning emerged most clearly when he contrasted current practices with those of "old-timers." "I had a previous client," Adam recounted, and I wonder where he is going with the story. "The client wants my workers to moonlight at other places, to do tasks like painting, something which is clearly an MOM offence. When I found out, I made sure to tell them over a Zoom meeting, which I recorded, that it was illegal, and lay out all the

consequences. That made me reconsider whether to continue the contract with them." He pauses, inhaling his cigarette, leaving a trail smoke in the air. "What happens if our workers get injured while deployed at those sites?" Adam says. "No matter how careful you are, you will always be found out eventually."

"Another time, in exchange for securing a contract, we were asked to mark up our prices deliberately so we could pay the clients an under-the-table sum in return. The old-timers, they are okay with this. But the younger ones nowadays, they think differently. Yulia, Denpo, Li Yin, they were all opposed to do this, so I decided to withdraw from our partnership. Even my younger son, when I told him, told me sternly, you can't do this, that's an offence. In the end, we withdrew, and they gave it to another contractor, a small company. The old-timers, they dare to do it." Despite the potential profit, Adam had walked away from the contract. His decision to withdraw from that partnership cost them business but preserved what he saw as essential moral boundaries. But the nostalgia with which Adam refers to "old-timers" makes me wonder if he secretly envisions himself as one of them, hampered only by these younger sensibilities.

"People say Singapore got no corruption. Bullshit one," Adam continues. "I'm sure some of these practices must not be new to you, your father must have encountered them at some point." I admit that my father has indeed explained some of the more common practices that occurred – based on hearsay from friends – back in the day, although everyone complains about how much harder it is for them to do so these days. Still, Adam's anecdotes suggests that a thriving under-the-table economy is still taking place. These stories highlight the contested nature of moral economy within Singapore's construction industry. Adam's reference to "old-timers" who "dare to do it" suggested generational tensions over acceptable business practices, echoing

Thompson's analysis of how moral economies evolve through struggle between competing ethical frameworks. The "old-timers'" pragmatic acceptance of corruption existed in tension with younger workers' more rigid ethical standards, forcing contractors like Adam to navigate between different moral worlds.

Curiously, Adam's adherence to certain ethical principles coexisted with his participation in the tender manipulation. This apparent contradiction reflected the situated nature of moral reasoning, where ethical decisions are made within specific structural constraints rather than abstract moral principles. The branch manager's offer of insider information represented not just an opportunity for unfair advantage, but a lifeline for fourteen workers facing potential deportation.

The competitive pressures shaping these moral calculations became visceral as the tender deadline approached. Despite having confidential information, Adam spent hours agonizing over pricing strategy. The "chemistry" he mentioned with the client built through years of reliable service created mutual obligations that transcended formal contract relationships. The local branch manager's willingness to share sensitive information reflected gift exchange relationships (Mauss, 1954), creating bonds of reciprocity that operated alongside market transactions.

Late that night, my phone rang. Adam's voice was strained: "Very, very stressed. Very disappointed." The news was devastating. Their competitors had underbid them by thirty percent, offering a price that seemed impossibly low given our break-even calculations. Even their supposed "special weapon", digitalization initiatives that Adam thought would differentiate their proposal, had been matched by competitors.

“How can they offer such a low quote when our calculations show cost-price is at least twenty percent higher?” Adam wondered aloud, echoing conversations I’d had with other contractors about the inexplicable economics of competitive bidding. The answer, as another contractor named Darren had explained to me, was that there’s always someone willing to quote “twenty, thirty, even forty percent lower than you,” often out of desperation rather than sound business logic.

This race to the bottom revealed the structural violence of capitalism itself, where intense competition forced firms to accept contracts that barely covered costs, transferring risk downward to workers while concentrating profits upward to clients and developers. The American client’s emphasis on “ethics” in evaluation criteria, while ultimately awarding the contract based on lowest price, epitomized total bureaucratization (Graeber, 2015), where procedural compliance masks extractive relationships in contemporary capitalism.

Sitting in bed, I think about bizarre it is that I have to comfort my boss, even though I too share his disappointment. Although I had only joined the company for less than a month, and had no real designation (or salary), I had come to see them as friends and colleagues where I have a real emotional stake in. As the main person drafting this tender, I also felt a strong sense of responsibility and can’t help but worry for the 14 men under our care. At the same time, I tell Adam that I think the price we settled for was reasonable, because if we deliberately underquote just to secure the bid at a losing price, we are ultimately doing both ourselves and the workers a disfavour. I think about how the other contractors who bid for this project are probably struggling with the same dilemmas we have, with the same migrant workers under their care who have the same familial obligations as the sole or main breadwinners of their family. I think

about the harsh realities of a system where no one seems to benefit, except perhaps the client or the end user, and the CEO of the company.

This moment of realization was a turning point in my understanding of the moral-political economy of the construction industry and my own role within it. By stepping into the shoes of Adam and his team, and actively participating in the tender process, I found myself grappling with the same ethical dilemmas and emotional pressures that shape the behaviour of market actors on a daily basis. My involvement in drafting the tender proposal gave me a visceral sense of the intense competitive pressures and thin margins that characterize the industry, and the way in which these structural constraints can push firms to the brink of survival. The fact that we had to agonize over every dollar and cent in our bid, knowing that even a small difference could mean the difference between winning and losing the contract, underscores the precarity and uncertainty that intermediaries must navigate in this cutthroat market environment. My growing emotional attachment to the company and its workers, despite my short tenure, also made me acutely aware of the moral and social dimensions of economic decision-making. The realization that our bid would have real consequences for the livelihoods and well-being of the 14 men under our care, as well as their families and communities back home, added a layer of ethical complexity to what might otherwise have been a purely technical or financial exercise.

This experience of complicity and moral entanglement is a common theme in ethnographic accounts of economic life, particularly in contexts where the researcher becomes embedded in the social fabric of their field site. In my own case, the experience of participating in the tender process alongside Adam and his team forced me to confront the limits of my own critical distance and objectivity as a researcher. By becoming emotionally invested in the outcome of the bid, and feeling a sense of responsibility for the workers whose livelihoods depended on it,

I found myself reproducing some of the same logics and priorities that I had previously sought to analyse from a detached, academic perspective.

Earlier in the day Adam, had shared another tidbit on why he felt compelled to produce profits. Each month, every department has to fork out what he calls an "internal fee" to support the overhead costs of Super Cool, which includes rental fees, and "The CEO's salary". When I first heard this, I was shocked. Why should the CEO of the company receive a steady paycheck regardless of whether the departments were doing well? From what I could see in the company carpark, he had more than one sports car alternated between, the latest being a red Lamborghini, which Denpo and Adam jokingly pointed out as "theirs" whenever we visited the parking lot on our way to lunch. That the department had to pay the CEO significant 'internal fees' regardless of how well it performed seemed so unfair I asked Adam whether he considered just coming out and starting his own company, but he smiled wryly and said he had no money to do so. He explained that in his previous role at a smaller company, he had seen how SMEs had to fight tooth and nail to secure projects, and cash flow was always a big problem. Even if he could secure a project, he would not be able to raise sufficient capital to keep the project afloat until payment was issued, as there was often a significant time lag of months or even years before the project payment was complete.

While not a classic subsistence crisis in the sense of food shortages or price spikes, the intense competition and razor-thin margins in the construction industry create a constant threat to the livelihoods of contractors and their workers. Losing a bid can mean financial ruin for the company and unemployment for the workers, evoking the high stakes struggles over survival central to Scott (1976) and Thompson's (1971) analyses. Adam's distress at being drastically underbid and the reference to contractors quoting unsustainably low prices out of desperation

highlight the precarity and economic turmoil that define the industry's moral economy. Adam, as a contractor, feels a strong paternalistic duty to protect his workers' livelihoods, even at the cost of the company's profitability. This echoes Scott's (1976) notion of a 'subsistence ethic' where elites are expected to prioritize the survival needs of subordinates. At the same time, Adam is beholden to the demands of his own bosses, particularly the CEO who expects a steady income from each department regardless of market conditions.

Adam's story illuminated how collusion emerged not from greed or moral failure, but from the intersection of moral economy and political economy. The personal relationships, reciprocal obligations, and ethical calculations that enabled information sharing were the same social infrastructure that made the construction industry function. To eliminate collusion would require dismantling the very networks of trust and reciprocity that contractors depended on for survival in an uncertain and highly competitive market. The tension between these competing moral claims – to workers, to bosses, to one's own survival – is a defining feature of the industry's moral economy. The cut-throat competition and unsustainable underbidding are not just the result of individual moral failings. The time lag in payment schedules, which puts immense cash flow pressure on contractors, seems to be an accepted industry practice that privileges clients over contractors. The lack of regulations or enforcement mechanisms to prevent underbidding suggests a policy environment that leaves contractors vulnerable to a race to the bottom. These structural conditions shape the moral calculations of actors like Adam, who must navigate the gap between what is legally permissible, financially sustainable, and morally obligatory. Adam's wry acceptance of his limited options reveals the differential power of actors to challenge or change the industry's moral economy. While many may recognize the system as exploitative, they feel powerless to transform it given the entrenched power relations and institutional inertia.

However, this episode also suggests the limits of moral economy as an explanatory framework. Adam's predicament cannot be reduced solely to a moral dilemma between subsistence obligations and market imperatives. It is also fundamentally about the political economy of the construction industry – the structural distribution of risk, reward, and power among different classes of actors. A moral economy lens brings these power dynamics into sharp relief and highlights their ethical stakes, but it must be complemented by a broader political-economic analysis to fully capture the forces shaping contractors' agency and experiences.

On a fundamental level, the construction industry in Singapore shares key features with the subsistence crises that motivated Scott and Thompson's analyses. While the threat is not one of literal starvation, the constant spectre of business failure and worker unemployment creates a similar dynamic of precarity and survival pressure. The moral obligation of elites (in this case, contractors like Adam) to ensure the subsistence of subordinates (workers) remains central, even if the means of doing so have shifted from grain distribution to contract bidding. Moreover, moral economy, like its agrarian predecessors, is characterized by paternalistic relations and reciprocal obligations between classes. Adam's sense of duty to protect his workers, even at personal cost, echoes the 'subsistence ethic' Scott identified among Southeast Asian peasants. The CEO's expectation of a steady income, regardless of market conditions, parallels the rent-seeking behaviour of agrarian elites. In both cases, moral claims are shaped by and help reproduce class hierarchies.

Adam's dilemma reveals why this chapter integrates moral and political economy frameworks rather than choosing between them. His anxiety about the fourteen workers reflects genuine moral obligations, the kind of subsistence ethic Scott (1976) identified where elites feel

responsible for subordinates' survival. Yet, those obligations operated within structural constraints that made honouring them nearly impossible. The foreign worker levies that squeezed margins, the competitive bidding that rewarded lowest price regardless of workers' welfare, the client's power to dictate one-sided contract terms – these political-economic conditions shaped which moral calculations remained viable.

Adam was not choosing between morality and profit. He was navigating between incompatible demands the system created: clients requiring low prices, workers needing employment, company owners expecting profits, competitors willing to undercut. His intermediary position meant obligations extended in multiple directions simultaneously: upward to capital, downward to labour, laterally to competitors. The moral economy of contractor networks emerged precisely from these structural impossibilities, creating informal coordination mechanisms that allowed contractors to honour some obligations by violating formal rules. Collusion therefore cannot be understood simply as moral failure or market distortion, but as a response to contradictions that developmental capitalism creates but formal institutions cannot resolve.

Then, two months later, I received another call late at night. This time Adam sounded different; exhausted but relieved. "We got it," he said simply. The lowest bidder had been disqualified for reasons Adam either couldn't or wouldn't specify. Maybe technical non-compliance, maybe incomplete documentation, maybe something else entirely. What mattered was that Super Cool's years of relationship building, their workers' accumulated expertise, their careful navigation of both formal requirements and informal expectations had somehow prevailed over pure price competition.

The fourteen workers would keep their jobs, their families would continue receiving remittances from Singapore. The carefully maintained relationships between client and contractor would survive another contract cycle. But the victory revealed something troubling about how Singapore's developmental capitalism actually operates. Success had not come through superior efficiency or ethical business practices, but from the same murky intersection of formal procedures and informal accommodation that made the thumb drive incident possible in the first place.

Adam's relief was genuine, but so was his recognition that they'd won a game whose rules remained fundamentally opaque. The system had rewarded their relationship-based approach, but that same system could have just as easily punished them for the very practices that made their relationships valuable. The fourteen workers were safe for now, but their security depended on intermediary actors like Adam continuing to navigate contradictions that the system created but refused to acknowledge. Their livelihoods rested not on transparent market mechanisms but on the daily moral improvisation of people caught between incompatible demands – the very improvisation that made contemporary capitalism functional despite its formal incoherence.

### 5.2. Darren's Story: Networks and Brotherhood

Adam's story however was not the only kind of collusion I encountered on the field site. Elsewhere, other contractors recounted similar stories of collusion, albeit with slightly different logics from the one above. I met these contractors in various capacities, usually by introduction of Mr. Wee, who had brought me to a bistro that he and his contractor friends frequented, to drink beer and unwind from their jobs. On one such occasion, I met Darren, an air-conditioning contractor and towkay of a mid-sized firm in Singapore. Darren was seen as one of the informal leaders of the group of which Mr. Wee belonged, as his English proficiency was one of the best

out of these mostly Chinese-educated men. This meant that apart from helping to explain government policy and translate changes to construction laws and regulation, Darren, was often these contractors' first port of call when they encountered legal or financial troubles. Darren invited me to interview him at his office, which I did over several meetings.

Darren owned a small office and factory space in an industrial estate in Hougang. The industrial estate in which he operated in was one of the modern ones, unlike the more traditional kind in Defu Lane which houses mostly single-storey red-bricked warehouses and shophouses built in the 1970s.




Figure 5.1: Darren’s Office




Figure 5.2: Defu Lane



Figure 5.3: Example of a traditional ‘office’ along Defu Lane



Figure 5.4: Along Defu Lane's hidden walkways

Instead, the modern industrial estate was a multi-storey complex, built in the 1980s after the older industrial estates witnessed numerous factory fires, and after the state introduced new zoning laws that sought to keep industrial estates confined to specific sectors in a bid to maximize the scarce land and reduce pollution around residential estates. This meant that most construction-related trades were housed in these giant multi-storey complexes, with layouts that enabled them to keep a small office alongside factory space that could also be converted

into warehouses or storage. The first time I visited Darren, I remember being overwhelmed by how dark it was – the industrial estate reminded me of a giant multi-storey carpark, as there was very little sunlight let in, and the rows of shops were reliant on the giant fluorescent white lights to keep the area lit. The organization was also quite haphazard, as stores would keep their equipment outside – tractors, air-conditioning units, metal rods, wooden beams – anything that their shops housed.

Darren's own 'office' was on the second floor, with the first floor being a mix of factory space, where some migrant workers were working, and an open-plan office, where his accountants, administrative assistant, and project manager worked. Darren's office was filled with files – a point he stressed was 'life-saving', as these files contained 'black and white' information that could help him during lawsuits or other bureaucratic problems. There were also several golf trophies and posters celebrating playing golf – a sport which Darren loved. Darren struck me as a cheerful, affable character, who was well-liked by the contractors in his circle due to his generous nature. He had worked in the air-conditioning industry for almost his whole life, starting as an apprentice at one of the largest distributors, before starting his own company. I learned that he was also friends with the CEO of Super Cool, as well as the CEOs of most other air-conditioning firms in the industry.

Said Darren, "We are friends, but also rivals. We are competitors but we are partners. We have a job with tender. We know who and who tender. I not so close one I fight them. But sometimes we know this guy is a good friend for us. I call him what's your tender. I call him up, we go three % down. I will not fight you, you get this, you give me some amount. We know everybody. Aircon is so small. Daikin dealer, Mitsubishi dealer is so small. By right cannot. To know everybody is a good thing. Some we are closer to each other. We don't play back-end

tricks or anything. There's a bit of time, I can't remember which period. The market is very tight, so everybody is fighting for project. It so happen that somebody contact me. Eh Desmond you tender for this project. Ah this one we stamp firm, we don't go down. I'm the lowest, he's the second lowest. He says stand firm, don't go down any more. He means the owner knows him, whatever price, the owner will go to him. He will give me some pocket money."

Darren's words underscore the central role of personal relationships and social networks in the moral economy of collusion in the aircon industry. There is a strong sense of mutual obligation and reciprocity among firms in the industry, even as they compete for projects and market share. This moral economy of friendship and reciprocity is evident in the way that Darren describes his interactions with other firms in the bidding process. When he is close to a competitor who is a good friend, he may call them up to find out their tender price, and agree not to fight them by going down by a certain percentage. In exchange, he expects to receive some amount of 'pocket money' from the winning firm. These practices of information-sharing, price-fixing, and kickbacks are clearly collusive and illegal from a formal regulatory perspective. However, from the perspective of the industry insiders, they are seen as a normal and legitimate way of managing competition and maintaining social ties in a small and close-knit market.

The moral complexity of these arrangements became evident when contractors faced the choice between loyalty to their networks and individual advantage. Darren described situations where respecting gentleman's agreements meant forgoing profitable opportunities, while aggressive competition risked damaging relationships essential for long-term survival. "Sometimes you have to choose between making money today and maintaining trust for tomorrow," he explained. "In this industry, trust is more valuable than any single contract."

These peer networks operated according to different moral logics than the client relationships Adam navigated. Where client relationships involved hierarchical obligations between unequal parties, contractor networks were premised on reciprocity among rough equals. The expectation was that today's favour would be repaid tomorrow, that information shared in one bidding round would be reciprocated in another, that supporting a fellow contractor's success would generate future support when needed. This reciprocal moral economy created its own forms of discipline and enforcement. Contractors who violated informal agreements by aggressive underbidding after promising restraint, or by failing to share information that could help network members, faced social sanctions that could be more damaging than legal penalties. Exclusion from information networks, loss of referral opportunities, and damaged reputation within industry circles represented forms of punishment that operated entirely outside formal regulatory frameworks.

The coordination Darren described wasn't happening in a vacuum. Contractors needed reliable intelligence about market conditions, competitor behaviour, and – crucially – who was financially stable enough to work with. This intelligence circulated through supply chain relationships that operated as early warning systems for industry instability. Darren explained how cement and sand suppliers functioned as crucial intelligence nodes within contractor networks, their position at projects' inception giving them unique visibility into companies' financial health.

"I have friends in cement and sand. These are very, very clear-cut scenario," Darren explained during one of our conversations at his Hougang office. "If let's say company is doing a few projects. If say other party got problem paying you cement and sand, means *jia lat* already,

down there." His switch to Hokkien – *jia lat*, literally 吃力 (chi li) or "eating strength," idiomatically meaning serious trouble – emphasized the severity of being unable to pay cement suppliers.

The logic was straightforward yet revealing. "They are the first supplier that a main con look for when they do a new project. Either that or piling people, or formwork. These are the first few people." Cement suppliers entered projects at ground level, literally, before electrical contractors wired buildings or plumbers installed pipes, concrete had to be poured. This temporal priority created financial priority: cement suppliers typically demanded payment before delivering materials, making them the most sensitive barometers of cash flow problems. "A few years back they ask for cash," Darren continued, referring to Great Earth Construction, a major contractor whose financial troubles were already circulating through industry networks months before any official announcement. "They ask for cash, but those they deal with longer, they allow for credit." The shift from credit terms to cash-on-delivery signalled distress. Established contractors enjoyed credit relationships built through years of reliable payment. When suppliers suddenly demanded cash upfront, it indicated doubts about the contractor's solvency – doubts that proved prophetic when Great Earth eventually collapsed.[80]

This intelligence about payment terms circulated through contractor networks with remarkable speed. "Market is very accurate. Even before they go down we already heard, people started to sue them, I heard that people complain to MOM, just got their December salary." The informal intelligence network Darren described operated faster and more reliably than formal credit

[80] GreatEarth Construction eventually filed for voluntary liquidation in January 2024, citing "insurmountable financial difficulties" and debts exceeding S$81.4 million. The collapse affected over 1,700 creditors and left multiple BTO projects in limbo. See Rennie Whang, "Troubled contractor GreatEarth files to wind up company, a week after shock BTO delays," *The Straits Times*, January 19, 2024, https://www.straitstimes.com/business/property/troubled-contractor-greatearth-files-to-wind-up-company-a-week-after-shock-bto.

rating systems. By the time banks or regulatory agencies recognized a contractor's financial distress, cement suppliers and their contractor customers had already adjusted their behaviour, demanding cash payments or refusing to work with troubled firms entirely.

What Darren described reveals something crucial about how contractor networks actually function. The cement suppliers who demanded cash payment weren't just protecting their own interests; they were generating intelligence that circulated through contractor networks faster than any formal credit rating system could provide. This information served dual purposes: it enabled contractors to avoid risky partnerships (a protective function that any prudent business would pursue) while simultaneously allowing them to coordinate behaviour with trusted partners (a collusive function that competition authorities would condemn). The same networks that enabled bid coordination also functioned as informal credit bureaus, circulating knowledge about who paid reliably and who represented dangerous exposure. From a regulatory perspective, these might appear as distinct activities – legitimate risk management versus illegal collusion. From contractors' perspective, they were inseparable functions of the same social infrastructure.

The defensive logic Darren articulated, using networks to avoid catastrophic losses, emerged from decades of contractors learning that formal legal protections couldn't actually protect them. This vulnerability intensified as the industry transformed, making personal networks not merely convenient but essential for survival. Chong San, the older contractor I mentioned earlier, made this transformation explicit in our interview.

"Now, I mostly work alone. I've lost a few hundred thousand dollars," he began, his matter-of-fact tone belying the enormity of such losses. "I am illiterate, and I won't find lawyers to sue

you just to recoup losses. My mentality then was, 倒就倒 (*dao jiu dao* – if it falls, it falls). If the main con fall, then it can't be helped. But it was easier to earn profits back in those days, so I could still stomach the losses."

The shrug with which he described these losses captured something essential about construction's risk structure. Subcontractors bore financial exposure that formal contracts couldn't protect against. Main contractors could declare bankruptcy mid-project, leaving subcontractors unpaid for months of completed work and absorbed material costs. The legal recourse Chong San mentioned, hiring lawyers to sue, often cost more than the losses themselves, particularly for smaller operators working on margins that a single major default could eliminate entirely. For someone like Chong San, who described himself as illiterate and operated through handshake agreements rather than elaborate contracts, the formal legal system offered no practical remedy.

"Afterwards, when the industry started going south, I only worked with respectable main con, those with status in Singapore, that wouldn't fall. In the early days, there were all sorts of main con. That's why, you need friendship." His emphasis on "friendship" (*youqing*, 友情) carried weight beyond its casual English translation. In Hokkien business culture, *youqing* implied reciprocal obligations that transcended contractual relationships, a form of social insurance where today's favour would be repaid when circumstances reversed. This wasn't sentiment but strategy, moral reasoning that served economic survival.

His withdrawal from a $1.2 million Woh Hup project[81] illustrated how these pressures had intensified and how friendship networks functioned in practice. “I already got awarded the contract and already did the mock-up, but after I did some calculations, I realized that I lacked money, so I withdrew from the project, otherwise my company might go bankrupt. I told a friend, also someone I have known for a long time, this project, I’ll give it to you.” The casualness with which he transferred a million-dollar contract show how contractor networks operated through relationships rather than formal market mechanisms. He didn’t put the contract back out to tender or negotiate a sale price. He simply handed it to someone he trusted, someone with whom he shared decades of reciprocal exchanges. “Thankfully, this friend also has long-standing relations with Woh Hup, so the transfer was smooth.” The transaction was possible precisely because both parties maintained relationships with the main contractor built through years of reliable delivery and mutual accommodation.

“The problem is that after you lock in prices, you only start work after 1-2 years, but the material prices keep increasing, and by then it would cost a lot more to build the same project.” This temporal lag between pricing and execution created systematic vulnerability that contractors had no formal mechanism to manage. They bid based on current material costs but absorbed future price increases, bearing inflation risk that clients refused to share. In volatile markets, this meant contractors could win projects that became loss-making by the time work actually began. Friendship networks helped distribute this risk. A contractor who found themselves underwater on a project could transfer work to better-positioned friends, receive informal assistance with material procurement, or call in Favors accumulated through previous exchanges, reciprocal accommodations that made the industry’s economics workable.

[81] Woh Hup (Private) Limited is one of Singapore’s largest construction firms, holding an A1 license (the highest grade) from the Building and Construction Authority. Founded in 1960, the company has built major infrastructure including MRT stations, public housing, and commercial developments. Working with Woh Hup represented significant prestige and financial scale for subcontractors like Chong San.

Chong San's casual description of losing hundreds of thousands of dollars captures construction's fundamental risk structure. Subcontractors bore exposure that contracts couldn't protect against and litigation couldn't remedy. The friendship he described was structural necessity, not cultural preference. As state policies raised the stakes through levy increases, formal protections became less viable. The thirty-fold increase in foreign worker levies meant margins that once absorbed occasional defaults disappeared entirely. Contractors had to choose: cultivate networks that could distribute risks informally, or accept catastrophic losses when main contractors collapsed or projects went underwater. Most chose networks. These relationships made collusion possible and, from their perspective, morally justified.

From a moral economy perspective, Chong San's invocation of *youqing* as business strategy echoes what Scott (1976) calls the "subsistence ethic" in peasant moral economies: economic actors living close to the margins prioritize survival over profit maximization, creating networks of mutual aid that distribute catastrophic risks. The friendship networks Chong San described operated according to moral logics similar to those Scott found among Southeast Asian peasants: expectations that those in temporary advantage would assist those in temporary distress, creating insurance mechanisms through social relationships rather than market transactions. Yet from a political economy perspective, this moral reasoning didn't emerge from timeless cultural values but from specific structural conditions the state itself created: the foreign worker levy policy that squeezed margins, the temporal lag between pricing and execution that created systematic vulnerability, and the inadequacy of formal legal remedies that made friendship more valuable than contracts.

Over the course of our interviews, I realized that this 'friendship' that Darren constantly talked about was not accidental. Neither was the fact that Darren – a man born to lower-working class parents – came to pick up golf as a hobby, or the fact that he had met and bonded with most of the other contractors via golf, who were from similarly poor family backgrounds and no exposure to the sport prior to them working in construction. In fact, the bistro in which the contractors regularly met was also at a golf club, which came to be their informal meeting spot even for those who had given up the sport. Darren explained that most of them picked up golf after they entered the trade due to habit, and necessity. Trade associations like the National Air-Conditioning Association organized golf events as their annual 'bonding' activity and brought vendors and clients for 'incentive' trips in order to build networks of trust and friendship. Even if contractors did not play golf themselves, just showing up at the golf club was important as a way to socialize. Sites like the golf club served as informal social spaces that allowed contractors to establish bonds and also talk shop, blurring the lines between work and friendship, legal business, and illegal collusion. Being seen to be at the golf club was also important for some contractors in order to differentiate themselves for poorer contractors at smaller firms by signalling that they had the right kinds of acquired taste and wealth and could thus be trusted as established firms in the market. It also appeased some of these contractors' status anxieties, reflecting a number of struggles that contractors had over their relationship to the state, their identities as man, their capacity to be modern, and their position in society.

The construction industry in Singapore is characterized by a distinct form of masculinity that blends working-class roots with entrepreneurial aspirations. This masculinity, shaped by the contractors' backgrounds in blue-collar work, manifests in a rugged, fraternal ethos that significantly influences business practices and moral economies. The frequent use of terms like "兄弟" (brothers) among contractors, regardless of their current economic status, reveals the

persistence of a working-class identity that valorises loyalty, toughness, and mutual support. This form of masculinity in Singapore's construction sector bears similarities to what Connell (1995) analyses in her studies of masculinity in working-class contexts. However, it diverges in important ways. Unlike the working-class schoolboys in Willis's (1977) classic "Learning to Labour," who were studied as they transitioned from school into manual trades**,** Singapore's contractors occupy an in-between space between working-class origins and middle-class aspirations. Their masculinity is not defined by opposition to management or white-collar work, but rather by a sense of shared struggle and mutual understanding born from their common backgrounds.

The Chinese concept of "义气" (*yiqi*), which encompasses loyalty, righteousness, and brotherhood, is central to this masculine identity. It creates a moral framework that facilitates and justifies certain forms of collusive behaviour. As Darren explained, "We are all brothers (兄弟) here. We understand each other's struggles. Sometimes, we need to help each other out." This "helping out" may involve practices like bid-rigging or market-sharing agreements, which are framed not as unethical actions but as expressions of loyalty and mutual support. The masculinity in Singapore's construction sector also differs from that observed in other blue-collar contexts in its entrepreneurial dimension. Unlike the active consent to exploitation through workplace games that Burawoy (1979) documented among factory workers, or the defensive masculinity of displaced industrial workers (Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012), these contractors embrace risk-taking and a certain bravado in business dealings. This aligns with what Connell and Wood (2005) describe as "transnational business masculinity," but with a distinctly working-class flavour. Interestingly, this masculine identity persists even as contractors become materially wealthy. As "towkays" (business owners), they may drive luxury cars and frequent high-end golf clubs, yet they continue to identify strongly with

working-class values and modes of interaction. This persistence of a blue-collar masculine identity among economically successful contractors creates a unique moral economy where material success is valued, but not at the expense of loyalty to one's "brothers" in the industry.

This form of masculinity facilitates collusive behaviour in several ways. First, it creates a strong in-group mentality that prioritizes loyalty to fellow contractors over abstract notions of fair competition. Second, it frames collusive practices as expressions of mutual aid rather than self-interested manipulation of the market. Finally, it provides a shared language and set of values that allow contractors to navigate the informal, relationship-based aspects of the industry with a sense of shared understanding and trust. This particular form of masculinity, rooted in working-class brotherhood yet aspirational in its entrepreneurial outlook, shapes a gendered moral economy that governs collusive behaviour in Singapore's construction industry. The emphasis on "义气" (yiqi) and fraternal loyalty creates a moral framework that not only permits collusion but encourages it as a form of mutual support among "brothers." This gendered moral economy redefines the boundaries of ethical behaviour, transforming what might be seen as corruption in other contexts into expressions of masculine virtue and solidarity. For instance, when contractors engage in bid-rigging, they often frame it not as cheating the system, but as "giving face" to a fellow contractor who needs the job more urgently, a distinctly masculine form of care and reciprocity. The shared background of having "worked their way up" fosters a sense that they're all in it together, facing common challenges that outsiders can't understand. This shared identity, deeply rooted in masculine experiences and values, makes it easier to justify practices like price-fixing or market allocation as necessary survival strategies in a tough industry, rather than as unethical manipulations of the market.

The persistence of blue-collar masculine norms even among successful towkays influences how this gendered moral economy operates across class lines. The preference for face-to-face dealings, sealed with a handshake over drinks or on the golf course, reflects a valorisation of personal trust and "man-to-man" agreements over formal contracts. This informal approach to business, rooted in working-class masculinity, creates an environment where collusive agreements can be made and maintained with minimal documentation, making them harder to detect and regulate. Here, the gendered moral economy privileges male bonding and trust over bureaucratic transparency, reframing collusion as a matter of honour among men rather than a legal infraction. Additionally, the risk-taking aspect of this masculinity, which sees bold business moves as signs of manly courage, encourages contractors to engage in increasingly daring forms of collusion, viewing the potential legal consequences as risks that a "real man" should be willing to take for his brothers. In this way, the gendered moral economy of the construction industry not only justifies collusion but actively valorises it as a demonstration of masculine virtue, courage, and loyalty.

Thus, the friendship and social bonds that enable collusion in the aircon industry are not purely personal or voluntary, but are also shaped by the structural conditions and institutional arrangements of the industry. The fact that trade associations actively organize bonding activities like golf events and incentive trips suggests that there is a deliberate effort to foster social ties and trust among competitors, which can facilitate collusive behaviour. From a moral economy perspective, these bonding activities may be seen as attempts to create a shared sense of identity, obligation, and reciprocity among industry members. By participating in these activities, contractors signal their commitment to the norms and values of the industry, and their willingness to engage in cooperative and mutually beneficial behaviour. However, from a political economy perspective, these bonding activities may also be seen as a way of structuring

social relations and incentives in the industry to enable collusion and limit competition. By creating opportunities for contractors to socialize and talk shop in informal settings, trade associations can help to facilitate the exchange of sensitive information, the coordination of bids, and the enforcement of collusive agreements.

The moral economy of friendship and reciprocity however is shaped by the political economy of market structure and competitive pressure in the aircon industry. According to Darren, the market for Daikin and Mitsubishi dealers is “so small” that there is a high degree of concentration and interdependence among firms in the industry. In a small and specialized market, firms are more likely to know each other personally and to have repeated interactions over time, fostering a sense of trust and mutual understanding. This same intimacy and interdependence however may also create pressures to collude even as they recognize its illegality and risks, as firms seek to manage competition and protect their market share in the face of limited opportunities for growth and differentiation.

The dynamics observed in the aircon industry in Singapore are not unique to this sector or even to the country. Spillman (2012), who examines the role of trade associations in shaping the economic landscape of industries in the United States, shows how these organizations facilitate the construction of shared identities, the management of competition through coordination and standard-setting, and the cultivation of solidarity among members. This suggests that the logics of informal coordination through industry associations are not specific to the construction industry or to Singapore, but rather emerge wherever intermediaries must coordinate fragmented production under conditions of high uncertainty and weak formal protections.

Indeed, similar stories of collusion can be found in various industries across different countries. In Singapore, for example, the Competition and Consumer Commission of Singapore (CCCS) has recently imposed record fines on chicken suppliers and electronic components firms for engaging in price-fixing and other collusive practices.[82] These cases highlight the prevalence of collusive behaviour across different sectors of the economy, indicating that the practices observed in the aircon industry are part of a wider trend.

Darren's story also highlights the important role of personal influence and market power in shaping collusion dynamics. This interplay reveals how social and economic capital blur together in construction. In industries like air-conditioning, where relationships and trust secure contracts and manage projects, the ability to cultivate and leverage personal networks matters as much as technical expertise or financial resources.

While both Adam's and Darren's cases involve collusive behaviour, they operate through different logics. Adam's case shows vertical collusion: a personal relationship between the local branch manager and a specific contractor, reflecting loyalty and reciprocity between business partners. The branch manager's willingness to share sensitive information functioned as gift exchange, creating obligations that bound the parties together. Darren's case shows horizontal collusion: a wider network of social ties among competitors, reflecting shared identity and mutual support. Contractors' willingness to share information and coordinate bids reflected a moral economy prioritizing cooperation over competition.

[82] Competition and Consumer Commission of Singapore (CCCS). 2018. "CCCS Penalises Fresh Chicken Distributors for Price-fixing and Non-compete Agreements." Media release, September 12, 2018. https://www.cccs.gov.sg/media-and-events/newsroom/announcements-and-media-releases/cccs-penalises-fresh-chicken-distributors-for-price-fixing-and-non-compete-agreements.

The collusive practices in both cases were enabled by personal relationships and informal norms operating outside formal market rules, reflecting what Granovetter (1985) identified as the enduring importance of social embeddedness even in highly rationalized markets. What emerges is not criminal conspiracy but ordinary social network operation. The same relationships contractors needed for legitimate purposes – market intelligence, project referrals, support during crises – created opportunities for coordination that violated competition rules. The moral economies sustaining these networks, rooted in working-class values of brotherhood and mutual aid, provided ethical frameworks justifying practices regulators viewed as market distortions.

### 5.3. Moral vs. Political Economy

The concept of "moral economy" originated as a critique of narrow economism. Thompson (1971) showed how English food rioters acted from shared moral norms about fair prices and social obligations, not mere hunger. Scott (1976) extended this to Southeast Asian peasants, whose "subsistence ethic" set limits on acceptable exploitation. Both positioned moral economy against political economy's tendency to naturalise market relations.

Later scholars broadened the concept, sometimes to the point of losing analytical precision. Fassin's (2009) expansive definition encompasses all moral sentiments in social space, collapsing the distinction between moral and political economy that gave the original concept its critical edge. Others sought to reintegrate morality into political economy by returning to Polanyi's (1944) insight that markets are always embedded in social relations rather than autonomous, self-regulating systems. Block (2003) and Sayer (2000) draw on Polanyi to argue that moral norms both enable and constrain market forces. My approach differs from both tendencies. Following Palomera and Vetta (2016), I ground moral economy in empirical analysis of specific contexts rather than invoking it as normative ideal or catch-all category.

Contractors' moral reasoning emerges from and responds to structural conditions: the precarity that heightens subsistence concerns (Götz, 2015), the relationship-dependence that makes trust economically valuable (Sayer, 2007), the competitive pressures that make collusion rational despite its illegality.

I do not take a "moral political economy" approach that treats the integration of moral and political economy as a normative good in itself. Such an approach might argue that aligning moral norms and material incentives is inherently desirable or that challenging unethical practices is always justified regardless of the structural constraints. Instead, I take a descriptive and analytical stance, using moral and political economy lenses together to better understand how contractors navigate Singapore's developmental model, without passing judgment on the moral status of particular practices or outcomes.

Yet this integration requires care. It would be easy to read contractors' moral economies as quiet resistances to market logic, small acts of solidarity within an alienating system. The ethnography suggests something more unsettling. The brotherhood networks Darren cultivated over years of golf games and beer sessions reduced the friction that would otherwise slow the circulation of contracts, workers, and capital through Singapore's construction industry. Adam's sleepless anxiety over his fourteen workers was genuine and inseparable from his anxiety over the client relationship their continued employment would preserve. The care he extended – covering medical bills, worrying about deportations, refusing contracts that would grind his men down – generated the loyalty that kept turnover low and productivity stable. Moral economy operates within and through accumulation, smoothing the frictions that would otherwise make developmental capitalism unworkable. The subsistence ethic Scott found among peasants resisting landlord extraction reappears here

in transmuted form, as the very mechanism through which market coordination becomes possible. The question is not whether Adam's concern for his workers was sincere; it clearly was. The question is what that sincerity produces, and for whom.

Echoing Palomera and Vetta (2016), I ground my use of moral economy in an empirical analysis of the specific social and historical context of Singaporean contractors. Rather than invoking moral economy as a normative ideal, I use it as an analytic lens for examining how moral claims and obligations are actually mobilized and contested by economic actors in practice. Furthermore, while recognizing the "social embeddedness" (Granovetter, 1985) of contractors' economic practices, I do not assume that their moral-economic norms are necessarily egalitarian or benevolent. Instead, I make a case for the need to re-integrate moral economy with political economy. While the moral economy tradition has rightly emphasized the social embeddedness of economic practices, it has sometimes done so at the expense of a robust engagement with the structural forces and power relations that constrain and enable moral norms and social ties. My call is not for a return to a narrow political economy that ignores culture and morality, but for a more integrated approach that examines the interplay between moral norms, social relations, and structural dynamics in shaping economic life. This involves showing how the moral strategies and ethical dilemmas of economic actors are shaped by their position within wider systems of power and inequality, or how the structural pressures of particular industries and markets create both opportunities and constraints for moral action.

This tension between the moral-political economy framework is particularly salient when examining the central question of whether intermediaries genuinely create value or primarily engage in rent-seeking behaviour. The moral economy approach prompts us to examine how

these actors justify their roles within existing moral frameworks and navigate the ethical dilemmas inherent in their positions. Conversely, the political economy approach, drawing on Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions, focuses on the structural forces, power relations, and systemic inequalities that shape economic systems. This perspective asks us to analyse how intermediaries fit into broader economic structures and to examine who ultimately benefits from their activities. A solely moral economic focus however risks treating economic practices as driven primarily by norms, values, and emotions, while neglecting the material structures and power relations that shape them. This may overemphasize the agency of individuals and groups to resist or reshape economic practices based on moral sentiments, underplaying the structural constraints they face. In Adam's case, a moral economy lens highlights his ethical stance against corruption but does not fully capture the competitive pressures and client power that make this stance costly and risky. A narrow focus on moral norms could also miss how they are shaped by political-economic contexts, such as how "old-timer" tolerance for informal practices is bound up with the industry's thin margins and power imbalances. On the other hand, a solely political economic focus overemphasizes the deterministic effects of structures and systems on individual and group behaviour. In Adam's case, a political economy lens highlights the structural pressures and power imbalances that constrain his ability to refuse corrupt practices but do not fully capture his moral motivations for doing so anyway.

Therefore, I argue that integrating both a moral and political economy approach is the most fruitful for understanding the rationalities and relationalities at play in the building industry. Such an approach recognizes the ways in which apparently "irrational" or "relational" practices may in fact be highly rational strategies for navigating the challenges and uncertainties of a specific institutional context, while also acknowledging the ways in which such practices are shaped by and reproduce wider structures of power and inequality. This suggests that the moral

economy of building industry collusion, premised on norms of reciprocity, loyalty, and insider knowledge, is not a vestigial remnant of a pre-modern past, but is actively reproduced and legitimized within the contemporary political economy of the sector. The intense competition and information asymmetries that characterize the industry create strong incentives for firms to collude, as a means of survival and advancement. The fragmented and informal nature of many building projects, involving dense networks of contractors and subcontractors, makes it difficult for regulators to monitor and enforce anti-collusion rules.

Might the logics of collusion then unite the moral-political economy divide? On the surface, collusion appears to be a clear case of the tension between moral and political economy imperatives. Collusive practices, such as price-fixing, bid-rigging, and market allocation, are widely condemned as unethical and illegal, violating both moral norms of fairness and honesty and political norms of competition and transparency. From this perspective, collusion seems to epitomize the conflict between the "moral" and the "political" in economic life. However, a closer examination of the ethnographic vignette suggests that the logics of collusion in the building industry in fact cut across and complicate the moral-political economy divide. The relational norms and practices that enable collusion are not just cultural quirks or ethical lapses, but are integral to the way the system operates. They are sustained not only by the self-interest of individual firms, but also by the broader institutional arrangements of the industry, such as the way contracts are awarded, the way information is shared, and the way disputes are resolved.

### 5.4. Construction's Global Affinity for Informal Coordination

In construction offices from Singapore to Sicily, the same ritual unfolds. Project managers close their doors, lower their voices, and begin the real work of making buildings happen. The morning's formal bid presentations give way to afternoon phone calls. Coffee shop

conversations replace boardroom protocols. What emerges is a form of craft, or the patient assembly of relationships that might constitute ‘corruption’.

This presents a puzzle for economic theory. If markets efficiently allocate resources through price signals, why does construction consistently generate what economists call “market failures”? The persistence of informal coordination across radically different institutional contexts, from Mafia-influenced Italy to post-socialist Eastern Europe to technocratic Singapore, suggests the problem lies not with markets but with our understanding of them. Pino Arlacchi (1986) spent years watching this unfold in southern Italy, finding Mafia who operated less like criminals than like alternative civil servants. Their violence was bureaucratic, almost mundane, a parallel administrative system that filled gaps in official governance. Workers spoke of Mafia coordinators with the same resignation they reserved for building inspectors: another layer of officialdom to navigate, another set of procedures to follow.

These ethnographic accounts reveal something conventional economics misses: construction’s peculiar relationship with place. Unlike financial traders or software developers, construction workers must show up. Buildings demand presence: physical, social, institutional. This creates place-based knowledge, such as an understanding which officials prefer morning meetings, how long permits actually take, where to find workers who understand local soil conditions. Such knowledge resists commodification. You cannot purchase it on spot markets or transfer it through corporate restructuring. It accumulates through sustained engagement with particular places and people. This is why established firms maintain competitive advantages that pure market logic cannot explain. Project-based work intensifies these dynamics. Construction assembles temporary coalitions of specialized firms who must coordinate complex activities despite limited shared history. These relationships operate through what might be recognized

as gift economies alongside cash economies. Favors circulate: a supplier delivers materials before payment, a contractor absorbs unexpected costs, an inspector schedules visits at convenient times. Such exchanges create obligations that bind participants more effectively than contracts.

Singapore adds local flavour to these global patterns. Here, project managers perform procedural compliance while conducting relational work. American clients' elaborate procurement procedures provide administrative legibility, simplified representations that make complex realities manageable. Local contractors respond with practical wisdom that navigates between official requirements and operational necessities. This creates productive tension between global standards and local practices. Multinational procurement procedures arrive carrying assumptions about competitive markets and arm's-length transactions. Local contractors translate these assumptions into workable arrangements, creating space for accommodation within rigid international frameworks. What appears as "corruption" from a regulatory perspective emerges as "coordination" from an operational one.

But this analysis raises uncomfortable questions about the relationship between formal and informal institutions. If informal coordination is necessary for construction to function, what does this say about formal regulatory frameworks? Are they simply elaborate performances of compliance that enable continued informal operation? Or do they serve other functions – legitimating state authority, satisfying international monitoring requirements, providing legal protection when relationships break down?

The Singapore case suggests both interpretations hold simultaneously. Formal procedures provide state legibility (Scott, 1999) through standardized representations that enable

administrative oversight. But they also create space for informal accommodation by establishing clear boundaries around what must be documented and what can remain tacit. The result is an institutional division of labour: formal systems handle what they handle well (documentation, accountability, legal recourse), while informal systems manage what formal systems cannot (flexibility, local adaptation, relationship maintenance).

Contractors therefore craft workable arrangements from whatever institutional materials are available. This creative work generates the accommodations that make global capitalism locally viable. But recognizing this work raises questions about who benefits from current arrangements. If informal coordination is necessary, why not formalize it? Who gains from maintaining the distinction between official procedures and actual practices? The persistence of informal coordination may reflect not just functional necessity but also power relations that benefit from opacity and relationship dependence.

### 5.5. Intermediaries and the Architecture of Contemporary Capitalism

Chapter 4 examined how contractors manage vertical relationships with the state, transforming regulatory constraints into profit opportunities through informal practices like phantom workers and MYE trading. This chapter analyses a fundamentally different form of intermediation: horizontal coordination among competitors that violates market competition rather than labour regulations. Collusion requires explaining not just how contractors evade rules but how rivals become collaborators – sharing confidential information, coordinating bids, honouring gentleman's agreements not to compete. These practices emerge from moral economies of brotherhood and reciprocity that operate alongside, and often override, competitive market logics. Where Chapter 4's informal practices involved contractors individually arbitraging regulatory gaps, collusion depends on collective trust networks that transform competition itself into a coordinated performance. The theoretical stakes shift from

understanding regulatory evasion to analysing how moral obligations among “brothers” reconcile with structural pressures toward cutthroat competition.

Adam’s navigation between corporate compliance requirements and operational necessities exemplifies the intermediary predicament. Intermediaries like Adam are structurally positioned in such way where they must translate between incompatible institutional demands while bearing responsibility for making systems work despite their contradictions. His role required simultaneously satisfying American headquarters’ ethical standards, Singapore branch management’s relationship needs, and fourteen workers’ survival requirements. No formal institution could reconcile these competing obligations, forcing Adam into informal coordination that violated rules while enabling operations.

This predicament reflects contractors’ structural position within developmental capitalism. Where industrial capitalism concentrated decision-making within vertically integrated firms, and financial capitalism operates through abstract market relationships, Singapore’s developmental model depends on intermediaries who navigate between multiple institutional frameworks without being fully accountable to any single authority. Contractors like Adam and Darren possess neither the sovereign power of corporate headquarters nor the clear subordination of industrial workers. They negotiate their position through relationships that are simultaneously economic and social, formal and informal, legitimate and illegitimate.

The two forms of collusion I analysed represent different aspects of this intermediary function. Vertical collusion emerges from contractors’ role as translators between global corporate standards and local operational realities. Horizontal collusion reflects their function as coordinators within fragmented production networks where pure market competition would

generate destructive instability. Both forms serve essential systemic functions that formal institutions acknowledge implicitly while condemning explicitly.

This contradiction reveals how developmental capitalism depends on productive illegality – rule violations that enable rather than undermine economic systems. Unlike the primitive accumulation that Marx identified as capitalism's founding violence, or the accumulation by dispossession that Harvey (2003) sees as characteristic of neoliberalism, Singapore's model operates through ongoing violations of its own formal rules. The system depends on actors who break rules to make rules work, creating governance through managed transgression. Contractors' moral economies serve systemic functions, not just psychological or cultural ones. The ethical frameworks justifying information sharing, price coordination, and relationship maintenance provide legitimate scripts for necessary illegality. These frameworks enable actors to violate formal rules while maintaining social solidarity and operational effectiveness. This represents a sophisticated evolution in capitalist governance: mobilizing moral reasoning for accumulation while maintaining plausible deniability about systematic rule violation.

As discussed in the introduction, these implications extend beyond construction to other sectors characterized by intermediary relationships. Platform economies, global supply chains, financial services, and professional consulting all involve actors who must coordinate between multiple institutional frameworks while bearing individual responsibility for systemic contradictions. What emerges is a form of capitalism that thrives on contradictions rather than resolving them, depending on intermediaries to absorb the tensions that would otherwise tear the system apart.

Where earlier development models sought to eliminate market imperfections through better institutions or more complete information (Evans, 1995; Wade, 1990), Singapore's model institutionalizes imperfection through intermediaries whose function is to navigate rather than resolve systemic contradictions. Contractors don't make markets more efficient in any neoclassical sense. They make markets functional despite inefficiencies, sustainable despite contradictions, legitimate despite violations of their own rules. The market capitalism Singapore celebrates publicly depends on the relationship-based coordination it condemns privately. Adam's anxious manipulation of tender documents and Darren's casual price coordination show how contemporary economic systems function not through clean mechanisms of supply and demand, but through messy networks of obligation, reciprocity, and moral calculation that make abstract market relationships workable.

Adam's sleepless nights over worker welfare and Darren's careful cultivation of brotherhood networks show how people create meaning and solidarity within structures designed to promote individual competition. Their moral economies constitute alternative visions of how economic relationships might be organized; that is, around care rather than profit maximization, reciprocity rather than arms-length exchange, collective survival rather than individual advancement. The tender process that kept Adam awake for weeks and the golf club conversations that sustained Darren's networks illuminate how moral-political economy operates within capitalism. Unlike the peasant communities that James Scott and E.P. Thompson studied, where moral economy emerged in opposition to market forces, contractors' ethical frameworks are thoroughly integrated with capitalist accumulation. Their moral calculations, such Adam's concern for worker welfare and Darren's loyalty to industry brothers, provide coordination mechanisms that pure competition cannot deliver.

This integration reveals something fundamental about how capitalism has evolved since Thompson's 18th-century food riots or Scott's Southeast Asian villages. Rather than destroying moral economy through market expansion, contemporary capitalism has learned to mobilize ethical commitments for accumulation. The subsistence ethic that Scott identified among peasants reappears in Adam's determination to preserve worker employment even at the cost of company profits. The reciprocal obligations that Thompson found in traditional communities persist in Darren's networks of mutual aid among competitors. The difference is that these moral economies now serve capitalist coordination, rather than challenging capitalist domination.

More broadly, my analysis of collusion as norm rather than as exception highlights how Singapore's success as a developmental state may depend less on resolving tensions between market and social coordination than on creating intermediary actors capable of navigating those tensions creatively. Contractors like Adam and Darren do not solve the contradictions inherent in Singapore's development model but make those contradictions manageable through daily practices of ethical improvisation and relationship maintenance.

## 6: Differentiated Citizenship

The city hasn't fully awakened when Mr. Wee's Toyota Camry glides into the service bay of the upscale shopping mall. It's just before seven in the morning, and the first light of day casts long shadows across the polished concrete. I watch him finish a call about material deliveries for another site across town, his voice shifting effortlessly between Hokkien, Mandarin, and English as he negotiates prices and arrival times. The phone, constantly ringing, perpetually attached to his ear, serves as both tether and tool, binding him to the complex web of logistics that keeps Singapore's construction industry churning.

"Aiyah, these suppliers always play games," he says, finally ending the call. "Now we go see today's headache."

We're here to oversee the renovation of a fast-casual diner, a modest project that might seem trivial amid Singapore's constant reinvention of its built environment. Yet it is precisely in such ordinary spaces that the architecture of citizenship becomes most visible, its hierarchies inscribed in the mundane choreography of bodies, tools, and time.

The mall exists in that liminal space between night and day. Cleaning staff in blue uniforms polish already gleaming floors, their movements methodical and almost invisible. Behind glass storefronts still secured with metal gates, retail workers arrange luxury goods that most of Singapore's construction workers will never afford. We pass through service corridors marked "Staff Only", transitional spaces that separate consumer fantasy from the labour that sustains it, until we reach the restaurant site.

Mr. Wee's phone buzzes again. His wife, who manages the administrative side of their business from a small office in Geylang, has discovered an unexpected complication. The mall management requires the entire renovation area to be "papered over" before work can begin. I watch his expression shift as he processes this information, mentally recalculating costs, schedules, and labour allocations.

"Cannot start scaffolding today," he sighs, the weight of adaptation settling into his features. "Must paper everything first. The mall people say construction too *bu ya guan* (不雅观) – not nice to see."

The term lingers in the air, speaking volumes about Singapore's relationship with the processes that build it. The "messiness" and "ugliness" of construction must remain hidden, rendered invisible behind pristine white barriers that maintain the illusion of effortless transformation. It's a metaphor that extends beyond this single project to Singapore's broader developmental narrative, a story that foregrounds gleaming outcomes while obscuring the labour, strain, and inequality that produce them.

As Mr. Wee begins making calls to rearrange the day's schedule, I'm struck by the casual authority in his voice. Workers' bodies and time shift like pieces on a chessboard, their plans for the day dissolving and reforming at his command. This power to redirect human movement, to determine who goes where, who does what, when, and how, reflects the graduated sovereignty that structures Singapore's citizenship regime.

A light rain falls as the service entrance comes alive with the first workers arriving. A small lorry with metal frame and canvas covering pulls into the loading bay, its diesel engine

clattering through the morning drizzle. One by one, they grip the wet metal frame to steady themselves as they descend, their movements stiff after an hour-long journey from dormitories.




Figure 6.1: Workers exiting a lorry on a rainy morning

Mr. Wee approaches them with practiced efficiency, explaining the change in plans through a mixture of simple English, gestures, and occasional Bengali words he's acquired through years of managing South Asian workers. The men nod without question, immediately reorganizing themselves to begin the papering work instead of the scheduled scaffolding. There is no negotiation, no discussion of how this affects their plans or expectations for the day; their time is not their own to allocate or defend.

This scene of silent adaptation is still unfolding when the Malaysian team begins to arrive, nearly an hour after the scheduled 7:30 start time. Their entrance presents an entirely different relationship to space and authority. It's nearly eleven o'clock, a full three and a half hours past the scheduled start time, when Ah Huat, the Malaysian foreman, finally pulls up on his Yamaha motorcycle. Mr. Wee with the easy familiarity of someone who knows his value cannot be easily replaced. They speak in rapid Hokkien, punctuated by laughter and gestures toward the

site. Three more Malaysian workers follow on similar motorcycles, their arrival staggered and unhurried, while a small van drops off another group.

"Causeway very jam," Ah Huat explains with a casual shrug, pointing vaguely northward toward the bridge that connects Singapore to Malaysia. The explanation, more observation than apology, is accepted without comment or consequence. The contrast with how Bangladeshi worker' tardiness is typically handled, with immediate reprimand and threat of salary deduction, couldn't be more stark.

In this ordinary moment – the differential treatment of workers arriving late – lies a profound revelation about Singapore's construction industry. Time itself is experienced differently based on one's location in the citizenship hierarchy. Some bodies are granted flexibility and understanding, their delays contextualized within broader structural constraints ("Causeway very jam, what to do?"). Others face rigid discipline, their every movement subject to surveillance and sanction.

This differential relationship to time, space, and authority materializes throughout the day, perhaps most vividly during lunch. As noon approaches, the South Asian workers gather in a designated corner of the worksite, a spatial confinement that marks their position in the hierarchy. They remain immobile, sitting on the concrete floor in tight circles, waiting for their catered meals to be delivered. Soon, small packets wrapped in waxed paper appear – simple curry rice prepared in bulk, the cheapest possible sustenance for bodies valued primarily as labour inputs. They eat quickly, quietly, their break tightly bounded in both space and time.

The Malaysian workers, meanwhile, simply walk out of the site entirely, crossing the boundary between construction zone and mall to purchase food from the hawker centre nearby, a spatial freedom unimaginable for the Work Permit holders. Their break stretches elastically, cigarettes and conversation extending well beyond the allocated time without comment from supervisors. Mr. Wee exercises the ultimate spatial privilege. “Come,” he says to me, “let’s go get lunch.” We leave the site entirely, walking to a mid-range restaurant in the mall itself where contractors and professionals dine on $15 lunch sets. Here, amid climate-controlled comfort, Mr. Wee conducts business, completely removed from the dust and noise of the site he manages.

In these mundane patterns of waiting versus movement, confinement versus mobility, and assigned space versus claimed territory, we can observe how abstract citizenship categories become lived hierarchies. Far from the policy debates and legal frameworks that officially define citizenship, these everyday practices show how differential inclusion operates as both a technology of governance and a mode of value extraction. This focus on differentiated citizenship extends the dissertation’s broader examination of how contractors mediate between different regimes of value and authority. As I’ve argued in previous chapters about contractors’ navigation of formal and informal economies, their management of differentiated citizenship suggests how Singapore’s development model depends on their ability to maintain productive tensions between competing demands: extracting maximum value from labour while preventing the complete alienation that might trigger resistance; implementing state categories while adapting them to worksite realities; and reproducing hierarchies while occasionally creating pathways for mobility that legitimize the system as a whole.

### 6.1. The Puzzle of Differential Treatment

The scenes at the mall raise a fundamental question: What explains the dramatically different treatment, rights, and experiences of workers who perform similar labour on the same

construction sites? The disparities I observed during fieldwork extend far beyond mere company hierarchies or skill-based divisions. Workers installing the same air-conditioning systems or laying identical tiles experience profoundly different conditions based primarily on their passports, legal statuses, and positions within Singapore's migration regime.

This puzzle becomes more pronounced when we consider that technical skill does not neatly map onto these disparities. Many Bangladeshi workers with years of experience and considerable expertise still face restrictions on their movement, deference requirements, and vulnerability to sudden termination that their Malaysian counterparts do not. Similarly, S Pass holders with the same formal qualifications as Employment Pass holders experience significantly different treatment in terms of housing options, family unification rights, and pathways to permanent residency.

During a conversation at the, I asked Mr. Wee why he was so lenient with the Malaysian foreman, who were late, and why the Bangladeshi workers' schedules were governed so precisely. He seemed momentarily puzzled by the question.

"Different kind of worker what," he finally responded with a slight shrug. "Malaysia guy can just go home if he not happy. The Bangladeshi workers, where can they go? Their permit tied to my company."

His words underscore how differential treatment becomes naturalized through the everyday language and practices of construction management. The disparities are not incidental outcomes of individual prejudice but structured and maintained through interlocking systems of legal status, migration policy, and economic incentives that create distinct categories of

workers with varying degrees of precarity and agency. These administrative categories require racialized interpretations to function. The Work Permit creates vulnerability, but contractors must supply the explanation for why Bangladeshi workers "naturally" accept worse conditions than Malaysians. State policy creates differential levy rates, but contractors elaborate why certain nationalities "need" certain types of management. This entanglement of bureaucratic categories and racial perceptions, not categories alone, produces the hierarchies I observed.

The more time I spent on construction sites, the more evident it became that these differentiations operated not just through formal policies but through embodied practices. Who could move freely, and who needed permission? Who ate where? Who could smoke without consequence? Whose mistakes triggered salary deductions, versus gentle reprimands? These everyday interactions are symbolic of how abstract categories of legal status became lived hierarchies, producing 'social facts' or arrangements that appear natural and inevitable despite being historically constructed and politically maintained.

But what exactly creates and sustains these disparities? The standard explanation in Singapore's policy discourse points to skill differentials and market forces: higher-skilled workers command better conditions through their market value, while lower-skilled workers accept more constrained circumstances as the price of earning wages significantly higher than available in their home countries. This framing positions differential treatment as a natural outcome of labour market dynamics rather than a constructed system of governance.

Anthropologists have long documented similar patterns of differentiated status and racial hierarchies in labour migration contexts globally (De Genova, 2005; Ong, 1999; Constable, 2007). What makes Singapore's case analytically useful is not its uniqueness but its precision

– the bureaucratic refinement through which these common patterns operate. Where other contexts rely on informal discrimination or ambiguous legal statuses, Singapore achieves similar stratification through meticulously calibrated administrative categories. This allows us to see clearly how contractors actively produce the meanings of these categories rather than simply implementing them.

The hierarchical treatment of different worker categories persists even when skill levels and experience are comparable. It manifests in domains seemingly unrelated to productivity or technical ability, in basic dignities like being addressed by name rather than number, having freedom of movement during non-working hours, or maintaining family relationships across borders.

These patterns point toward a system that goes beyond simple market segmentation to encompass differentiated regimes of control, value, and belonging. What we observe on Singapore's construction sites is not merely a labour hierarchy but a citizenship hierarchy; a carefully calibrated system where different categories of workers are granted differential access to rights, mobilities, and protections based on their position within nested categories of belonging to the Singaporean state.

Scholars of migration have extensively documented differentiated citizenship – how states create graduated rights regimes that stratify migrants into hierarchies of belonging (Ong, 2006; Morris, 2002; Bosniak, 2006). Singapore exemplifies these patterns with particular bureaucratic precision. Yet what I observed during fieldwork revealed something these frameworks don't fully capture: the active work contractors perform to transform administrative categories into lived hierarchies.

State policies create the architecture: Work Permits that bond workers to employers, levy rates that vary by nationality, dormitory requirements that segregate bodies. But these categories don't automatically produce the differential treatment I witnessed at Mr. Wee's worksite. Someone must decide that Malaysian lateness deserves understanding while Bangladeshi tardiness triggers wage deductions. Someone must designate corners where South Asian workers eat while Malaysians walk freely to hawker centres. These decisions emerge from contractors' calculations about what each category of worker will accept, calculations shaped by both economic incentives and racial logics that predate current policies.

The conventional framing suggests these disparities reflect market dynamics – skilled workers command better conditions through scarcity, unskilled workers accept constraints for higher wages than home offers. This explanation dissolves when confronted with the morning scene at the mall. The Bangladeshi workers who reorganized without question and the Malaysian workers who arrived three hours late weren't demonstrating different skill levels. They were navigating different relationships to precarity. The Bangladeshi workers' Work Permits meant deportation for defiance. The Malaysian workers' ability to return home daily meant Mr. Wee needed to maintain relationships rather than impose discipline. These structural vulnerabilities become naturalized through contractors' explanations about which nationalities "need" strict supervision versus family treatment, transforming policy-created constraints into supposed cultural characteristics.

For contractors like Mr. Wee, navigating this system of differentiated citizenship is not just a procedural matter of following formal regulations but requires understanding how different categories of workers can be managed, disciplined, and motivated based on their position

within Singapore's migration regime. Their practices – whom they hire for which roles, how they structure worksite interactions, how they discipline different categories of workers – actively reproduce hierarchies, translating abstract legal categories into concrete experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

In the following sections, I examine how this system of differentiated citizenship operates through multiple, overlapping mechanisms, focusing particularly on how contractors serve as intermediaries who both implement and sometimes challenge these hierarchies through their everyday practices of labour management. By tracing the specific ways in which citizenship categories shape wages, welfare provision, safety practices, and skill recognition, I show how contractors transform legal distinctions into profitable inequalities while navigating competing demands from the state, workers, and market forces.

### 6.1.1. The Historical Construction of Differential Skill

While these formal categories establish the contemporary architecture of differentiated citizenship, they did not emerge in a vacuum. To understand how skill, value, and belonging became so thoroughly differentiated in Singapore's construction industry, I turned to historical sources that might illuminate their development. After navigating complex bureaucratic procedures and waiting months for approval, I gained access to a set of archived documents from the Ministry of Labour at the National Archives of Singapore. Reading these archives alongside my ethnographic observations revealed how contemporary practices carry forward colonial-era logics of racial labour management, though translated through technical language of skills and qualifications. The contractors' rankings of migrant workers I overheard echoed evaluative frameworks visible in these historical documents, suggesting how racial hierarchies sediment across time even as their justifications shift from explicit racial discourse to administrative categorization.

Sitting at a designated terminal in the climate-controlled reading room, I scrolled through heavily redacted digital files where large sections of text appeared as black rectangles, rendering much of the content unreadable. These redactions themselves were revealing, a material manifestation of the politics of transparency and opacity governing knowledge production around migrant labour in Singapore.

As Ann Laura Stoler (2010) argues, colonial and postcolonial archives function not as neutral repositories of facts but as 'sites of command' reflecting the anxieties and assumptions of the powerful. Reading both along and against the grain of these fragmentary sources, I sought to uncover the "common sense" logics that have shaped Singapore's differentiated citizenship regime from its early postcolonial years to the present. Even through heavy redactions, patterns emerged in how workers were categorized and evaluated along lines of nationality, gender, and perceived temperament.

One partially redacted document from the 1970s contained a company representative's assessment of workers from different countries:

"Company has recruited 211 Thai girls and 12 Indonesian girls. [...] Company has found Indonesian girls different from the Thais, but similar to Malaysians. [...] The Thai girls can be good workers, with fairly good productivity, if strictly controlled, to minimize absenteeism. Thai girls however take up much of the Personnel Department's efforts in stringent supervision after office hours."

Another document recorded a meeting with a shipyard's personnel officer, who compared workers from India and Sri Lanka:

"Sri Lankans who are employed as general workers are better educated and hence more argumentative, politically minded, and harder to control. The Indians they have recruited are skilled, not so well educated and better disciplined. [...] India is a very good source of the skills required by the shipyard but Singapore has to compete with the Middle East for such workers." What struck me most in these historical documents was the explicitly gendered and racialized language used to evaluate different worker groups. The repeated references to "Thai girls" and "Indonesian girls," along with emphases on control and supervision, revealed deeply paternalistic attitudes toward female migrant workers. Similarly, the contrast drawn between "argumentative" educated Sri Lankans and "disciplined" Indians demonstrated how education and political consciousness were framed as problematic traits rather than assets when found in certain nationalities.

These historical patterns of differentiation continue to shape contemporary hierarchies in Singapore's construction industry, though in somewhat modified forms. The gendered dimension has largely disappeared from the construction sector, which now employs almost exclusively male migrants. However, the racialized attributions of skill, discipline, and temperament persist with remarkable continuity, operating independently of actual capabilities. The Bangladeshi workers I observed could diagnose complex electrical faults and execute precise tile work, yet contractors consistently described them as "unskilled" while Malaysian workers performing identical tasks were deemed to possess inherent aptitude. As Lisa Lowe (1996) argues in her analysis of Asian American labour history, such attributions are not just

cultural stereotypes but technologies of governance that rationalize differential treatment and compensation for different groups of workers.

### 6.1.2. Mapping Categories onto Bodies and Nations

The formal categories of Singapore's migration regime follow distinct patterns that show how differentiated citizenship intersects with broader regional hierarchies and colonial legacies. Work Permits for construction are overwhelmingly allocated to South Asian men (primarily from Bangladesh, India, and to a lesser extent, Sri Lanka) and smaller numbers from China, Myanmar, and Thailand. S Passes more frequently go to Chinese, Malaysian, and Filipino workers, while Employment Passes predominantly serve Chinese, Malaysian, Indian, and Western professionals.

These distributions become naturalized through popular discourses about national characteristics and aptitudes. Throughout my fieldwork, contractors and managers routinely justified their hiring preferences through nationalized stereotypes that transformed policy-created distinctions into seemingly natural cultural differences. During my interviews with contractors and site supervisors, a strikingly consistent hierarchy of worker nationalities emerged in their narratives. Seng, himself a migrant from Malaysia who had come to Singapore over two decades ago and risen to a supervisory position, articulated these rankings explicitly during our conversation in his office.

"Malaysian Chinese workers top one," he explained, gesturing with his hand to indicate superiority. "Then Thai workers, then Indian workers, then Bangladesh workers at bottom." When I asked what created this hierarchy, he elaborated based on his three decades of industry experience. His characterization of Bangladeshi workers was particularly revealing: "At first

they seem very good, very docile, but once they find out their friend in another company earning fifty cents more per hour, they become sour very fast. Then they start to 'jiat zhua'." He used the Hokkien term meaning "eat snake" – a vivid local expression for deliberately slacking off. "They'll work slowly, make mistakes, until you have no choice but to fire them. Then they can go to the other company."

Ethan, another supervisor, reinforced these characterizations, claiming that Bangladeshi workers would stop work precisely at the end of their shift, while Indian workers would often provide fifteen or twenty minutes of unpaid overtime if needed. "Bangladesh worker always watching the clock," he complained. "Five o'clock sharp, tools down, no matter what job situation. India worker more understanding, will finish properly before leaving."

These nationality-based assessments appeared consistently across interviews with different contractors, suggesting deeply entrenched industry-wide perceptions. Occasionally, contradictions emerged that exposed the constructed nature of these hierarchies. During one interview, after describing what he called typically Bangladeshi behaviour, Mr. Wee paused and added quietly, "But of course I can understand why they do that. It's a natural human instinct." This momentary recognition of universal human motivation stood in stark contrast to his usual categorical distinctions based on nationality.

The contrasting characterizations of Indian and Bangladeshi workers' approaches to overtime illuminate how cultural stereotypes become operationalized as mechanisms of value extraction. When contractors frame Indian workers' unpaid labour as cultural virtue while casting Bangladeshi insistence on proper compensation as moral deficit, they construct essentialised cultural deficiencies, where workers' bodies are sorted into hierarchies of expected productivity

that feel natural yet serve capital's interests.  Case in point: Aihwa Ong spent months on Malaysian assembly lines in the 1980s, watching supervisors craft elaborate stories about ethnic aptitudes – Malay women's "nimble fingers," Chinese discipline, Indian persistence (Ong, 1987). These cultural explanations provided moral cover for economic exploitation, transforming systematic discrimination into seemingly thoughtful management. Likewise, Carla Freeman's fieldwork in Barbadian data processing centres highlight how these processes travel globally (Freeman, 2000). Freeman traced how international employers feminized and racialized particular kinds of labour, and how workers internalized these narratives, speaking of their own "natural" suitability for pink-collar work even as the jobs offered few pathways to advancement. This represents the fundamental racialization and culturalization of migration, where economic relationships are transformed into seemingly natural cultural differences. What appears as cultural accommodation actually serves as sophisticated value extraction, creating stratified integration within migrant populations.

As Aihwa Ong (1999) demonstrates in her analysis of "flexible citizenship," such ethnically coded characterizations do not simply reflect cultural differences but actively produce differentiated regimes of labour discipline. The "calculativeness" attributed to Bangladeshi workers and the "understanding" nature ascribed to Indian workers are not neutral observations but normative judgments that legitimate differential treatment and compensation. By positioning certain behaviours as cultural characteristics rather than rational responses to structural conditions, contractors transform citizenship-based inequalities into seemingly natural differences in worker temperament and capability.

These stereotypes were neither universal nor consistent across my interviews. While contractors like Mr. Wee complained about Bangladeshi workers being overly "calculative,"

others like Mr Tan, who ran a medium-sized tiling company, praised the same group for being "very obedient" and "willing to work long hours." When pressed on these contradictory characterizations, it often emerged that contractors were generalizing from experiences with individual workers: a particularly diligent Bangladeshi employee would lead to positive stereotypes about the whole group, while a single dispute over overtime could colour perceptions of an entire nationality.

Through these processes, abstract administrative categories become mapped onto bodies marked by nationality, ethnicity, and perceived cultural attributes. The Work Permit holder becomes synonymous with the "Bangla" or "Tamil" worker; the S Pass holder becomes the "PRC technician"; the EP holder becomes the "expat engineer." These collapsed categories naturalize the hierarchies produced by Singapore's differentiated citizenship regime, making policy-created distinctions appear as natural differences between national groups.

### 6.1.3. Malaysian Workers and Liminal Citizenship

The case of Malaysian workers in Singapore's construction industry further complicates these hierarchies by introducing a category that straddles conventional boundaries between "local" and "foreign." Occupying a liminal position, Malaysian workers benefit from cultural and linguistic affinities with Singaporeans while remaining excluded from full citizenship rights and privileges.

Interestingly, the vast majority of Malaysian construction workers I encountered were ethnic Chinese, despite their minority status in Malaysia's overall population. This overrepresentation speaks to how ethnicity intersects with nationality to shape labour market opportunities and hierarchies. Many Chinese Malaysian workers cited experiences of economic marginalization

in Malaysia, with limited access to public sector employment and educational opportunities, as motivations for seeking work in Singapore.

Their linguistic capabilities and cultural familiarity with Chinese Singaporean contractors afford them significant advantages over other migrant groups. Many speak Hokkien, Cantonese, or other Chinese dialects common among contractors, enabling direct communication without translation. They understand local cultural references, social norms, and work expectations, reducing the "cultural friction" that often characterizes interactions between contractors and South Asian workers.

Archival sources suggest that Malaysian workers were actually the first group officially designated as "foreign workers" in Singapore following the political separation of the two territories in 1965. Despite centuries of fluid movement between these interconnected regions, the creation of national boundaries suddenly transformed familiar neighbours into foreign labourers. This historical context adds another dimension to Malaysian workers' ambiguous position – they represent both the oldest established category of foreign labour and the group least perceived as truly "foreign."

Malaysian Chinese workers benefit from cultural and linguistic "proximity capital" that enhances their perceived value relative to other migrant groups, even when performing identical tasks. The privileged position of Malaysian Chinese workers, particularly ethnic Chinese, within Singapore's construction hierarchy illuminates the lateral relations between differently racialized populations within postcolonial labour systems. In her analysis of colonial and postcolonial labour regimes, Lowe (2015) demonstrates how power operates not just through vertical exploitation but through horizontal differentiation between subordinated

groups. Malaysian Chinese workers occupy a revealing intermediate position in this spatial articulation. They are culturally and linguistically proximate to Chinese Singaporean contractors, yet legally categorized as foreign, benefiting from certain privileges while remaining vulnerable to exploitation.

This lateral positioning matters for Malaysian workers themselves and shapes how Singapore's entire construction hierarchy functions. As Lowe argues, these differentiated relationships between racialized populations are fundamental to how racial capitalism operates across colonial and postcolonial contexts. The relative privileges afforded to Malaysian Chinese workers – flexible mobility across the Causeway, greater cultural and linguistic capital, more personalized management approaches – produce distinctions that fragment potential solidarities between different categories of migrant workers.

When Mr. Wee explains that 'Malaysia worker you must treat like family' while Bangladeshi workers require 'clear rules,' he participates in what Lowe calls the 'production of difference' essential to racial capitalism's functioning. These differential experiences of management, intimacy, and recognition create the conditions for Malaysian workers to identify with contractors rather than with fellow labourers from South Asia, despite their shared legal status as non-citizens. This lateral differentiation, where some foreign workers receive familial treatment while others face rigid discipline, reveals how thoroughly Singapore's apparently neutral migration categories operate through racialized distinctions that have deep roots in colonial hierarchies of belonging.

Yet their in-between status also creates unique vulnerabilities, as illustrated by the tragic story of Chong San's worksite accident. The greater freedoms afforded to Malaysian workers,

including looser enforcement of safety protocols, can expose them to physical risks from which more strictly regulated workers are paradoxically protected. Their liminal citizenship thus functions as both privilege and potential liability, affording greater autonomy and recognition while sometimes reducing institutional protections.

### 6.1.4. Radical Capitalism Through Citizenship

Singapore's construction industry offers a critical site for examining how racial capitalism operates through seemingly race-neutral legal categories in contemporary global economies. Singapore's developmental state capitalism – its state-orchestrated coordination of labour flows, industrial planning, and economic development – provides the administrative infrastructure through which racial capitalism functions. The same bureaucratic systems that manage economic growth simultaneously produce and naturalize racialized hierarchies of labour, making citizenship categories the vehicle for racial differentiation.

While scholars like Cedric Robinson (1983) established racial capitalism as the process through which racialized hierarchies enable differentiated exploitation, Singapore's citizenship-based stratification system both confirms and complicates this theoretical framework. Writing against Marxist frameworks that treated capitalism and racism as separate systems, Robinson argued that capitalism has always been racial: the accumulation processes central to capitalism have historically depended on the production and exploitation of racialized difference. His account traced how European capitalism emerged through and required the racialization of populations, from feudal class systems to colonial slavery. For Robinson, racial hierarchies aren't aberrations within capitalism but constitute its operating logic.

When contractors like Seng explicitly rank workers ("Malaysian Chinese at the top, then Thai, then Indian, then Bangladeshi at the bottom"), they reveal a hierarchy that cannot be understood

through citizenship status alone. This ordering echoes what Jodi Melamed (2015:77) identifies as capitalism's need for "procedures of racialization" to organize and optimize extraction. Yet unlike contexts where race explicitly determines labour value, Singapore's system operates through administrative categories that appear neutral while producing racialized outcomes. This distinction matters not only analytically but politically. Though citizenship categories appear administratively rational and race-neutral, they are difficult to disentangle from the racialized perceptions that shape them from the outset. The legal framework provides bureaucratic legitimacy for hierarchies already informed by colonial histories and racialized assumptions about different national populations. Singapore's differentiated treatment of workers cannot be fully separated from longstanding perceptions about cultural compatibility, work ethic, and social distance; perceptions that citizenship categories formalize and legitimize through state administrative power.

This arrangement both extends and challenges racial capitalism theory in three key ways. First, it demonstrates how racial logics adapt to contexts where explicit racial hierarchies have become politically unacceptable. Rather than abandoning differentiated extraction, capitalism innovates new sorting mechanisms that achieve similar outcomes through different means. Singapore's citizenship categories function as what Goldberg (2009) might recognize as "racial neoliberalism", where market principles become racial principles without requiring explicit racial discourse.

Second, Singapore's construction industry shows how racial capitalism operates through legal technologies that sort bodies not by phenotype but by nationality, education, and skill certification. Contractors' constant rotation through different source countries, shifting from Thai to Bangladeshi workers when wages rise, implements what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002:

16) terms the "death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies," but through mechanisms that appear as rational labour market decisions rather than racial exploitation. This legal technology of racialization operates more flexibly than traditional racial categories, allowing for fine-tuned calibration of vulnerability and extraction across multiple, overlapping dimensions.

Third, the Malaysian Chinese workers' experience highlights how completely contemporary racial capitalism has adapted beyond simple black/white or colonizer/colonized binaries. These workers occupy an ambiguous middle ground – culturally proximate to Chinese Singaporean contractors yet legally categorized as foreign, benefiting from certain privileges while remaining vulnerable to exploitation. Their position demonstrates capitalism's ability, as Lowe (2015) argues, to simultaneously differentiate and connect various populations through distinct yet related modes of exploitation and governance.

This analysis builds on racial capitalism scholarship that recognizes how racialization operates through administrative mechanisms rather than phenotype. Melamed (2015) traces how multicultural inclusion creates new racial divisions, Goldberg (2009) examines racial neoliberalism's bureaucratic forms. Singapore's differentiated citizenship exemplifies these processes. Racialization, as Melamed argues, doesn't always code as race or follow black/white binaries; it operates through nationality, documentation status, skill classifications. Singapore's sorting of workers by nationality into precisely gradated vulnerability demonstrates how contemporary capitalism innovates new differentiating mechanisms while preserving key extractive functions historically associated with race.

For contractors, this system enables what might be called “moral arbitrage”, extracting value from citizenship-based vulnerability while maintaining narratives of fairness and opportunity. When Jimmy dismisses “jumping ship” as showing poor “attitude” rather than recognizing it as a reasonable response to structural exploitation, he demonstrates how completely citizenship-based hierarchies have been naturalized as reflecting individual character rather than systematic sorting. This moral positioning allows contractors to present themselves as fair employers while implementing differential treatment that would be indefensible if explicitly racialized.

This refined understanding of racial capitalism contributes to the chapter’s broader examination of differentiated citizenship by illuminating the specific mechanisms through which administrative categories become technologies of extraction. Neither simple agents of exploitation nor innocent intermediaries caught between larger forces, contractors actively leverage citizenship-based hierarchies while navigating their own vulnerabilities within Singapore’s managed capitalism. By examining how they implement, interpret, and occasionally subvert these hierarchies, we gain insight into the specific mechanisms through which Singapore’s economic development has depended on the careful management of differentiated citizenship as a technology of racialized value extraction.

Singapore’s system of differentiated citizenship shares features with other global contexts of migrant labour while maintaining distinctive characteristics that illuminate broader patterns of racialized labour extraction. Seth Holmes’ (2013) ethnography of Mexican farmworkers in the United States reveals similar processes of embodied hierarchy, where certain bodies are rendered structurally vulnerable through legal classifications that limit mobility and rights. Like Singapore’s Work Permit holders, Mexican farmworkers experience what Holmes terms

the naturalization of suffering, where structural violence becomes interpreted as cultural predisposition or biological difference. The difference with Singapore's system is how it creates multiple, finely calibrated tiers of foreign labour rather than a simple citizen/non-citizen binary, that allows for more precise extraction of value from differently positioned bodies.

The Singapore case also resonates with Hans Lucht's (2011) work on Ghanaian migrants in Italy and Krause's (2018) studies of Chinese migrants in Italian manufacturing. Both scholars trace how racial hierarchies emerge through the intimate textures of migrant life, though they attend to different registers of exclusion. Lucht's time among Ghanaian fishermen in Naples exposes the raw immediacy of discrimination. The daily navigation of workplace bigotry, the desperate competition for day labour at roadside pickup points, the way spatial marginalization compounds racial othering. His ethnography captures how migrants find themselves fighting each other for scraps of work while enduring what he describes as flagrant abuse. Krause's fieldwork in Prato's textile workshops operates at a different frequency, tracking the quieter violence of institutional encounters. Through encounter ethnography, she follows Chinese migrants through routine bureaucratic interactions like postnatal checkups, interactions that appear procedurally neutral but consistently reinforce cultural hierarchies. Where Lucht documents the spectacular forms of racism, Krause reveals its bureaucratic mediation. Her subjects navigate endless regulations around borders and residence, each encounter reproducing subtle power imbalances between migrants and Italian institutions. Together, these ethnographies illuminate how racialized labour systems operate across multiple scales, from the brutal immediacy of workplace discrimination to the administrative choreography of state encounters that quietly reproduce difference.

However, Singapore's system is distinctive in its state-managed precision and institutional embeddedness. Unlike the often chaotic and partially informal incorporation of migrant labour in Italy, Singapore's migration regime operates through highly formalized channels while still creating racialized outcomes. This comparison shows how racial capitalism adapts to different political contexts, operating through irregular and semi-legal channels in Southern Europe while taking on highly regulated, bureaucratically sophisticated forms in Singapore's developmental state. Where Italian migration unfolds through the uneven terrain that Lucht and Krause map, such as roadside labour markets, workshop raids, bureaucratic encounters that may or may not follow protocol, Singapore orchestrates mobility with technocratic efficiency. The city-state's foreign worker permits create precise hierarchies: Employment Pass holders from the Global North enjoy pathways to permanent residence, while Work Permit holders from South and Southeast Asia face systematic barriers to settlement. These are not the haphazard exclusions of overtaxed Italian municipalities but carefully calibrated policies that segment workers by nationality, education, and skill level. Singapore's administrators don't rely on the kind of institutional improvisation that Krause observes in Prato's health clinics or schools. Instead, they deploy sophisticated bureaucratic instruments such as salary thresholds, dependency ratios, and spatial restrictions that appear neutral while producing racially stratified outcomes. The levy system makes employers pay differential rates for workers from different countries. Dormitory requirements segregate certain nationalities in purpose-built housing estates. These mechanisms achieve what the chaotic Italian system accomplishes through informal networks and street-level discrimination: a racialized hierarchy of labour that serves capital accumulation while maintaining political stability. Singapore thus underscores how racial capitalism can operate through the very sophistication of state capacity rather than its absence.

Singapore's system differs from Christina Schwenkel's studies of Vietnamese workers in Eastern Germany during the socialist period. While both systems involved state-to-state labour agreements and managed migration, the socialist context emphasized worker education and technology transfer alongside labour provision. Singapore's system, by contrast, deliberately maintains zones of graduated sovereignty that structurally limit most workers' access to settlement rights, skill development, or social incorporation. This comparison highlights how capitalism's specific formations, rather than migration itself, create particular configurations of racialized vulnerability through citizenship stratification.

Schwenkel's ethnography of Vietnamese contract workers in East German factories describe a fundamentally different logic of managed mobility. The socialist state may have extracted labour, but it also invested in human development through language training, technical education, cultural exchange programs that treated workers as future builders of socialism rather than temporary units of production. Vietnamese workers learned industrial skills they could take home; some studied architecture and urban planning that would later rebuild war-torn cities. The East German system, for all its hierarchies and contradictions, operated on the premise that worker development served broader socialist internationalist goals.

Singapore's technocratic apparatus works differently. Foreign workers remain deliberately temporary, their permits renewable but never convertible to permanent status. The system channels different nationalities into different sectors: Bangladeshis for construction, Filipinas for domestic work, Indians for shipyards. Unlike the socialist investment in worker education, Singapore's policies actively prevent skill development that might threaten local employment or enable settlement. Workers cannot bring families, cannot change employers easily, cannot access most social services. Where East Germany's managed migration aimed at building

socialist subjects, Singapore's creates a renewable reserve army of temporarily present but permanently foreign labour. The comparison illuminates how different political economies shape the possibilities and limitations of human mobility – socialism's flawed but expansive vision of worker development versus capitalism's efficient extraction of labour power stripped of social reproduction costs.

Singapore's differentiated citizenship regime offers a particularly interesting case study in administrative racialization, where seemingly technical bureaucratic classifications produce racialized outcomes without requiring explicitly racial discourse. Unlike contexts where race directly determines legal status (as in historical systems of racial segregation) or where migration status maps clearly onto phenotypical difference, Singapore's system operates through finely calibrated administrative categories that preserve the appearance of meritocratic rationality while producing strikingly similar patterns of hierarchical incorporation. By creating multiple tiers of foreign labour with precisely calibrated rights and restrictions, Singapore's migration regime allows for fine-tuned extraction from differently positioned bodies while maintaining institutional distances between exploitation and accountability. This naturalization of inequality represents racial capitalism's core innovation – creating systems where racialized exploitation appears as neutral market outcomes rather than political arrangements requiring justification. Singapore's case is significant not because it invents new forms of exploitation, but because it demonstrates how thoroughly these can be rationalized, bureaucratized, and incorporated into a development model celebrated globally for its efficiency and modernity.

### 6.1.5. Contractors as Strategic Mediators

For contractors, this elaborately stratified system creates both constraints and opportunities, requiring sophisticated calculation about how to extract maximum value while remaining

compliant with complex regulations. Their position, suspended between state policies, market pressures, and worksite realities, grants them significant discretion in how citizenship hierarchies materialize in daily practice. Neither fully aligned with state power nor identified with worker interests, contractors occupy an ambiguous middle ground where they translate abstract policies into concrete practices while pursuing their own economic survival.

Each hiring decision involves calculating skills and wages, but also levy costs, quota implications, and the differential rights and restrictions attached to each worker category. At Super Cool, this citizenship calculus materialized visibly on a whiteboard in Adam's office, where Adam and Yulia maintained an elaborate table mapping out the complex matrix of nationality-specific salary expectations and levy rates. The whiteboard documented how different bodies carried different costs: Bangladeshi and Indian Work Permit holders commanded lower salaries but incurred higher monthly levies. A Basic Skilled (R2) worker without Core Trade certification cost an additional S$900 monthly in government levies, while a Higher Skilled (R1) Core Trade-certified worker reduced this to S$500. Malaysian workers, meanwhile, enjoyed privileges through longstanding bilateral arrangements that exempted them from security bond requirements, allowing recruitment with reduced bureaucratic friction, creating administrative ease that constituted a form of citizenship privilege.

Through fieldwork, I quickly discovered that skill certification operated primarily as a mechanism for levy reduction rather than recognition of genuine capability. During my fieldwork at Super Cool, I observed this firsthand while preparing tender documents. I found myself stapling painting skill certificates for workers who were primarily air-conditioning and mechanical ventilation technicians. When I inquired about this apparent mismatch, Chia Yi explained matter-of-factly: "Painting easiest CTC test to pass. AC/MV very technical, harder

to pass. Same levy reduction either way." This strategic deployment of certifications, securing the "easiest" qualifications regardless of actual job function, shows how thoroughly the skill recognition system had been reinterpreted as a mechanism for navigating levy structures rather than developing genuine technical expertise.

The absurdity struck me as I sat at that desk, mechanically attaching certificates that bore no relation to the work these men actually performed. Why invest months training workers in complex HVAC systems when a weekend painting course delivered the same financial benefit? The Building and Construction Authority's elaborate testing regime designed to elevate industry standards and recognize skilled labour had been quietly transformed into an accounting exercise. Though not exactly fraud, it highlighted the complete subordination of skill development to financial optimization. Workers learned to game the system too, accumulating certificates in trades they'd never practice. I watched men who could diagnose complex refrigeration problems study for basic electrical tests because those came with faster certification timelines. The irony was profound. Singapore's technocratic apparatus, so precise in its categorizations, had inadvertently created perverse incentives that undermined its own stated goals.

The strategies contractors developed to maximize value extraction within regulatory constraints operated through careful choreography of compliance and circumvention. They rotated workers between nominally separate companies to stay within quota limits, classified workers in higher skill categories on paper while assigning them lower-skilled tasks, and maintained multiple record-keeping systems for different regulatory audiences.

Mr Tan guided me through his company's parallel documentation systems with the practiced ease of someone who had perfected this routine over years. Mr Tan's office occupied one unit among hundreds in Jurong's sprawling industrial estate, where identical warehouse blocks stretched toward the horizon in geometric precision. The corridors inside hummed with harsh fluorescent lighting that made every surface feel antiseptic and temporary. When he opened the door to his company's unit, the first thing that greeted visitors was a small altar tucked into the corner: a Chinese prosperity god surrounded by burnt incense sticks, the sweet smoke offering a momentary reprieve from the building's sterile atmosphere.

His finger traced columns in the expensive HR software he had purchased – neat eight-hour days, scheduled rest periods, overtime carefully calculated within legal parameters. "This record for MOM," he explained, referring to the Ministry of Manpower's monitoring capabilities. The software had cost thousands of dollars and promised seamless compliance tracking, yet Mr Tan rarely used it for actual scheduling.

Instead, he flipped to what he called the real record: a handwritten ledger that tracked the same workers through twelve-hour shifts, consecutive weeks without breaks, overtime hours that would trigger regulatory sanctions if officially reported. "Software too transparent," he explained with a slight grimace. "Government can audit the system anytime. They see everything – when workers clock in, clock out, how many hours overtime. Cannot put more than the legal limit or red flag comes up."

The irony struck me as I sat in his air-conditioned office surrounded by the latest project management technology. The digital tools designed to streamline operations had become constraints that forced analogue workarounds. Mr Tan had invested in sophisticated HR

software only to discover that its transparency made it unsuitable for his actual labour practices. The real scheduling happened in notebooks that could disappear if auditors arrived, while the official system displayed perfect compliance with regulations that bore little resemblance to the rhythms of construction work.

The dual timesheets at Mr. Tan's office encoded moral economies of remuneration (Sargent, 2019) of competing visions of what workers deserve and why. The official ledger presented clean eight-hour days and calculated overtime, a bureaucratic fiction that satisfied Ministry of Manpower audits. The real record told something different. These parallel accounting systems embodied moral frameworks that transformed identical labour into different categories of value. Where Sargent (2018) found Delhi contractors navigating between piece-rate contracts and kinship-based wage relations, Singapore's contractors operated through citizenship-based moral economies that naturalized differential payment through cultural narratives. The Malaysian supervisor who could negotiate flexible hours inhabited one moral universe; the Bangladeshi labourer whose hours were strictly monitored and circumscribed by regulations and wage scales existed in another. This practice highlights a profound paradox in Singapore's labour protection framework. The Employment Act's overtime provisions formally universal protections applying to all workers earning below S$2,600 monthly regardless of citizenship, ostensibly safeguard vulnerable workers from exploitation. Yet in practice, these protections create a citizenship-specific enforcement gap because contractors selectively circumvent them precisely for those workers whose precarious status prevents them from filing complaints. This way, universal protections become stratified experiences through selective implementation rather than explicitly discriminatory policies. While the law appears neutral, its implementation follows citizenship hierarchies with surgical precision. The same regulation that shields citizens

also becomes a tool of control over migrants, creating what appears to be equal treatment while delivering systematically unequal outcomes.

Most contractors expressed ambivalence about this mediating role. At Kim San Bistro, they positioned themselves as victims rather than beneficiaries of the system, complaining about increasing levies, tightening quotas, and growing regulatory complexity. “Government squeeze us from every direction,” lamented Mr Tan during a particularly animated evening discussion. “Levy go up, dormitory cost go up, safety requirement more strict. But tender price still must be competitive. They think contractor printing money, but actually margin getting smaller every year.”

This self-perception as squeezed intermediaries rather than agents of exploitation reveals the complex subjectivity contractors develop within Singapore’s construction ecosystem. They experience themselves not as privileged citizens exploiting vulnerable migrants but as struggling entrepreneurs navigating hostile regulatory environments. This positioning allows them to deflect responsibility for worker conditions onto larger structural forces, such as main contractors, developers, and government policies, while minimizing their own agency in reproducing exploitation.

Even as they complain about regulations, contractors strategically leverage the differentiated citizenship regime to maintain profitability. They have adapted their business models to extract maximum value within regulatory constraints, developing specialized knowledge about how to navigate quotas, minimize levy costs, and manage workers from different categories. Their frustration stems not from opposition to the system’s fundamental hierarchies, but from restrictions on their ability to exploit these hierarchies more freely.

### 6.2. The Slippage Between Citizenship, Skill and Power: "Attitude" and Agency

The formal categories of Singapore's migration regime gain their force through slippage that occurs on construction sites, where citizenship status becomes conflated with skill, skill with attitude, and attitude with inherent cultural attributes. Through this chain of associations, policy-created legal distinctions transform into seemingly natural hierarchies of competence and character.

#### 6.2.1 Attitude as Citizenship Performance

One curious way in which this slippage operates is the primacy of "attitude" over technical proficiency in worker evaluations. During my fieldwork, contractors consistently privileged disposition and compliance above demonstrated capability when assessing workers, a criterion that appears neutral but powerfully reinforces citizenship hierarchies. Jimmy, a local carpentry subcontractor, articulated this perspective with striking clarity:

"A good worker is all about attitude and responsibility," he declared emphatically. "I don't care if your workmanship is good or not, if your attitude is not good, I won't hire you no matter how good you may be."

This evaluation framework operates as a technology of differentiated citizenship through its definition of "good attitude." The qualities contractors valued included unquestioning compliance, expressions of gratitude, and willingness to work beyond contractual hours. These were precisely the performances of subordination that Work Permit holders must enact to maintain their precarious legal status. For workers whose right to remain in Singapore depends on a single employer, demonstrating the "right attitude" becomes a survival imperative that exceeds professional strategy.

The system thus creates its own justifications through circular logic. Precarious citizenship necessitates behavioural deference, which contractors then interpret as evidence of superior character traits. Workers perform gratitude because their permits depend on employer satisfaction, yet contractors read this performance as authentic cultural disposition toward respect and hard work. This cycle transforms legal vulnerability into apparent moral superiority. The same precarity that forces deferential behaviour becomes evidence for cultural narratives about work ethic and attitude. Contractors can maintain that they treat workers differently based on character assessments rather than citizenship status, while the character assessments themselves emerge from citizenship-based vulnerabilities. The framework allows systematic discrimination to appear as merit-based evaluation, obscuring how legal precarity shapes the very behaviours that justify differential treatment.

The moral dimensions of this evaluative framework became explicit when Jimmy characterized workers who questioned instructions or requested proper compensation: “Some of these workers, they’re just lazy and stubborn. They don’t want to learn, don’t want to follow instructions. They think they know everything just because they’ve worked a few years in the industry. But actually, they’re just pig-brained.”

This dehumanizing language, transforming resistance to exploitation into evidence of intellectual deficiency, performs crucial ideological work. As Ghassan Hage (2000) argues in his analysis of national belonging, such discourses construct certain groups as perpetually foreign others requiring domestication and constant discipline. By framing resistance as moral failing or inherent limitation rather than rational response to structural conditions, these

characterizations naturalize citizenship hierarchies as reflections of workers' intrinsic qualities rather than policy-created statuses.

The emphasis on "attitude" functions as a sorting mechanism determining who qualifies as a proper subject of labour relations and who requires paternalistic management. Workers who demonstrate the "right attitude" are recognized as legitimate subjects with whom reciprocal, if unequal, relations are possible. Those categorized as having "bad attitudes", a designation that disproportionately falls on those with the most precarious legal status, are positioned as inadequately formed subjects requiring discipline rather than negotiation. This pattern extends beyond Singapore; scholars of migration have documented similar dynamics where compliance and deference become proxies for workers' fitness for inclusion (Anderson, 2013; Parreñas, 2001).

### 6.2.2. Management as Citizenship Enforcement

The slippage between citizenship, skill, and character materializes through citizenship-specific management practices that contractors have developed over decades. At construction sites throughout Singapore, I observed how different categories of workers were managed through distinct approaches that corresponded precisely to their legal status and consequent bargaining power.

With Bangladeshi and Indian Work Permit holders, contractors maintained formal distance, issuing instructions through supervisors rather than direct communication, conducting regular inspections, and implementing structured reward and punishment systems. With Malaysian and Chinese workers on higher-tier passes, they adopted a more relational approach based on personal trust, informal negotiation, and mutual obligation.

Mr. Wee explained this differentiated approach matter-of-factly: “Malaysia worker you must treat like family. Give face, understand their situation, sometimes can close one eye if they need to take emergency leave. Bangladesh worker different. Must be clear about rules, check their work regularly, otherwise quality will drop.”

What his explanation reveals is not arbitrary cultural preference, but a strategic adaptation to the constraints and opportunities created by the citizenship regime. Malaysian workers’ greater mobility, i.e., their ability to return home easily or find alternative employment, necessitates relationship-building approaches that acknowledge their bargaining power. Bangladeshi workers’ legal precarity, i.e. their dependence on a single employer for continued legal presence, enables more directive management based on formal authority rather than negotiated consent. These differentiated practices create distinct experiences of authority, autonomy, and value based on legal status. Through everyday decisions about who receives direct communication versus hierarchical instruction, whose time is flexibly interpreted versus strictly monitored, contractors transform abstract legal distinctions into embodied experiences of differential worth.

This management differentiation extends to spatial organization and temporal discipline. Work teams at Super Cool were organized along national lines – Bangladeshi workers under Bangladeshi supervisors, Burmese workers under Burmese foremen – creating parallel hierarchies justified through communication efficiency. In practice, this arrangement reinforced social boundaries between worker categories and prevented the development of cross-national solidarity that might challenge workplace hierarchies.

Similarly, temporal discipline followed citizenship contours. Work Permit holders faced strict monitoring of arrival times, break durations, and departures, with formal attendance procedures and penalties for tardiness. Higher-tier workers experienced more flexible timekeeping, with punctuality managed through informal social pressure rather than punitive measures. These differential approaches to time reflect fundamental assumptions about which bodies require strict regulation and which deserve temporal autonomy, assumptions that correspond precisely to citizenship categories while appearing as cultural characteristics or individual temperaments.

### 6.2.3. Differential Capacity for Agency

The slippage between citizenship and character becomes particularly evident when examining how workers attempt to exercise agency within the constraints of differentiated citizenship. Each citizenship category creates distinct possibilities for navigating, contesting, or occasionally transcending hierarchical constraints, possibilities that are then interpreted through moral frameworks that obscure their structural foundations.

One key strategy involves what contractors criticized as workers "jumping ship" between companies for slightly higher wages. Jimmy, a wood-working contractor in his fifties, described this practice with evident moral disapproval: "These workers, they're not loyal. They work for you for a few months, and then as soon as they hear about a slightly better pay somewhere else, they leave."

From his perspective, such mobility represents a moral failing, an absence of proper gratitude and commitment. Yet this moral framing masks how dramatically unequal this form of resistance is across citizenship categories. For Malaysian workers, especially ethnic Chinese with linguistic and cultural affinities to Singapore, job mobility represents a relatively accessible and low-risk strategy. Their geographic proximity to home, stronger social networks,

and greater cultural capital enable them to move between employers with minimal disruption to their livelihood or status.

For Bangladeshi workers on Work Permits, however, similar strategies carry catastrophic risks. Changing employers typically requires returning to Bangladesh and re-applying through recruitment agencies, incurring substantial costs and employment gaps. The structural limitations on their mobility, created explicitly by Work Permit regulations, explain precisely the behaviours employers criticize: insistence on contractual working hours and attention to comparative wages represent rational responses to their limited bargaining power and high costs of job change.

The racialization of these differential mobility strategies becomes explicit in contractors' characterizations of similar behaviours across worker categories. Adam, my supervisor and a Malay Singaporean contractor at Super Cool, expressed frustration with local Malay workers using almost identical language to that applied to Bangladeshi workers: "The Malays come. They work, today (give out salary), tomorrow cannot come. Give all sorts of stupid nonsense. Not to be racist, but they will tell me, today cannot come. My body aching. I need to send my grandmother to hospital."

What makes these comments revealing is not simply their echo of colonial stereotypes about Malay "laziness", stereotypes that as Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) demonstrated, served specific economic functions during the colonial period. Rather, their significance lies in how they illustrate the persistence of racial taxonomies within ostensibly race-neutral citizenship categories. Adam's frustration stems from employing workers whose citizenship status grants them greater labour market options and legal protections than those available to non-citizens.

The “laziness” he criticizes might better be understood as a form of labour power that citizenship rights make possible, which is the ability to withhold labour without facing deportation.

This dynamic illustrates what Claudio Sopranzetti (2017) identifies as “relative freedom” in his ethnography of Bangkok motorcycle taxi drivers, freedom operates not as an absolute condition but as a relational value defined against alternative constraints. For Bangkok’s motorcycle taxi drivers, the appeal of their profession lies not in absolute autonomy but in the particular configuration of freedoms and unfreedoms it offers relative to factory work, such as the ability to determine daily schedules and income levels while remaining subject to structural precarity and informal regulations. The behaviours characterized as problematic in Malay Singaporeans represent precisely the relative freedoms that citizenship affords, such as the ability to prioritize family obligations, to change jobs without severe penalty, and to assert boundaries around working time. From contractors’ perspectives, these citizenship-based freedoms appear as moral failings rather than legitimate rights, creating a “moral economy of mobility” where the same behaviours are coded as either legitimate or problematic based on who exercises them.

This framework illuminates the paradoxical treatment of workers across Singapore’s construction industry. Bangladeshi workers face criticism for being “calculative” when they insist on proper compensation, behaviours representing their limited means of exercising agency within highly constrained conditions. Conversely, Malay Singaporeans face criticism for exercising precisely the autonomy that Bangladeshis lack. In both cases, what appears problematic is not the specific behaviour but workers’ attempts to exercise whatever limited agency their position affords.

The moral framing of differential mobility obscures how thoroughly these possibilities are structured by citizenship status. By rendering structural constraints as cultural predispositions (Bangladeshis are "calculative," Malays are "lazy," Malaysians "understand our culture"), this discourse transforms citizenship-based inequalities into seemingly natural differences between national groups. The slippage between legal status, cultural character, and moral worth creates a system where policy-created hierarchies appear as natural differences, justifying differential treatment while obscuring its political foundations.

### 6.2.4. Exceptional Pathways and System Legitimation

Occasionally, exceptional relationships develop that appear to transcend citizenship boundaries. Some contractors sponsor valued workers for skill certifications that increase their wages, help long-term employees transition from Work Permits to S Passes, or even support applications for Permanent Residency. The story of Denpo, whom I elaborate on in the next chapter, exemplifies this exceptional arc. These exceptions, however, remain precisely that – individual accommodations that leave the broader system intact. Rather than challenging differentiated citizenship's fundamental logics, these exceptional pathways reinforce its core premise that rights should be earned through extraordinary contribution rather than guaranteed based on human dignity. By requiring exceptional performance, language acquisition, and "cultural integration" for mobility between citizenship categories, these pathways naturalize the hierarchies they appear to transcend.

More significantly, these exceptional cases serve an important legitimating function. The occasional success story of the Work Permit holder who becomes a supervisor, the S Pass holder who obtains Permanent Residency creates a narrative of meritocratic possibility that obscures the structural barriers preventing most workers from achieving similar mobility. By focusing attention on individual characteristics that enable exceptional advancement such as

Denpo's university education, his technical skills, his "different" nature, these narratives reinforce the very conflation of citizenship with merit that underpins differentiated citizenship.

### 6.2.5. The Production of Citizenship Through Character

The slippage between citizenship, skill, and character reveals how thoroughly differentiated citizenship operates as a productive rather than merely restrictive system. It doesn't simply limit rights and mobility for certain categories of workers but actively produces subjects suited to particular positions within Singapore's stratified labour market. Through everyday evaluations of "attitude," differentiated management practices, and moral narratives about mobility, contractors transform abstract legal categories into embodied dispositions and identities.

What emerges is a system where citizenship becomes conflated with character, legal status with inherent worth, and structural constraint with cultural predisposition. This slippage reproduces existing hierarchies by naturalizing policy-created distinctions as inherent differences between national groups. The circular logic that Bangladeshi workers need strict management because they lack initiative; they appear to lack initiative because their precarious status makes assertiveness catastrophically risk, transforms contingent policy decisions into seemingly natural social facts.

For contractors navigating Singapore's construction industry, this slippage serves both practical and ideological functions. Practically, it enables maximum value extraction from differently positioned workers by calibrating management approaches to their specific vulnerabilities and constraints. Ideologically, it justifies differential treatment as responding to inherent worker qualities rather than exploiting structural inequalities. By transforming policy-created distinctions into apparently natural differences, this slippage allows contractors to see

themselves not as agents of exploitation but as pragmatic managers responding to workforce realities.

### 6.3. From Categories to Lived Hierarchies

Through these interconnected processes of the establishment of formal categories, their historical construction as racialized skill hierarchies, their mediation by contractors through strategic practices, and their negotiation by workers through limited mobility and resistance, Singapore's differentiated citizenship regime transforms from abstract policy into lived reality. The formal architecture established by state policies becomes inhabited, interpreted, contested, and reproduced through everyday interactions that determine how different bodies experience construction work.

What emerges is a comprehensive social ordering that shapes how different bodies experience space, time, value, risk, and recognition. How does a work permit transform into lived experience? Through countless daily practices that sort workers into different worlds of possibility. The Malaysian supervisor enters job sites without question while the Bangladeshi worker fumbles for permits at every checkpoint. These differences accumulate across scales both intimate and institutional. The permit holder becomes a particular kind of body that moves through space differently, experiences time differently, carries risk differently. The result is parallel worlds of citizenship within the same construction sites. Workers inhabit the same physical spaces while navigating entirely different regulatory landscapes, social expectations, and possibilities for grievance or advancement. Singapore's migration apparatus succeeds precisely through this multiplication of experience, creating hierarchies so naturalized that they feel like the inevitable organization of difference rather than the careful construction of inequality.

For contractors, navigating these hierarchies requires sophisticated practices of differentiation and mediation. Through everyday decisions about whom to hire for which positions, how to organize work teams, which behaviours to reward or punish, whose mistakes to forgive and whose to penalize, they implement, interpret, and occasionally modify citizenship hierarchies established by state policies. Their role is neither purely deterministic, mechanically implementing state categories, nor entirely autonomous. The following sections examine how these processes manifest in healthcare access, accommodation standards, and safety practices. Here, the consequences of differentiated citizenship become visible in workers' physical well-being and bodily integrity. These domains show how abstract categories acquire material force, shaping not just economic opportunities but the fundamental conditions under which migrant workers inhabit their bodies while building Singapore's urban landscape.

### 6.3.1. Differentiated Welfare: Graduated Care and Protection

My focus on healthcare access and safety practices as key domains of differentiated citizenship stems from their unique capacity to reveal both the material consequences of citizenship stratification and contractors' crucial intermediary role in implementing these hierarchies. These domains matter not merely as workplace issues but as sites where abstract administrative classifications become literally embodied through differential exposure to harm, illness, and care. Medical anthropologists have documented how inequality becomes literally embodied through differential exposure to harm and access to care (Farmer, 2003; Holmes, 2013), where social hierarchies materialize as physical differences in morbidity, mortality, and bodily integrity. In contexts where explicit discussions of racial or citizenship-based discrimination remain politically sensitive, examining who receives what level of care and protection provides a concrete empirical window into how differentiated citizenship operates beneath official narratives of meritocracy and universal protection.

These domains capture how contractors inhabit the contradictions of differentiated citizenship on a daily basis. But in decisions about damaged bodies and workplace hazards, the smooth operation of citizenship sorting sometimes falters. Healthcare and safety expose citizenship hierarchies at their most visceral. A dislocated shoulder becomes a calculation about treatment costs versus worker replaceability. These moments transform legal abstractions into immediate questions of whose body deserves protection.

But contractors also create small ruptures in these hierarchies. Adam's insistence on proper medical care regardless of nationality, his willingness to absorb costs for worker welfare, his careful attention to dormitory overcrowding, are all practices that emerge from personal relationships that exceed citizenship logic. When Mr. Wee describes a particular Indian worker as "like family" while maintaining general hierarchies, he occupies the space between systematic sorting and individual care. These domains matter precisely because they make visible both the ruthless efficiency of differentiated citizenship and the moments when its human costs become unbearable even to those who profit from its operation.

### 6.3.2. Healthcare as a Site of Differentiation

Healthcare access emerged as another domain where contractors operationalized differentiated citizenship through everyday decisions about which bodies deserved what level of care. Singapore's regulatory framework requires a minimum level of medical insurance for all Work Permit holders, with employers responsible for medical expenses up to S$15,000 annually, revised to $60,000 for policies effective after 1 July 2023.[83] However, this formal equality masks profound differences in how healthcare actually functions across worker categories.

[83] Ministry of Manpower (MOM). n.d. "Medical insurance requirements for migrant workers." Webpage. https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/sector-specific-rules/medical-insurance/.

At Super Cool, where I conducted six months of participant observation, these differences materialized during a monthly welfare meeting between management and worker representatives. Chia Yi, a representative from the company's commercial affairs team, was explaining details about the new Primary Healthcare System (PHS) introduced by the Ministry of Manpower. The plan included unlimited medical consultations, transportation to clinics, and annual health screenings, with workers responsible for only a S$5 co-payment per visit.

As Chia Yi described these benefits, Kumar, a Bangladeshi worker representative, asked whether the S$5 co-payment could be claimed through the company's insurance. His question prompted an immediate and disproportionate response from Yulia, the assistant director:

"Why so stingy over just five dollars?" she said sharply. "Your health is more important. Don't wait until you're very sick just to save five dollars."

Denpo, the migrant worker manager, joined in: "Kumar, why you ask this kind of question? Company already paying for the insurance."

Yulia continued with increasing irritation: "The PHS is for your benefit, but it's also an additional cost for the company. We're already facing a global recession, and we need to be careful with our budget. You should be grateful that the company is complying with MOM requirements."

This exchange revealed the contradictory messages embedded in the company's approach to worker healthcare. On one hand, workers were encouraged to seek prompt medical attention

when needed. On the other, they were chastised for inquiring about cost coverage and reminded to be "grateful" for provisions that were legally mandated. Kumar's attempt to clarify a simple administrative question was reframed as evidence of "stinginess" and insufficient appreciation for the company's compliance with basic regulations.

This maternalistic response where adult workers are treated as children who needed to be schooled in proper appreciation exemplified how welfare provision became a site for reinforcing power hierarchies rather than ensuring worker wellbeing. The subtext was clear: healthcare was presented as a generous gift rather than a fundamental right, with workers expected to demonstrate appropriate gratitude rather than ask questions about implementation. In private conversations with Singaporean contractors, I discovered deeper suspicions about workers' healthcare utilization. Mr. Wee, Seng, and Ethan shared anecdotes about workers supposedly "inventing" reasons to obtain medical leave. Mr. Wee recounted a story of a worker allegedly drinking hot soup to artificially raise his temperature before a medical examination. Seng claimed he had caught workers on medical leave "hanging out in Little India, drinking beer" when they should have been resting.

These narratives of worker deception served to justify restrictions on healthcare access that would be unthinkable for Singaporean employees or higher-tier pass holders. Contractors routinely implemented practices that constrained workers' ability to seek medical care: requiring supervisor approval before clinic visits, demanding detailed justification for medical leave requests, and sometimes contesting doctors' recommendations if they resulted in extended work absences.

### 6.3.3. Accommodations as Embodied Hierarchy

Beyond healthcare, workers' living conditions provided another domain where differentiated citizenship materialized through contractors' decisions about who deserved what kind of housing. Singapore's regulatory framework establishes minimum standards for foreign worker accommodation, but these requirements vary significantly across worker categories and leave substantial discretion to employers regarding implementation.

The segregated geographies of worker housing inscribe citizenship hierarchies directly onto Singapore's physical landscape. Earlier, as part of my work with various migrant worker collectives and my internship with the Foreign Manpower Management Division of the Ministry of Manpower, I had visited various accommodation types that housed construction workers, from converted industrial spaces and shipping container dormitories to purpose-built facilities housing thousands. The stratification was immediately apparent: Singaporean managers and engineers typically lived in private condominiums or HDB flats in residential neighbourhoods; Malaysian and Chinese workers often occupied shared HDB apartments or smaller dormitories with improved facilities; Bangladeshi and Indian Work Permit holders predominantly resided in large-scale dormitories in industrial areas, with some smaller companies housing workers in converted factory spaces.

These massive Purpose-Built Dormitories (PBDs) are located in places like Tuas and Jurong, industrial zones deliberately distant from the city's residential heartland. During my visits to dormitories like Tuas View and Kranji Lodge, the sensory dimensions of this segregation became immediately apparent. The scents of nearby industrial plants mingle with the dormitories' own smells of communal cooking, detergent, and the close quarters of thousands of bodies. The constant background drone of manufacturing facilities creates a sonic landscape

utterly distinct from Singapore's residential neighbourhoods, punctuated by the rumble of trucks and buses that transport workers between dormitories and worksites.

This spatial distancing represents more than logistical convenience. It embodies what Yeoh and Huang (1998) describe as Singapore's spatial management of migrant difference, where foreign workers remain essential to urban development yet systematically segregated from cosmopolitan public spaces. The dormitories themselves materialize graduated citizenship through their architectural features: high perimeter fencing topped with barbed wire, security checkpoints with biometric access controls, and CCTV systems that monitor common areas. Inside, space is allocated according to a precise calculus of minimum requirements: 4.5 square meters of living space per person, one toilet for every fifteen residents, and so on. These features function as technologies of containment that extend the workplace's control logics into non-working hours.

This standardization of differential housing based on citizenship status reveals how thoroughly hierarchical treatment had been systematized within company operations. The physical conditions of these different accommodations manifested citizenship hierarchies in tangible form: the number of bodies per room, the availability of privacy, the quality of mattresses and bedding, the ratio of workers to toilets and showers, the provision of air conditioning versus fans, the accessibility of cooking facilities.

Beyond these physical conditions, dormitory living imposed strict behavioural regulation through formal and informal rules: curfews that restricted workers' movement after certain hours; limitations on visitors; prohibitions on cooking in rooms; restrictions on alcohol consumption; regular inspections that treated adult workers as subjects requiring surveillance

rather than as responsible tenants. These constraints on basic autonomy such as when, where, and how to eat, sleep, socialize, and relax all constituted another dimension of differentiated citizenship's lived reality.

The housing arrangements for workers on Work Permits and S-Passes also exemplify a dormitory labour regime (Pun, 2007) which produces particular forms of dependent subjectivity through the integration of work regulation, living arrangements, and migration status. While Pun developed this concept to analyse Chinese factory workers, it illuminates how Singapore's construction industry creates and maintains specific worker subjectivities through similar mechanisms of spatial control and temporal discipline. The ideal worker produced by this system displays precisely the traits most valued by contractors: docility instead of assertiveness, gratitude rather than rights-consciousness, and infinite flexibility rather than boundaries around working time. This dormitory labour regime is not merely a housing arrangement but a comprehensive system for producing particular kinds of workers whose temporariness is institutionalized through both spatial arrangements and legal categorization.

These housing differentials create distinct relationships to Singapore's urban space. Work Permit holders typically experienced Singapore through limited trajectories: from isolated dormitories to worksites and back, with occasional visits to recreation centres in industrial areas or weekend excursions to Little India or other designated spaces for migrant workers. Their spatial experience remained highly constrained, with limited integration into Singapore's broader urban fabric.

This spatial organization starkly contrasts with the residential patterns of Malaysian workers, who typically rent HDB flats in northern neighbourhoods like Woodlands and Yishun, areas closer to the causeway but still integrated within Singapore's public housing landscape. The geographical proximity of these areas to Malaysia, visible across the strait on clear days, mirrors Malaysian workers' intermediate position in the citizenship hierarchy, neither fully incorporated nor completely externalized in the way South Asian workers are. Malaysian workers, consequently, develop more nuanced spatial knowledge, navigating residential neighbourhoods, using public transportation, and participating in everyday spaces like food courts and shopping centres. Through these differentiated mobilities and immobilities, abstract citizenship categories become concrete experiences of belonging or exclusion within Singapore's carefully managed urban landscape. Their citizenship status afforded them a fundamentally different relationship to the city-state, one characterized by participation rather than segregation.

Occasional disruptions revealed the constructed nature of these housing hierarchies. During Singapore's Circuit Breaker period (its COVID-19 lockdown), when dormitories became outbreak epicentres, the state temporarily rehoused some migrant workers in vacant HDB flats, army camps, and even floating accommodations.

The differentiated accommodation system benefits contractors through multiple mechanisms. Most directly, it enables cost savings by minimizing expenditure on housing Work Permit holders while reserving better conditions for those with greater bargaining power. More subtly, it facilitates labour control by containing workers in regulated spaces where their movements can be monitored and their activities restricted. Perhaps most significantly, segregated housing prevents the development of social ties and community integration that might encourage

migrant workers to seek longer-term rights and recognition within Singapore. Through these housing arrangements, contractors translate abstract citizenship categories into lived spatial experiences that reinforce hierarchies of belonging and exclusion. The physical segregation of different worker categories determines who can access which urban spaces, who can develop what kinds of social relationships, and who experiences Singapore as home versus workplace.

### 6.3.4. Differentiated Safety: Whose Bodies Merit Protection

As the construction industry in Singapore underwent rapid modernization from the 1980s onwards, workplace safety emerged as a key domain where citizenship hierarchies materialize in everyday practice. The state's introduction of formalized safety regulations, intended to create universal protections, instead became another realm where differentiated citizenship operated through contractors' selective enforcement and workers' uneven vulnerability.

At Super Cool, where I conducted several months of participant observation, safety for the predominantly migrant workforce was a highly regimented affair. Workers underwent regular briefings, mandatory training sessions, and constant supervision by safety officers, with managers repeatedly invoking the spectre of accidents and penalties to discipline them into compliance. The approach reflected what Foucault (1977) might recognize as disciplinary power, creating "docile bodies" through surveillance and normalization, with citizenship determining whose bodies warranted which forms of control.

One virtual safety meeting I attended vividly illustrated the paternalistic approach taken toward migrant workers. Denpo, the assistant manager, meticulously reviewed recent workplace incidents reported in the news, using them as cautionary tales. "Guys, what is the moral of the story?" he asked rhetorically. "Take this as a very serious lesson for us to learn. Very silly

mistake for us to make... If you are unsure, you need to ask somebody, please do so. Do not proceed with your work if you are not very sure."

Yulia, another manager, added with maternal concern: "Guys just to add in, that all of the cases of safety issues, all the accidents... we would like to remind you again to be more alert and aware of the safety risks."

The didactic, infantilizing tone of these briefings showed how safety became a vehicle for reproducing hierarchies of authority and subordination between managers and migrant workers. The presentation positioned workers not as competent adults capable of professional judgment but as childlike subjects requiring constant reminders and moral instruction. This approach reflected broader patterns in Singapore's migration regime, where employers bear formal responsibility for foreign workers' conduct and welfare. As anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2006) observes in her analysis of graduated sovereignty, such regimes create differentiated modes of governing populations based on their perceived worth and position within global capital.

The strict safety regime at Super Cool contrasted sharply with practices at smaller sites run by contractors like Mr. Wee, where I observed dramatically different approaches applied to workers of different nationalities. One morning at one of Mr. Wee's renovation site inside an industrial estate, I witnessed a scene that crystallized this differentiation: a group of mostly Malaysian and Singaporean workers were taking a smoking break in plain view, with cigarette boxes and lighters casually strewn about amidst the dust and debris. Some hastily concealed their cigarettes when they noticed my presence, but others continued smoking without concern.

When I asked Mr. Wee about this obvious safety violation, he simply shrugged and remarked, “By right, they are not supposed to smoke here. But sometimes, we have to go by left. If they want to take the risk, it’s on them.” When I pressed further, he explained that strictly enforcing the no-smoking policy would be futile and counterproductive, potentially creating “bad blood” and eroding worker cooperation.

This incident revealed how citizenship and nationality directly determined whose safety violations warranted enforcement and whose could be tolerated. For Malaysian and Singaporean workers, safety rules became flexible guidelines subject to negotiation and selective enforcement. Their shared cultural background with contractors like Mr. Wee and their greater labour market mobility afforded them a kind of informal immunity from strict safety discipline. Malaysian workers in particular occupied a liminal position that was neither fully foreign nor fully local, navigating a middle ground where certain freedoms were possible precisely because of their ambiguous status.

The dangers of this differentiated approach became evident through the story of Chong San’s tragic worksite accident, which surfaced repeatedly during my fieldwork. One evening, while discussing workplace safety with Malaysian workers, Ah Seng, a veteran carpenter, shared what he called a “famous story” known to all Malaysians in the industry: two Malaysian workers were painting with turpentine in a basement when a spark from a cigarette ignited the fumes. One died instantly, “burned so badly that his own mother couldn’t recognize him,” while the other survived with severe scarring across his face and body.

As the workers recounted this story, their sombre expressions revealed how the very flexibility that granted Malaysian workers certain freedoms also exposed them to catastrophic risks. The

selective enforcement of safety regulations, presented as respect for worker autonomy, could have deadly consequences. This paradox illustrates the double-edged sword of informality in regulatory systems, where freedoms from rigid enforcement simultaneously create vulnerabilities by removing protections.

The tensions within Singapore's differentiated safety regime emerged most pointedly during my interview with Jimmy, a local construction subcontractor visibly agitated about a recent conflict with a newly hired Chinese carpenter. Just six days into his employment, the worker had lodged a formal complaint with the Ministry of Manpower, citing safety lapses and substandard working conditions. Jimmy was incredulous: "I asked him every day if he had any issues, and he just smiled and said everything was fine," he fumed. "Then he goes and complains behind my back! When I confronted him, he just said coolly, 'You have your own ideas, but I have my own rights.'"

This confrontation revealed competing logics at work in Singapore's construction industry. The Chinese worker's invocation of "rights" represented an assertion of agency through formal regulatory channels, challenging the climate of informality that often characterizes construction sites. Yet from Jimmy's perspective, this formalization constituted a betrayal of the implicit social contract between employers and workers. He readily acknowledged safety shortcomings in his workshop, such as poor ventilation, inconsistent use of protective equipment, but insisted such compromises were necessary pragmatic adjustments. "If we followed every rule to the letter, we'd never get any work done," he maintained.

Jimmy's position reflects what sociologist Michael Burawoy (1985) identifies as the "manufacturing of consent" in labour processes, where workers and employers cooperate in

bending formal rules to maintain production, often at the expense of safety. Yet in Singapore's construction industry, this consent operates unevenly across citizenship categories, with certain workers expected to accept greater risks while others can legitimately invoke formal protections.

What struck me most was Jimmy's inability to understand the worker's perspective. He dismissed health concerns as "suspicious," attributed the complaint to hidden "agendas," and reduced the worker's grievances to the "high agency fees" he had paid to secure the job. These rhetorical moves individualized and depoliticized structural issues, recasting systemic safety problems as personality conflicts or cultural misunderstandings.

This framing exemplifies what Holmes (2013) identifies as the naturalization of suffering, where the very bodies of migrants come to be seen as "deserving" of the pain, injury, sickness they suffer. By attributing safety concerns to cultural difference rather than structural inequality, contractors like Jimmy maintain the fiction that different safety standards for different workers reflect natural variations rather than citizenship-based discrimination.

The embodied nature of these differentiated safety regimes manifested in contractors' own physical histories. Mr. Wee's story exemplifies how risk and injury become incorporated into professional identity. As a young apprentice, he suffered a severe fall while working on an MRT scaffolding, resulting in unconsciousness and a permanent scar on his scalp, a bald white spot amidst his thick hair. Rather than viewing this injury as evidence of inadequate protection, Mr. Wee spoke of it with pride and nonchalance, treating it as a badge of honour attesting to his toughness and dedication.

This incorporation of injury into professional identity reflects what Kris Paap (2006) identifies as the "manly" culture of construction, where physical risk becomes reimagined as a test of masculinity rather than a preventable hazard. For contractors like Mr. Wee, having endured and survived workplace dangers constitutes a rite of passage that separates "real men" from "boys." This gendered understanding of risk creates particular challenges for migrant workers, who must navigate both citizenship vulnerability and pressure to demonstrate masculine toughness by accepting dangerous conditions without complaint.

The juxtaposition of these ethnographic vignettes – Malaysian workers smoking on site, the tragic consequences in Chong San's case, the Chinese worker's rights assertion, and contractors' scarred bodies – show how safety becomes a domain where citizenship hierarchies are simultaneously reproduced and occasionally contested. Far from representing a universal value applied equally to all bodies, safety in Singapore's construction industry emerges as thoroughly graduated, with different standards, enforcement mechanisms, and consequences based on citizenship status and perceived replaceability.

Yet as the Chinese worker's determined complaint reminds us, these hierarchies don't go uncontested. Despite structural vulnerabilities, migrant workers develop various strategies to assert their right to physical protection, from formal complaints to collective organizing to subtle acts of resistance. These contestations reveal the unstable nature of safety hierarchies, which require constant maintenance through both formal discipline and informal accommodation. Citizenship functions not merely as legal status but as embodied experience, determining whose physical wellbeing matters, whose pain warrants attention, whose injuries deserve response, and whose bodies merit protection. Through the everyday management of workplace risks, contractors translate abstract citizenship categories into lived hierarchies of

vulnerability and care, simultaneously reproducing and occasionally disrupting the stratified moral economies that underpin Singapore's construction industry.

A striking paradox emerges when examining Singapore's construction safety regime more closely. While the state has implemented its most comprehensive safety regulations specifically targeting migrant workers, these protections simultaneously function as mechanisms of control and differentiation. The proliferation of safety rules for Work Permit holders, from mandatory training certifications to specialized equipment requirements, ostensibly aims to protect vulnerable bodies. Yet, in practice, they often serve as justification for intensified surveillance and restricted autonomy. During my fieldwork, I noticed how "safety" frequently operated as a code word enabling forms of control that would be unacceptable if explicitly framed as discipline. When the government instituted curfews and alcohol restrictions, these were presented as "safety measures" rather than mobility constraints.

This linguistic slippage reveals how protection easily slides into paternalism, particularly when directed at those deemed incapable of securing their own wellbeing. The selective application of these rules further reinforces citizenship hierarchies, determining who is "allowed" or "trusted" to manage their own safety versus who requires external governance. Malaysian workers' ability to smoke on site without consequence at Mr. Wee's project reflected an implicit trust in their judgment absent for Bangladeshi workers, for whom identical behaviours triggered formal penalties. I do not suggest these safety regulations are unimportant or should be disregarded; construction remains genuinely dangerous, with migrant workers facing disproportionate risks. Rather, I am interested in how safety becomes differently operationalized across citizenship categories, simultaneously protecting and constraining those it governs.

The discourse around migrant worker safety among activists, government agencies, and contractors reveals these tensions. During the heated public debate about transporting workers in open lorries following several accident fatalities, government officials emphasized safety improvements through added railings and covered tops while maintaining the segregated transport system. Activists demanded integration into public transportation as a safety issue. Contractors complained about increased costs without addressing the fundamental question of why different workers merited different transportation standards in the first place. The system's internal contradictions become most visible in its enforcement mechanisms. When safety violations result in financial penalties for employers regardless of their preventative efforts, a complex resentment emerges – directed simultaneously toward the state for imposing "unrealistic" standards and toward workers whose individual actions might trigger collective punishment.

As Seng complained: "Government make so many safety rules, then fine company when worker don't follow. We already give training, give equipment, give warning. Some worker still take shortcut, then company pay fine. How to manage like this?" This complaint reveals the tripartite tension between state regulation, employer responsibility, and worker agency that characterizes Singapore's differentiated safety regime. Safety thus becomes a contested domain where protection and discipline, care and control, remain inseparably entangled.

As discussed earlier, the differential treatment of Malaysian and Bangladeshi workers at construction sites exemplifies "relative freedom" (Sopranzetti's, 2017). Similarly, in Singapore's construction industry, Malaysian workers' "freedom" to smoke on site or bend safety rules doesn't represent absolute autonomy but a specifically configured form of relative

privilege within a broader system of constraints. Their ability to engage in these technically prohibited activities stems from their particular position within the citizenship hierarchy – close enough to Singaporeans culturally and linguistically to be granted a degree of trust and leniency, yet still subordinate within the overall labour regime. Such freedoms are not the absence of power but a specific configuration of it, revealing how power operates through calibrated permissiveness as much as through explicit restriction.

This analysis helps us understand why Malaysian workers might value these small freedoms deeply despite their potential dangers. The right to smoke on site or bypass certain safety protocols represents not just convenience but recognition of their elevated status relative to other migrant workers. These "freedoms" function as citizenship performances; demonstrations of their privileged position within the industry's hierarchy. Yet as the Chong San incident tragically demonstrates, these same freedoms can constitute heightened vulnerabilities, creating a double bind of precarious freedom. His permit grants him mobility that Bangladeshi workers cannot access, while this same mobility places him in situations where oversight disappears and safety protocols bend around operational convenience. The double bind of precarious freedom becomes visible when flexibility transforms into abandonment, where the absence of rigid supervision means the absence of protection.

These differentiated freedoms create stratified systems of mobility that regulate far more than physical movement. They shape the capacity to exercise agency within structured constraints, determining not just where workers can go but how much risk they must absorb in exchange for the privilege of movement. The Malaysian worker's ability to navigate job sites freely becomes both marker of citizenship advantage, and a source of particular vulnerability within Singapore's construction hierarchy.

### 6.4. Conclusion: The Fractal Nature of Differentiated Citizenship

What makes Singapore's construction hierarchies so revealing is their fractal character. Specifically, the way differentiated citizenship reproduces itself at multiple scales, creating gradations of privilege and vulnerability even within seemingly uniform legal categories. Among Work Permit holders who share identical formal status, intricate hierarchies based on nationality, ethnicity, and perceived "attitude" create additional gradients of exploitation. These nested distinctions enable contractors to extract calibrated forms of value from differently positioned bodies while maintaining the fiction that such differences reflect natural cultural predispositions rather than deliberately constructed inequalities.

The most telling evidence of this fractal reproduction appears in the figures of migrant intermediaries like Seng, who had himself arrived in Singapore as a migrant worker from Malaysia decades earlier. Former migrants who achieve supervisory positions often become the most vigilant enforcers of hierarchies they once experienced from below, reproducing the logics of differentiation at each level of the construction industry.

This fractal reproduction reveals how differentiated citizenship operates not only through formal state policies but through conversions (Guyer, 2004) where institutional and cultural frameworks translate between different systems of value. In her analysis of African economic practices, Guyer demonstrates how value multiplies through "conversions" across different scales and metrics. Similarly, in Singapore's construction industry, abstract legal categories become converted into assessments of skill, character, and worth through the everyday practices of worker evaluation, task assignment, and disciplinary action.

The mall renovation site I described at the beginning of this chapter exemplifies these conversion points in action. When Mr. Wee accepted Malaysian workers' tardiness without comment while strictly disciplining Bangladeshi workers for similar delays, he was converting citizenship status into temporal discipline. When South Asian workers gathered in designated corners during lunch while Malaysian workers moved freely through the space, the abstract legal categories of Work Permit and Malaysia Special Pass became translated into embodied experiences of spatial constraint and freedom. These mundane practices about who can move where, who eats when and with whom, whose tardiness requires explanation represent the microphysics through which differentiated citizenship becomes lived reality. The domains examined in this chapter, from spatial mobility to safety practices to evaluations of "attitude", demonstrate how thoroughly citizenship status structures every aspect of workers' experiences on construction sites, creating distinct regimes of vulnerability and value extraction calibrated to workers' positions within Singapore's stratified migration system.

For contractors, differentiated citizenship functions as a resource to exploit. The graduated vulnerabilities built into Singapore's migration categories create opportunities for calibrated extraction. This intermediary work makes differentiated citizenship functional in ways state policy alone cannot achieve. Categories on paper require translation into workplace realities. Contractors perform this translation, producing the everyday textures through which abstract legal status becomes lived hierarchy. Their practices generate the cultural narratives, workplace disciplines, and moral economies that naturalize citizenship-based inequality as reflecting workers' inherent characteristics rather than deliberate political design. Contractors convert legal vulnerability into workplace power, maintain stereotypes that justify differential treatment, and discipline resistance as attitude problems rather than structural responses. They smooth over the migration regime's contradictions, making permanent hierarchies appear as

temporary arrangements, making extraction organized through citizenship look like neutral market dynamics.

# 7: Middling Migrants

## 7.1. Introduction: Denpo's Liminal World

"I thought I can rely on this kind of people also," Adam says loudly, standing beside Denpo's desk. Denpo, seated at his computer, continues working on a tender due at 4pm, his expression carefully neutral despite Adam's looming presence. The computer screen reflects in Denpo's glasses as his fingers move methodically across the keyboard. "So what can I do for them now?" Denpo responds calmly. "You want me to take action and terminate them? For me, I will just give him a chance to take another opportunity. Or if you think it's not worth, then I let you go lah."

I freeze at my desk, surprised by the casual discussion of someone's termination. The matter-of-fact way they discuss ending someone's employment, and by extension, their right to remain in Singapore, contrasts sharply with my understanding of them as people. Adam stands over Denpo's desk, gesticulating animatedly.

"Let you go lah," Adam says heatedly. "How am I going to accept? Do your safety lah, Denpo. Can accept meh? I need to accept? I need to answer you know, Denpo. I need to answer to this kind of *shit* you know."

The whole office hears this exchange, but everyone pretends not to notice, staring fixedly at their screens with unnatural focus. The clicking of keyboards continues without pause, a percussive soundtrack to the unfolding drama. The young administrative assistant near the water cooler suddenly finds her stapling task requires intense concentration, while the draftsmen at the corner desks hunch further over their blueprints.

Denpo's posture remains carefully calibrated, straight enough to convey attention but not so rigid as to suggest defiance. His hands rest lightly on his keyboard, no longer typing but poised as if ready to resume work. His gaze is lowered in a studied neutrality that seems practiced, a physical manifestation of navigating the delicate balance between deference and dignity.

This moment at Super Cool's office unfolds beneath the perpetual twilight created by purple-tinted window film, the harsh fluorescent lights casting an unforgiving glow across rows of desks. The low hum of air conditioning, an ironic constant in a company that installs these very systems across Singapore, provides a white noise backdrop that normally masks the softer sounds of daily office life. Outside, the industrial landscape stretches in concrete, metal, and exposed pipes, far from the gleaming cityscape that dominates Singapore's global image.

This scene captures the distinctive position of what I term "middling migrants" in Singapore's construction industry. Neither fully incorporated into Singaporean society nor relegated to the precarious status of temporary worker, figures like Denpo navigate a complex middle ground that illuminates how citizenship operates as graduated practice rather than binary status. At forty-two, this Burmese assistant manager has achieved a degree of stability and recognition rarely accessible to most migrant workers, yet remains subject to forms of exclusion and vulnerability that his Singaporean colleagues do not face. Despite his Permanent Resident status, technical expertise, and managerial position, the moment with Adam reveals how his authority remains conditional, requiring constant reinforcement through performances that demonstrate competence to superiors while maintaining sufficient distance from the workers he supervises.

The concept of middling migrants I develop in this chapter extends our understanding of intermediary figures in Singapore's construction industry. Previous chapters examined contractors as key mediators between state regulation and market demands, and between management and labour forces. This chapter shows that "the contractor" as intermediary often isn't a single person but a function distributed across multiple figures. Middling migrants represent the cultural-linguistic dimension of this distributed coordination. Citizen-contractors interface with state bureaucracy, negotiate market pressures, and manage business operations. Middling migrants do different work. They translate between languages, managing co-ethnic workers through cultural knowledge, bridging between management directives and rank-and-file realities. Their in-between status, positioned between full citizenship and temporary work permits, enables forms of translation and mediation that citizen-contractors cannot replicate. Yet these functions remain structurally undervalued despite being operationally indispensable, exposing how Singapore's construction industry depends on disaggregated intermediation rather than unified contractor figures.

Middling migrants complicate binary understandings of migration and citizenship that typically sort migrants into categories of "skilled" versus "unskilled" or "temporary" versus "permanent." Their experiences reveal how citizenship in Singapore operates not as a simple legal status but as a carefully calibrated hierarchy of rights and recognitions that preserves fundamental inequalities while allowing limited mobility for select individuals. By examining how these figures navigate this stratified system, we gain insight into how differentiated citizenship, analysed in the previous chapter as formal policy, manifests as lived experience.

This chapter extends the dissertation's broader examination of intermediary figures who translate between different regimes of value and authority. While contractors mediate primarily

between state regulation and market demands, middling migrants must navigate between management expectations and worker realities, between different cultural and linguistic worlds, and between competing moral obligations. Their experiences reveal how thoroughly Singapore's development model depends on mediating figures who absorb tensions, facilitate communication across difference, and maintain productive relationships within highly stratified systems.

Through detailed ethnographic portraits of three middling migrants: Denpo, the Burmese assistant manager at Super Cool; Wang Da Gang, a self-employed Chinese contractor; and Yulia, an Indonesian assistant director, I trace different pathways to middling status and various strategies for navigating partial incorporation. Their stories illuminate how race, nationality, gender, and migration timing shape experiences of differentiated citizenship while revealing both the constraints of Singapore's migration regime and the creative adaptations that emerge within its interstices.

As we will see through the everyday experiences of these figures, middling migrants simultaneously reproduce and occasionally challenge the hierarchies within which they operate. Their technical expertise, cultural mediation, and management capabilities fill important gaps in Singapore's construction industry, enabling the extraction of value from migrant labour while occasionally creating spaces for limited advocacy or accommodation.

### 7.2. Conceptualizing Middling Migrants

The concept of "middling migrants" I develop in this chapter builds upon but reconfigures earlier approaches to intermediary figures in migration studies and anthropology. I employ the term "middling" deliberately to capture their intermediate positioning across multiple dimensions simultaneously – economically between management and labour, legally between

citizens and temporary workers, socially between cultural worlds. The term carries resonance with Paul Rabinow's "middling modernists," though I deploy it differently here. Where Rabinow (1989) used "middling" to describe French colonial administrators who occupied middle positions within imperial hierarchies of knowledge production, I use it to analyse migrants who occupy middle positions within postcolonial citizenship regimes. While both usages share an emphasis on structural betweenness as constitutive rather than transitional, my focus centres on how these figures mediate labour relations rather than knowledge systems.

Unlike migration frameworks that categorize migrants primarily through skill distinctions (Iredale, 2001; Iskander, 2021) or economic position (Piore, 1979), middling migrants are defined by their distinctive structural position within Singapore's migration regime and their crucial mediating functions within the construction industry's hierarchies. They occupy an ambiguous middle ground, neither fully aligned with management nor completely identified with rank-and-file workers, possessing some citizenship privileges while remaining excluded from others, technically skilled yet often unable to gain full recognition for their education and expertise.

Why write about middling migrants, in a dissertation ostensibly about contractors as intermediaries? While both serve as intermediaries, they do so in fundamentally different ways and from distinct structural positions. Contractors, as established in previous chapters, emerged as distinctive intermediary figures in the political-economic sense, mediating between state development goals, capital flows, and labour management. They occupy the middle tiers of production chains, navigate between formal and informal economies, function as capital-holders and risk-bearers, and typically operate as Singaporean citizens or long-established PRs with local business networks and cultural capital. Their intermediary functions centre on

economic organization, regulatory navigation, and business relationships. Middling migrants, by contrast, are defined primarily by their positioning within Singapore's migration regime and citizenship hierarchy. They begin as foreign workers who, through skill acquisition, sponsor support, and personal initiative, achieve partial incorporation into Singapore society. Their intermediary functions focus on cultural and linguistic mediation rather than economic organization. As Denpo's navigation of the confrontation with Adam illustrates, they must translate between languages as well as between different systems of authority, knowledge, and expectation.

What makes this relationship particularly significant is how it represents the disaggregation of intermediary functions that were once unified in colonial figures like the kepala and mestizo. Contemporary Singapore's more formalized citizenship regime has effectively separated the economic power of intermediation (concentrated in citizen-contractors) from the cultural-linguistic work of intermediation (delegated to middling migrants). Contractors have inherited the economic organization of labour, the business functions, and the relationship with state authority, while middling migrants have inherited the cultural-linguistic mediation functions, the ambiguous position between privilege and subordination, and the management of co-ethnic workers.

This separation of functions serves several important political purposes: it limits the potential power of any single intermediary figure, creates a more flexible system that can be calibrated according to changing economic needs, maintains racial-national hierarchies while obscuring them behind apparently neutral citizenship categories, and creates pathways for limited mobility that legitimate the system without threatening its fundamental structure. In everyday practice, contractors and middling migrants stand in a relationship of both complementarity

and hierarchy. Most middling migrants work for contractors as supervisors, foremen, or skilled technicians, implementing the contractor's directives while managing migrant workers. Contractors rely on middling migrants' linguistic and cultural mediation abilities, while middling migrants depend on contractors for employment stability and potential sponsorship for improved status. This interdependence reveals how thoroughly Singapore's construction industry depends on multiple, overlapping forms of intermediation to function effectively.

### 7.2.1. Historical Antecedents: From Colonial Intermediaries to Contemporary Mediators

As highlighted in Chapter 2, the intermediary role of middling migrants carries deep historical resonances in Southeast Asia. Colonial labour systems throughout the region relied on intermediary figures who bridged European management and Asian workers. These intermediaries operated at the fault lines of colonial capitalism, translating between different regimes of value, language, and authority. Chapter 2 traced how contractors inherited certain intermediary functions from colonial figures like the kepala, particularly in economic coordination and liaising with the state. This chapter shows that other functions – cultural-linguistic mediation, co-ethnic labour management, daily workplace translation – have been distributed to a different category of intermediaries: middling migrants. Where colonial kepala unified multiple mediating roles within single figures, contemporary Singapore has disaggregated these functions across citizen-contractors and middling migrants, each managing different dimensions of the gap between state regulations and construction realities.

The kepala system in colonial Malaya and Singapore exemplifies this historical antecedent. These native overseers, typically of the same ethnicity as the workers they supervised, functioned as crucial links between colonial authorities and migrant labour forces. The kepala combined multiple functions: recruiting workers from their home villages, organizing daily labour routines, maintaining discipline, and communicating management demands to workers.

Their position was fundamentally ambiguous – simultaneously agents of colonial exploitation and members of the communities they helped manage. Similarly, *mestizo* intermediaries, individuals of mixed European and Asian ancestry, occupied distinct positions within colonial hierarchies. Unlike the kepala, who represented workers of the same ethnicity, mestizo intermediaries operated more as cultural and racial bridges between European administrators and diverse Asian populations. Their mixed heritage granted them access to European education and certain legal privileges, while their Asian ancestry provided connections to local communities and markets.

What distinguished these colonial intermediaries was their ability to combine multiple forms of mediation within single roles. The kepala simultaneously served as labour recruiter, cultural translator, discipline enforcer, and limited advocate for workers. Similarly, the mestizo combined commercial mediation, cultural-racial bridging, and administrative intermediation within a single position defined by racial mixture and partial colonial privilege.

Today's middling migrants inherit aspects of these historical intermediary roles while navigating distinctly contemporary conditions of flexible labour and graduated sovereignty. Like colonial intermediaries, they mediate between those who possess formal authority and those who perform direct labour. They translate languages but also expectations, technical requirements, and cultural norms across different segments of the workforce. They also occupy morally ambiguous positions, simultaneously enforcing hierarchies that disadvantage fellow migrants while occasionally creating spaces for resistance or accommodation within these structures.

What makes middling migrants theoretically significant is how they illuminate the graduated nature of citizenship in contemporary Singapore. Their experiences reveal citizenship not as a binary status, i.e., present or absent, but as graduated sovereignty (Ong, 2006), where different populations are subjected to different forms of governing based on their perceived value to global capital. However, where Ong's knowledge workers gained mobility through technical expertise directly valued by transnational capital, middling migrants reveal capital's dependence on forms of cultural and linguistic mediation that remain structurally undervalued yet functionally indispensable. Their intermediate positioning exposes how capital requires more than "skilled" professionals and "unskilled" workers. It also requires cultural brokers who can extract value from migrant labour through translation, supervision, and disciplinary functions. This configuration reveals the artifice of skilled/unskilled binaries by showing how capital's actual requirements exceed these categories, requiring forms of embodied cultural knowledge that enable but do not directly constitute value production.

Middling migrants occupy a particularly revealing position within this graduated system, for they are valuable enough to receive certain accommodations (like pathways to Permanent Residency) yet still subject to significant constraints and conditional inclusion. These middling migrants experience partial citizenship (Parreñas, 2001), where they are folded into forms of incorporation that grant certain rights and recognitions while withholding others. This partial status materializes in everyday realities: the ability to rent but not purchase public housing; the right to reside long-term but the difficulty in bringing family members; the technical authority at work alongside vulnerability to dismissal.

Neoliberal capitalism "makes live" certain populations in specific ways while "letting die" others (Foucault, 2003; Brown, 2017); a process of calibrated incorporation rather than

wholesale abandonment. Like the mestizo intermediaries of colonial Southeast Asia, today's middling migrants both enable and complicate racial hierarchies through their liminal positioning. Their partial inclusion in Singapore's citizenship regime simultaneously validates the system's selectivity (by showcasing "successful" integration) while revealing its fundamental exclusivity (through the ongoing struggles they face despite their achievements). The theoretical significance of middling migrants extends beyond migration studies to demonstrate how contemporary capitalism disaggregates functions once unified in colonial intermediaries – separating economic organization from cultural mediation – creating more flexible and precisely calibrated systems of labour control.

### 7.2.2. Studying Liminal Figures

Studying middling migrants presents distinctive challenges and opportunities. Their intermediary position makes them simultaneously more accessible than rank-and-file workers due to their language skills and office presence, yet more guarded in certain ways due to their precarious authority. The same contextual intelligence that makes them effective mediators also makes them acutely aware of the risks of excessive disclosure to researchers. My approach combined extended workplace ethnography at Super Cool, where I conducted six months of participant observation in the Commercial Affairs Department, with life history interviews and participation in key sites of middling migrant sociality. This multi-sited methodology allowed me to observe how middling migrants navigate between different worlds, how they perform different aspects of their identity in different contexts, and how they manage the contradictions inherent in their intermediary position.

For Denpo, this involved following him between office interactions and worksite visits, joining him at Peninsula Plaza where Myanmar nationals gather on weekends, and attending the monthly welfare meetings he conducts with workers. I interviewed Wang Da Gang at Mr. Wee's

home, while for Yulia, it included observing her management approaches at Super Cool, discussing her transnational business aspirations, and understanding how she navigates the gendered dimensions of authority in a male-dominated industry. These varied ethnographic engagements revealed middling migrants not as abstract categories but as complex individuals navigating structural constraints through creative adaptations and strategic accommodations. Their stories illuminate the broader workings of Singapore's differentiated citizenship regime and its dependence on various forms of intermediation.

This chapter on middling migrants advances the dissertation's broader argument about intermediary figures in Singapore's construction industry in several ways. First, it demonstrates how intermediation occurs at multiple scales and through different types of actors, revealing the complexity of Singapore's construction ecosystem beyond the contractor-state or contractor-worker relationships examined in previous chapters. Second, it illuminates the lived consequences of the differentiated citizenship regime analysed in Chapter 6, showing how abstract policy categories materialize as embodied experiences of inclusion and exclusion. While Chapter 6 focused on how contractors implement and navigate these formal categories, this chapter reveals how certain migrants experience, negotiate, and occasionally challenge these hierarchies from within. Third, examining middling migrants alongside contractors provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Singapore's development model depends on various forms of mediation to function effectively. Where contractors mediate primarily between state regulation and market demands, middling migrants navigate between management expectations and worker realities, between different cultural and linguistic worlds, and between competing moral obligations. Finally, this focus on middling migrants challenges dominant narratives about Singapore's development that emphasize either state-led modernization or market-driven growth. Instead, it reveals how the city-state's construction

industry relies on complex arrangements of intermediation, where different actors absorb tensions, facilitate communication across difference, and maintain productive relationships within highly stratified systems.

### 7.3. Pathways to Middling Status: Three Cases

#### 7.3.1. Technical Expertise: Denpo's Journey from Worker to Assistant Manager

In the small meeting room at Super Cool, Denpo closes the door behind us and settles into a chair, momentarily free from Adam's watchful gaze. The afternoon light filters through the purple-tinted windows, casting an artificial twilight across his features. As he begins to share his story, the details of his journey from Myanmar to his current position as assistant manager gradually emerge, revealing the complex trajectories that shape middling migrants' lives.

"I got PR also by chance," Denpo begins, his voice low and reflective. "A few of my friends were applying, so I thought why not apply together. In 2006, it was very, very easy to get PR. Within 3 months, I get. Compared to 2009, everything changed." This casual comment about the relative ease of obtaining Permanent Residency in 2006 compared to later years reflects broader shifts in Singapore's immigration policies, as the government responded to growing public concerns about foreign competition by tightening pathways to permanent settlement. For Denpo, this timing proved fortuitous, allowing him to secure a stability that later arrivals would find increasingly elusive.

Denpo's background defies the stereotypical narratives about "unskilled" migrant workers in Singapore's construction industry. Born in Kayah State in eastern Myanmar, he grew up in a family that valued education despite the political turmoil engulfing the country. "My father don't want us to live in this kind of environment," he explains, referring to the prevalence of

drugs, alcohol, and violence in their hometown. “His intention is to have a bigger picture. Go work for few years, have bigger perspective, come back and work for yourself.”

Contrary to assumptions that migrant construction workers lack formal education, Denpo holds a bachelor’s degree in Geography from Yangon University. “Very famous,” he notes with a hint of pride, “but from 1988 onwards, the standards keep falling, after the junta take over, so become not recognized internationally.” This detail illuminates how national politics and global educational hierarchies intersect to shape migration trajectories. Despite his university education, the devaluation of Myanmar credentials in the international labour market meant Denpo’s options for working abroad were limited to sectors typically associated with “low-skilled” labour.

Denpo’s migration to Singapore came about through family circumstances rather than personal choice. His father had originally arranged for his younger brother to work in Singapore, but when his brother decided to get married instead, Denpo was sent in his place. “My father pay for me to come,” he explains, highlighting how migration decisions often emerge from family strategies rather than purely individual choices. This arrangement, where families invest resources in sending members abroad with expectations of remittances and future returns, reflects what household diversification strategies (Massey, 1993) approaches that distribute risk and opportunity across family networks.

His early experiences in Singapore reveal the challenges facing even educated migrants when they enter a new linguistic and cultural environment. “When I first came, I can’t speak English, I can’t communicate, I can’t read or write,” he recalls with palpable emotion. “Every day for six months, my supervisor penalize me. He will go and tell boss, ‘I don’t want to go with this

guy, you better change for me.'" The pain of this experience remains evident in Denpo's voice as he describes the humiliation and frustration he felt. "You know lah, I cannot cry. Sometimes I have this anger, but I have to swallow it."

Language acquisition became the primary barrier to Denpo's professional advancement. Unlike middling migrants from former British colonies like India, who often arrive with English proficiency, Denpo faced the double challenge of technical work and linguistic isolation. His struggles highlight how language operates as a crucial form of capital in Singapore's stratified labour market, determining opportunities for advancement and recognition.

Denpo's determination to overcome these barriers manifested in creative strategies for language learning. "He asked me to watch those movies with subtitles," he shared, referring to an older colleague from Myanmar who mentored him. "You can see, you can listen. Those don't understand, I have a book, a dictionary, to translate." Through these self-directed methods, combined with daily workplace interactions, Denpo gradually built his language skills. His experience reveals how middling migrants often rely on informal networks and innovative learning techniques rather than formal education to acquire the linguistic capital necessary for advancement.

The systematic barriers facing non-English speaking migrants emerge clearly in Denpo's recollections. "You just imagine every day get scolded by leader because I couldn't communicate," he reflects. "And I didn't get a chance to learn. Some people are very stingy with knowledge. You ask them questions, they also won't teach you." This experience of exclusion from knowledge networks highlights how workplace hierarchies are maintained not merely through formal authority but through control over information and skill transmission.

Denpo's journey from general worker to assistant manager unfolded over more than fifteen years, marked by gradual skill acquisition and strategic positioning within the company. His technical expertise in air-conditioning and mechanical ventilation systems became the foundation for his advancement. This specialization allowed him to carve out a valuable niche within Super Cool, where his knowledge of complex ACMV systems became indispensable to the company's operations.

"I graduated with a different field," he explains, referring to his geography degree, "but when I start to do this, I enjoy it. This is what I want to do." Despite the mismatch between his educational background and his work in the construction industry, Denpo found meaning and purpose in his role as a technician and supervisor. "When I was young, I like to fix things, broken things," he recalls with a smile. This connection between personal inclination and professional specialization highlights how some middling migrants construct narratives of vocational fit even within constrained opportunity structures.

Denpo's desire to further his skills and qualifications reveals both the aspirations and limitations that shape middling migrants' professional trajectories. "My request was rejected," he recounts, referring to his initial attempts to pursue polytechnic education. "I know that I need to go further study, if not it's like I'm riding a horse, but I don't know whether male or female. I know how to fix aircon, but I don't know the theory." This vivid metaphor captures the predicament of many middling migrants who possess practical expertise but lack the formal credentials that would enable them to advance further in their careers.

The turning point in Denpo's career came when Adam offered to sponsor his professional development. "Adam was willing to pay for my school fees in advance, and subsequently

deduct a small amount from my salary each month," Denpo explains. This arrangement, while presented as benevolent support, also functioned as a mechanism of control and retention. By financing Denpo's education in exchange for a contractual commitment, Adam effectively ensured his continued loyalty and service to the company. This dynamic illustrates the ambiguous nature of sponsorship relationships in middling migrants' advancement. While offering genuine opportunities for skill development and credential acquisition, such arrangements also reinforce dependency and limit mobility. The contractor's financial investment in a middling migrant's education becomes a form of bond that ties the worker more tightly to the company, even as it ostensibly expands their capabilities and prospects.

Today, Denpo's responsibilities at Super Cool are extensive, spanning technical oversight, worker supervision, client relations, and administrative duties. He manages teams of workers across multiple sites, handles technical issues that arise during installation and maintenance projects, and serves as a crucial liaison between management and the predominantly migrant workforce. Denpo's role in the monthly welfare meetings with workers is also particularly fraught. He must simultaneously represent management interests, and maintain connections with workers who share similar migration experiences. This dual positioning requires constant negotiation between different loyalties and responsibilities, exemplifying the complex moral terrain that middling migrants navigate daily. While his technical expertise has enabled his professional advancement, his value to Super Cool lies equally in his capacity to manage relationships across difference.

Denpo's journey illuminates one distinctive pathway to middling status within Singapore's construction industry: advancement through technical expertise and formal incorporation into corporate structures. Denpo's story reveals both the possibilities and limitations of this

pathway. While he has achieved relative stability achieved through professional development and PR status, I show how his partial incorporation presents its own sets of vulnerabilities in a later section.

### 7.3.2. Entrepreneurial Autonomy: Wang Da Gang's Path to Self-Employment

I meet Wang Da Gang in Mr. Wee's living room on a Tuesday evening after work. The fluorescent light catches the weathered lines around his eyes as he settles into the plastic chair Mrs. Wee has pulled up to their coffee table. His hands, marked by years of manual work, hold the porcelain teacup she has served with practiced care. "Wang is one of my subcontractors," Mr. Wee explains. "I've known him for over ten years."

Mr. Wee had arranged this meeting, knowing my interest in speaking with a range of contractors in Singapore, not all of whom embodied the typical contractor outlined in Chapter 3. As we talk, Wang's phone rings constantly. With each call, he shifts effortlessly between languages: the regional accent of his native Jiangsu when speaking with his workers, standardized Mandarin with other contractors, occasional snippets of functional Singlish with Singaporean suppliers. These linguistic transitions offer glimpses into his daily reality as a middling migrant who has carved out his own niche in Singapore's construction ecosystem.

"When I first came in 2002," Want tells me, "I was just another China man doing formwork and cement. Now I manage eighteen workers, all from my hometown. I brought them here myself."

Our interview is constantly interrupted by calls – Wang arranging for men to pick up materials, coordinating deliveries, solving small crises that emerge at various worksites. With each call, I witness his linguistic agility, shifting between the regional accent of his native Jiangsu when

speaking with his workers (most from his hometown) to a more standardized Mandarin when dealing with contractors, occasionally punctuating conversations with snippets of functional Singlish when suppliers or clients are Singaporean. These interruptions aren't inconveniences but windows into Wang's daily reality as a middling migrant who has carved out his own niche in Singapore's construction ecosystem.

Wang's trajectory from worker to boss offers a revealing counterpoint to Denpo's journey. Like many Chinese migrants in Singapore's construction industry, Wang's entry in 2002 coincided with China's economic opening and the flow of skilled workers seeking opportunities abroad. "I paid about $40,800 in agency fees," he recalls with a grimace. "It was very expensive. When I came, that was the market price. Everybody wanted to go out, but it was difficult. You can build a house with that price."

This enormous sum, representing years of savings and likely family loans, marks a critical difference in the migration pathways available to Chinese versus Burmese workers like Denpo. While both paid substantial fees to access Singapore's labour market, the higher costs faced by Chinese migrants reflects differentiated mobility regimes, where access to particular labour markets is stratified not just by skill but by nationality, with different price points attached to different passports and destinations.

Wang's early experiences echo Denpo's struggles: precarious employment, wage theft, and vulnerability." After two years, the company went bankrupt due to SARS," he recounts. "They only paid me my salary after two years. I was owed about 4 months of salary." Unlike Denpo, however, Wang's response to this injustice reveals a different strategy of collective action. "We went to MOM as a group of workers," he explains, his voice taking on a harder edge. "There's

no use if you go alone. The law doesn't care if you go alone. If you go in a group, the government will be scared."

This reference to collective action highlights a significant difference in how Chinese and South Asian workers navigate labour disputes in Singapore. Wang's cohort of Chinese workers understood their collective leverage and were willing to mobilize it, a strategy that reflects both different perceptions of citizenship rights and the particular position of Chinese nationals within Singapore's racial hierarchy. For Denpo, whose vulnerability as a Burmese national was more acute and whose worker's permit was tied to a single employer, such collective mobilization would have carried much higher risks of deportation or blacklisting.

Wang's path to becoming a small-scale entrepreneur followed a distinct pattern common among Chinese middling migrants. After gaining experience as an employee, he leveraged personal networks to secure independent contracts. "When I came back [from China], I worked as my own boss," he explains. "I have a lot of friends here, they have their own networks and relationships, so they will recommend jobs for me."

This transition from worker to independent contractor represents a different mode of mobility than Denpo's rise through corporate ranks. Where Denpo's advancement depended on employer sponsorship, formal education, and integration into corporate structures, Wang built his business through informal networks, embodied technical skills, and entrepreneurial risk-taking. The Chinese contractor ecosystem facilitates this pathway through ethnic entrepreneurship, where access to co-ethnic networks that provide information, credit, labour, and contracts that wouldn't be available through formal channels. Wang's reliance on these ethnic networks recalls Bonacich's (1973) concept "middleman minorities", though

reconfigured within Singapore's contemporary citizenship regime rather than colonial structures. Like Bonacich's classic cases of ethnic groups occupying intermediate economic positions, Wang maintains strong hometown connections and uses co-ethnic solidarity for business advantage while remaining structurally positioned between Singaporean management and migrant workers. However, where Bonacich's middleman minorities often faced host society hostility due to their permanent outsider status, Wang's pathway to PR status demonstrates how Singapore's differentiated citizenship regime creates new possibilities for partial incorporation that complicate traditional middleman dynamics.

Unlike Denpo's narrative of loyal service to a single company, Wang's story is punctuated by financial setbacks and betrayals that reveal the precarity beneath entrepreneurial success. "I have been cheated of several tens of thousands of dollars," he sighs, gesturing toward a file cabinet where I glimpse neatly organized court documents. "I have fought two lawsuits before, but I couldn't get my money back. I won the lawsuit, but I couldn't reclaim the money. The lawyer fees cost half of my profits." These legal battles highlight the particular vulnerabilities of self-employed middling migrants like Wang, who lack the institutional backing Denpo enjoys through Super Cool. When clients default on payments or partners renege on agreements, these entrepreneurs must navigate Singapore's legal system largely on their own, often finding that formal justice doesn't translate to practical remedy. This reality reinforces their reliance on informal networks and reputation-based business practices, what Wang calls "having to build relationships with people."

Most revealing is Wang's approach to sociality and business networks. "In my off time, I find other bosses to drink. We go KTV together, I pay for them. You need a social circle. If you squat at home all day, nobody will know you. All my jobs are through recommendation." These

spaces of male homosociality such as KTV lounges, bars, smoking areas outside industrial shops constitute crucial sites where business relationships are formed and information exchanged. Unlike Denpo, whose advancement depends on formal corporate structures, Wang relies on these informal networks for business survival and growth.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between Wang and Denpo lies in their family arrangements. While Denpo has managed to bring his wife and children to Singapore, albeit without securing their PR status, Wang maintains a split household across national boundaries. “My wife is at home raising the two children,” he tells me. “As long as I bring money home, she’s fine. If I don’t bring money, then she might run away,” he adds with a laugh that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

This transnational family arrangement reveals how different migration regimes shape intimate relationships. Chinese construction workers, regardless of success or longevity, face particular barriers to family reunification in Singapore. Even after gaining PR status himself, Wang has elected (or been forced by circumstance) to maintain his family in China, a pattern resembling “astronaut families” (Ong, 1999) where wage earners orbit between countries while spouses and children remain anchored elsewhere.

This separation shapes Wang’s relationship to Singapore in fundamental ways. Despite living in the city-state for over twenty years, his sense of home remains firmly in China. “I’m used to being lonely, so I don’t want to go home,” he reflects. “But I can’t not go home. My wife and children are at home. My wife wants me to go home.” This ambivalence contrasts with Denpo’s determined efforts to establish his family permanently in Singapore, suggesting different horizons of belonging and settlement.

Yet Wang has achieved something Denpo continues to struggle for – Permanent Resident status. The timing of his migration in the early 2000s positioned him within a window of opportunity, a period when Singapore's immigration policies were more welcoming to skilled Chinese migrants. By the time Denpo began applying for PR for his family, this window had significantly narrowed following policy shifts in the late 2000s.

Wang's experience also demonstrates a different understanding of citizenship as capital. Unlike Denpo, who sees PR status as the foundation for his family's permanent settlement in Singapore, Wang views it instrumentally, a legal status that facilitates his business operations while his emotional and family investments remain in China. "I plan to stay in Singapore for another 5 or 6 years, work until I'm 60," he tells me. "Then I want to retire once I've saved enough." This planned return migration reveals a fundamentally different orientation to citizenship than Denpo's aspiration for multi-generational integration.

Wang's approach to his workers further illuminates his middling position. Unlike corporate supervisors like Denpo, who must balance company directives with worker management, Wang exercises more direct and personalized authority. "During Covid, I used my own savings to pay them," he states with evident pride. "The government subsidies $750, I paid $1200. To keep their hearts. All of them have stayed."

This paternalistic relationship reflects Wang's personalized authority, where power exercised through direct relationships rather than bureaucratic structures. Wang's workers, mostly recruited from his hometown in Jiangsu, relate to him not only as employer but also as patron

and hometown representative. “I know all their families,” he explains. “You need to have a worker’s heart. They need to feel like your work is their work.”

The contrast between Wang’s entrepreneurial pathway and Denpo’s corporate advancement reveals different survival strategies within Singapore’s differentiated citizenship regime. While both have achieved some measure of stability and recognition as middling migrants, they’ve done so through distinct configurations of economic activity, family arrangements, cultural capital, and relationship to Singaporean institutions. Their different approaches highlight the variety of ways middling migrants navigate their liminal positions, finding niches of possibility within structures designed to maintain strict hierarchies of belonging.

### 7.3.3. Cultural Brokerage: Yulia’s Corporate Mediation Work

In contrast to both Denpo’s technical leadership and Wang’s entrepreneurial independence, Yulia’s position at Super Cool represents a different configuration of middling status, one built on cultural mediation, gender performance, and transnational business connections. At thirty-seven, the Indonesian-born assistant director brings distinct capabilities and constraints to her role, reflecting gendered modes of flexible citizenship where forms of transnational mobility shaped by gender expectations and opportunities.

I first meet Yulia on the sixth-floor balcony of Super Cool’s office building, where executives gather for smoke breaks and informal conversations away from the open-plan office floor. Dressed in a tailored pantsuit that contrasts with the more casual attire of administrative staff, she projects a carefully cultivated corporate image. Yet as she offers me a cigarette and gestures toward the industrial landscape below, her manner shifts to something more confidential, a stepping out of her professional persona.

“I am a foreigner too,” she tells me, her Bahasa Indonesia accent softening her precisely enunciated English. “I started to work in Natural Cool 10 years ago, starting in September 2012. It was my first time working in this line. Before this I worked as a PA in the telco industry. I moved here because of husband, who had studied at NTU. He is also a PR. For one year I tried to adapt to Singapore first. I didn’t work. I tried to get accustomed. But I had no friends, no social mingle.”

This description of initial isolation resonates with many middling migrants’ experiences of Singapore, a city where professional networks and social connections often follow citizenship lines, creating particular challenges for those who fall between established categories. Unlike both Denpo and Wang, whose migration was directly tied to construction labour opportunities, Yulia’s entry point was through marriage, a gendered migration pathway that shapes numerous aspects of her subsequent experience.

Her career trajectory at Super Cool reveals a distinct pathway to middling status centred on her ability to navigate between different cultural systems. “My first boss until now is Adam,” she explains. “He is the one that educated me a lot, from scratch. He made me try everything so I will really understand. Carrying the CS/CU, carrying the fan coil unit. I started as an admin assistant. He brought me to meet the clients. He gave me a task.”

Like Denpo, Yulia’s advancement depended on patronage from a Singaporean sponsor. However, while Denpo’s value derived primarily from technical expertise and worker management, Yulia’s distinctive contribution comes from her ability to mediate between Super Cool’s Singaporean management and its diverse migrant workforce. This cultural brokerage function becomes especially evident during the company’s monthly welfare meetings, which

she co-hosts with Denpo. During these sessions, conducted via Zoom with workers joining from dormitories across Singapore, Yulia shifts fluidly between formal corporate communications and more personalized interactions. “We are Asian, we have religion,” she explains to me after one particularly intimate session where workers shared personal struggles. “Maybe Western don’t have. Why not every day we start with a prayer, to your own gods? We give a positive feeling.”

This cultural mediation extends beyond managing workers to facilitating Super Cool’s regional expansion. As the company establishes new operations in Indonesia, Yulia’s Indonesian background and connections become increasingly valuable assets. “We are starting our business in Jakarta in July,” she mentions with evident satisfaction. “I need to mingle, but need to reset. My culture is 12 years ago. The basis are there, since I was born and raised in Indonesia. But when you ask about ‘latest update’, I don’t know.”

This observation captures the particular dilemma of middling migrants who serve as cultural brokers: their value derives partly from their connection to origin countries, yet their long residence abroad creates gaps in cultural knowledge that must be actively managed. Unlike expatriate professionals who maintain clear identification with home countries, or assimilated immigrants who adopt host country identities, middling migrants like Yulia must constantly negotiate the distance between their remembered homelands and their current reality.

The gendered dimensions of Yulia’s middling position emerge most clearly in her reflections on emotional management. “I cannot put myself as woman anymore,” she comments after a particularly difficult client meeting. “Ten years ago, I cry a lot. Adam told me, ‘Yulia, you half lah. Cannot be a woman lah, in this industry.’” This gendered expectation to suppress emotion while maintaining the relational work traditionally assigned to women creates particular strains

for female middling migrants who are expected to embody both masculine authority and feminine care simultaneously.

The construction industry's masculine culture requires Yulia to develop specific strategies for establishing authority. Unlike male supervisors like Denpo or Wang, who can rely on technical expertise or entrepreneurial success as sources of legitimacy, Yulia must carefully manage her self-presentation to be taken seriously. Her corporate attire, direct communication style, and occasional participation in male-dominated practices like smoking represent conscious adaptations to this gendered environment. At the same time, Yulia leverages stereotypically feminine attributes – emotional intelligence, interpersonal sensitivity, cultural awareness – as professional assets. During worker welfare meetings, she deliberately uses maternal language and gestures to create connections: "We will chat with them, tease them, say wah you very handsome?" This strategic performance of femininity allows her to establish authority through care rather than command, creating a distinctive management approach that complements rather than mimics male supervisors' styles.

Yulia's liminal position manifests in her management style, particularly in how she handles conflicts between workers and management. During one contentious meeting about salary increases, I observed her alternately empathizing with workers' financial struggles while maintaining firm boundaries around Super Cool's budgetary constraints. "We treat them as partners, as human beings," she explained to me afterward. "But cannot be you want candy, I give you candy. Everything must be justified." This dual position, expressing genuine care while maintaining hierarchical distance, characterizes many middling migrants' management approaches. Unlike citizen-managers who can maintain greater emotional distance from migrant workers' struggles, or rank-and-file migrants who might develop more organic

solidarity with fellow workers, middling migrants occupy an awkward middle ground where empathy and authority must be delicately balanced.

Yulia's experience of PR status also differs notably from both Denpo's and Wang's. While Denpo views PR as a path toward multigenerational settlement in Singapore, and Wang sees it primarily as a business facilitator while maintaining Chinese identity, Yulia treats her Singaporean residency as one node in a transnational life strategy. Her family maintains properties in Jakarta, her business aspirations span Southeast Asia, and her professional identity bridges multiple national contexts.

"Now, I feel lost when I come back to my own country," she confesses during one of our conversations. "When I come back to Singapore, I feel, this is home. I got used to all the comforts in Singapore." Yet this sentiment coexists with ongoing investment in Indonesian connections and aspirations to leverage her Singaporean experience for future business opportunities across Southeast Asia.

This transnational orientation shapes her relationship to both workers and management at Super Cool. Unlike Denpo, who maintains careful neutrality in company politics, or Wang, who asserts independent entrepreneurial authority, Yulia actively positions herself as a bridge between different stakeholder groups. During contentious discussions about worker housing during COVID-19, for instance, she advocated for improved conditions while framing these as business necessities rather than moral imperatives, a tactical approach that allowed her to advance worker interests without directly challenging management authority.

Yulia's middling position is perhaps most clearly illustrated through her experience with a worker who fell ill shortly after she arrived in Singapore. "He said, 'Mam, I am very sick,'" she recounted. "I brought him to hospital myself, and took care of him. Turns out, he had dengue fever." This act of care, going beyond professional obligations to personally escort a worker to medical treatment, exemplifies the maternal authority Yulia cultivates. Yet this same worker later deceived management about a family emergency, claiming his mother was too sick to walk in order to secure leave for his wedding. When Adam received photos showing the supposedly bedridden mother standing and smiling at the wedding ceremony, Yulia felt personally betrayed. "Few years, he lied to Denpo. Men, they don't care. From women point of view, many times I feel disappointed. You take it for granted when we try to really treasure you." This experience taught her to maintain emotional boundaries while still providing care, embodying the contradictions inherent in middling migrants' authority.

Despite these disappointments, workers continued to include Yulia in significant life moments. "Like this guy still send me wedding invites," she told me, showing me an invitation printed in peacock blue and silver, mailed all the way from India. These gestures revealed the genuine affection workers felt for her, even as structural hierarchies complicated their relationships.

Yulia's transnational business aspirations further distinguish her trajectory from Denpo's and Wang's. While Denpo focuses on securing his family's position within Singapore, and Wang aims for eventual retirement in China, Yulia actively cultivates business opportunities that span national boundaries. As she prepares for Super Cool's expansion into Indonesia, she positions herself as an essential intermediary: "In Singapore, one day I can set up 4 meetings or appointments. In Jakarta, don't every try to make 3 appointments, or you will go home past midnight. There is traffic, and lateness." Yulia's ability to navigate between different business

temporalities, cultural expectations, and regulatory environments positions her as a valuable asset to a company seeking regional expansion. This form of "broker capital" represents a distinctive pathway through which some middling migrants establish security and recognition despite formal citizenship constraints.

The monthly welfare meeting Yulia conducts with workers via Zoom exemplifies her particular approach to middling authority. As workers join from their dormitories, lying on bunk beds with fans whirring in the background, Yulia shifts effortlessly between corporate messaging and personal connection. "We make jokes, tease them," she explains. "We want to see their facial expressions, see how they are feeling, how is their mood." This affective management, monitoring and responding to workers' emotional states, represents a form of care that simultaneously extends and reinforces hierarchical relationships. By encouraging workers to share personal struggles and making small gestures of support, Yulia creates genuine connections while maintaining the structural inequalities that define their relationship. This complex entanglement of care and control characterizes many middling migrants' management approaches, particularly those of women tasked with maintaining worker morale.

### 7.4. Negotiating Authority and Vulnerability

The everyday experiences of middling migrants like Denpo, Wang, and Yulia reveal how their intermediary position requires constant navigation of authority and vulnerability. Unlike contractors who exercise economic power through business ownership or rank-and-file workers whose structural position is clearly defined, middling migrants occupy an ambiguous middle ground where their authority remains conditional, requiring continuous reinforcement through performance while exposing them to unique forms of vulnerability. Through three key ethnographic moments: 1) Adam's public reprimand of Denpo, 2) the van incident involving

worker discipline, and 3) the monthly welfare meeting with migrant workers, I show middling migrants negotiate partial power and persistent precarity.

### 7.4.1. The Public Reprimand: Embodied Hierarchies in Super Cool's Office

The confrontation between Adam and Denpo that unfolded in Super Cool's open-plan office resonated throughout the Commercial Affairs Department long after the immediate incident had passed. To understand its full significance requires situating it within the particular spatial and hierarchical dynamics of the workplace.

The third-floor office where the confrontation occurred occupies an in-between space, neither the rarefied realm of executive decision-making nor the sweat-soaked reality of on-site labour. Against this backdrop, Adam's raised voice created an immediate rupture in the office's acoustic ecology. The physical dynamics of the confrontation were equally telling: Adam standing over Denpo's desk, while Denpo remained seated, his posture carefully calibrated to convey attention without suggesting either defiance or submission.

Adam's accusation, "I thought I can rely on this kind of people also", carried multiple layers of meaning. The phrase "this kind of people" hung in the air, its deliberate ambiguity allowing multiple interpretations: workers under Denpo's supervision, migrant supervisors like Denpo himself, or perhaps a broader category of non-Singaporeans deemed less reliable. This strategic imprecision characterizes much discourse around migrant labour in Singapore, allowing speakers to invoke racial and national hierarchies without explicit reference to prohibited discriminatory categories.

Denpo's response, "So what can I do for them now? You want me to take action and terminate them?", revealed the high stakes of the interaction. The casual discussion of termination carried

profound implications in a system where employment is tied directly to legal residence. For Work Permit holders, dismissal typically means not just job loss but deportation, severing access to Singapore's higher wages that often support entire families in home countries. Denpo's willingness to consider termination, delivered in a calm and measured tone despite the public nature of the reprimand, demonstrated his strategic navigation of competing pressures, showing sufficient deference to Adam's authority while maintaining his own position as a manager empowered to make consequential decisions about subordinates' fates.

When Adam escalated with, "Let you go lah. How am I going to accept?", the implied threat momentarily collapsed the distinction between Denpo and the workers under his supervision, reminding everyone present of the conditional nature of Denpo's own position despite his years of service and PR status. This momentary erasure of hierarchy, treating an assistant manager as potentially disposable as a rank-and-file worker, revealed how thoroughly citizenship status shapes vulnerability within Singapore's construction industry.

For middling migrants like Denpo, authority is always conditional, requiring constant reinforcement through performance. Unlike Singaporean managers whose position rests on citizenship privileges and formal organizational hierarchy, Denpo's authority derives from multiple, sometimes contradictory sources: his technical expertise and experience, his ability to mediate between management and workers, his cultural and linguistic capabilities, and crucially, the continued approval of superiors like Adam. This precarious authority must be actively maintained through daily practices that simultaneously demonstrate competence to superiors, command respect from subordinates, and navigate the complex racial and national hierarchies that structure Singapore's construction industry.

The public nature of the confrontation served an important disciplinary function beyond the immediate issue at hand. By dressing Denpo down in front of his colleagues, Adam reinforced not just his own superior position but the broader hierarchies that structure Super Cool and similar companies. The visible performance of authority and submission created what Foucault (1977) might call a spectacle of power that reminded everyone present of the conditional nature of middling migrants' advancement.

### 7.4.2. The Van Incident: Moral Economies and Middling Ethics

If Adam's outburst illuminated the precarious nature of middling migrants' authority, a subsequent incident involving a damaged company van revealed the complex moral positioning that shapes their everyday decisions. This encounter, which unfolded during a lunchtime drive with Denpo and Adam, offered a window into how middling migrants navigate the ethical dilemmas inherent in their intermediary position.

Inside Denpo's van, the small green Myanmar wristband wrapped around the gear stick and the family photograph on the dashboard stood in stark contrast to the work-related items strewn across the back seat: gloves, a safety helmet, folders of site plans. These objects embodied the overlapping domains Denpo navigated daily, such as national identity, family responsibilities, and professional obligations, all compressed within the confined space of his vehicle.

Adam grips the edge of his seat as we turn onto the expressway. "Yong Han," he says, his tone shifting from casual to instructional, "I want to share with you one issue. Since you are doing research, I thought I should share this with you. You can include this in your research, I want you to show the kinds of struggles employers have to deal with."

I glance at Denpo, who focuses on navigating the midday traffic, his face neutral as Adam continues. “Now we have a $1450 repair bill. The whole engine needs to be replaced.” Adam’s hands gesture emphatically. “So what should we do? Should I make them pay?”

Denpo, who had remained silent during Adam’s initial recounting, quietly added contextual details that significantly complicated the narrative. “The van already had oil problems before. We sent it for repair twice already.” This additional information transformed the incident from a simple case of worker negligence to a more complex situation involving potential mechanical failures and maintenance issues.

Adam dismissed these complications, insisting, “Must be the driver what!” “If the oil light comes on, you stop driving! Basic common sense. Don’t try to make excuses for them.” From his perspective, the worker had failed to conduct proper checks and continued driving despite warning signs. The determination to assign blame solely to the worker, despite evidence of pre-existing mechanical problems, revealed how responsibility within construction hierarchies typically flows downward while authority and decision-making power remain concentrated above.

Denpo nods, his fingers tapping lightly on the steering wheel. “He was also fined $200 last month for speeding. Maybe he’s afraid to get in more trouble.”

Adam scoffs. “So now we’re rewarding him for previous bad behaviour?”

While Adam interpreted this as additional evidence of the worker’s irresponsibility, Denpo framed it as a mitigating circumstance that warranted greater empathy. “As a migrant, I know

and understand how much pain salary cuts cost," Denpo says, his voice softening. He glances briefly at the family photograph clipped to his dashboard. "$1450 is no small figure, probably more than the monthly salary of the technician."

This exchange illuminated competing "moral economies" operating within Singapore's construction industry. Thompson's concept, developed to understand food riots in 18th-century England, describes how shared assumptions about rights, responsibilities, and fair practices shape economic interactions beyond pure market logic. Within Super Cool, multiple moral economies coexisted and occasionally collided. Adam operated primarily within a contractual moral economy where worker-employer relationships were governed by formal agreements and clear lines of responsibility. However, the worker likely understood his position through a patronage moral economy that emphasized care and protection from employers in exchange for loyalty and hard work. Denpo navigated between these systems while drawing on a migrant solidarity moral economy that recognized the particular vulnerabilities and hardships faced by non-citizens.

Later, in a private conversation, Denpo elaborated on his moral predicament. "No matter what," he said, his voice taking on a darker tone, "I am still a migrant. Adam is Singaporean so he will never care about what migrants feel." This statement highlighted the persistence of Denpo's migrant identity despite his permanent residency status.

The gulf between their experiences seemed unbridgeable in certain respects. Years of working alongside Adam, sharing meals and project deadlines, hadn't dissolved what Denpo saw as an essential difference in perspective. He possessed insights into worker vulnerability that Adam, despite his genuine concern for employee welfare, simply couldn't access. When disciplinary

decisions arose, Denpo understood the particular anxieties that permit-dependent workers carried, such as the fear of termination meaning deportation, the pressure to accept unsafe conditions rather than complain, the way small infractions could cascade into visa complications. While he couldn't directly challenge Adam's authority or openly contradict company decisions, he still found ways to introduce mitigating information, suggest alternative interpretations of worker behaviour, and advocate subtly for more lenient treatment. His interventions required delicate calibration; forceful enough to make a difference, subtle enough to avoid overstepping his position as a permanent resident managing other migrants.

### 7.4.3. The Welfare Meeting: Disciplining Workers, Disciplining Selves

Perhaps nowhere are the contradictions of Denpo's middling position more evident than in Super Cool's monthly welfare meetings with migrant workers. Every month, Denpo and Yulia co-host a virtual meeting via Zoom, bringing together workers scattered across various dormitories throughout Singapore.

As workers joined the call, Denpo greeted each by name, his manner shifting noticeably from the reserved professionalism he maintained with Adam to a more personalized, almost familial interaction. The workers themselves appeared in various states of repose: lying on beds, seated on plastic chairs, sometimes outdoors in dormitory common areas with the sounds of traffic or conversation in the background. Most wore t-shirts or singlets, the formal hierarchies of the workplace temporarily suspended in these more personal spaces.

The meeting's most poignant segment centred on a news clip Denpo shared from the Straits Times, featuring migrant workers protesting over unpaid wages. The video showed workers in safety helmets and vests staging a demonstration at Ang Mo Kio, using a lorry to block a building entrance. Denpo carefully framed this news story not as an example of legitimate

worker resistance but as a cautionary tale about legal violations. “I just want to share with you, as a foreigner, what are the dos and don’ts,” he explained, his voice taking on a more formal, instructional tone. Reading directly from the article, he emphasized that those found guilty of participating in a public assembly without a permit under the Public Order Act could be fined up to $3,000.

“I just want to ask, assembly in public area, holding signage, is it legal in Singapore a not?” Denpo prompted the workers. “Yes, illegal boss,” one worker promptly responded. Denpo continued his lesson: “Guys, moral of the story here ah. You cannot do anything without permit in Singapore. There will be a fine, there will be a laws and order in Singapore to say that taking part in a public assembly without a permit, under the Public Order Act, can be fined up to $3000.”

This framing performed several crucial functions. First, it established a clear boundary between acceptable and unacceptable forms of addressing worker grievances, delegitimizing collective public action while implicitly directing workers toward official, individualized channels. Second, it positioned Denpo himself as an informational resource rather than an enforcer, educating workers about Singapore’s laws rather than explicitly threatening punishment. Finally, it created separation between Super Cool and the company in the news story: “So far in my employment period with Natural Cool, my salary never come late – and all of your salary never come late as well.”

Most striking was Denpo’s dual positioning in this interaction. While explicitly aligning with management interests in preventing worker mobilization, he simultaneously maintained linguistic solidarity through phrases like “As a foreigner” and “You need to follow the laws in

Singapore," subtly acknowledging a shared position vis-à-vis Singapore's regulatory regime. This duality, neither fully identified with management nor completely aligned with workers, exemplifies the ambiguous moral terrain middling migrants occupy.

The meeting continued with a discussion of workplace safety incidents, focusing on recent accidents in the construction industry. Again, Denpo's presentation balanced disciplinary and protective functions, warning workers against unsafe practices while also emphasizing mutual care and welfare. "You see ah, why we have every month Zoom briefing about the latest update from MOM? What are the thing to be taken as a lesson? Because each and every one of you are very very valuable, for yourself, for your family, for our company, Super Cool, and for our team."

The technical language Denpo used when explaining safety concepts, shifting between formal engineering terminology and simplified explanations, demonstrated his role as translator between different knowledge systems. When describing the dangers of working at height, for instance, he first used technical classifications ("scaffold, MEWP") before offering more accessible explanations: "The moment you are above the ground, you are working at height. Be it ladder, be it scaffold, be it MEWP, you are working at height. One feet, two feet above the ground, you are working at height."

At the meeting's conclusion, Denpo called for a prayer: "Before I end this meeting, I would like to call for the prayer for tonight. We have Buddhist here, we have Hindu, we have Muslim, we have Christian. We pray to our own god for tonight. We pray for ourselves, for our family, for our worker, for our customers, for health, wealth, and safety. And our prayer begin now."

This religious practice, instituted by Yulia five years earlier, represents a hybridization of corporate management and cultural practice. The practice simultaneously acknowledges workers' religious identities, creates spaces for personalized spiritual practice within corporate settings, and reinforces management authority through ritual leadership.

The meeting ended with a moment of silence as workers bowed their heads in prayer, the digital space of the Zoom call temporarily transformed into a site of spiritual practice. This final act underscored the multiple ways middling migrants like Denpo must navigate between secular corporate rationality and more culturally embedded forms of community and care. By leading workers in prayer while conducting formal corporate business, Denpo performed precisely the kind of boundary-crossing work that makes middling migrants valuable within Singapore's construction industry.

### 7.4.4. Limited Agency Within Hierarchical Systems

These three ethnographic moments of Adam's public reprimand, the van incident, and the welfare meeting, all show the distinctive forms of agency available to middling migrants within Singapore's construction hierarchies. Their position grants them neither the economic power of contractors nor the potential for collective resistance sometimes available to rank-and-file workers. Instead, they exercise the capacity to pursue valued goals within structurally constrained circumstances.

This interstitial agency serves specific functions that contractors cannot perform. Contractors mediate between state regulations and market pressures through business operations and bureaucratic navigation. Middling migrants do different work: they translate across linguistic barriers that stop contractors from communicating with workers directly, manage co-ethnic crews through cultural knowledge that citizen-contractors lack, and absorb the daily frictions

between what regulations require and what sites can actually deliver. Singapore's construction industry depends on both: economic coordination and cultural mediation operating in tandem, each managing contradictions the other cannot touch.

For Denpo, this agency manifests in his subtle efforts to moderate harsh management decisions, translate technical information into accessible language for workers, and create small spaces of dignity and recognition within highly constrained environments. His careful calibration of posture and tone during Adam's confrontation, his introduction of mitigating information during the van incident, and his incorporation of prayer into corporate welfare meetings all represent strategic navigations of limited but real possibilities for intervention.

Yulia's agency takes different forms, shaped by gender and her specific positioning within Super Cool. When a worker was accused of stealing, she used her role as a "non-threatening" female figure to gather information that male supervisors couldn't access. During welfare meetings, she strategically deploys emotional language and maternal gestures to create connections with workers that facilitate management goals while providing genuine support. Her transnational business connections allow her to position herself as indispensable to Super Cool's regional expansion, securing her position through a form of cultural capital unavailable to locally focused managers.

Wang Da Gang's entrepreneurial position creates different possibilities for agency. Unlike Denpo and Yulia, whose authority remains delegated from Singaporean management, Wang has established relative autonomy through business ownership. This position allows him to exercise more direct control over his workers while remaining vulnerable to larger economic forces like client non-payment and regulatory changes. His agency emerges through the

creative development of ethnic business networks, the cultivation of personalized relationships with hometown workers, and strategic navigation of Singapore's legal system when disputes arise.

What unites these different manifestations of middling agency is their fundamentally interstitial nature, operating in the gaps and connections between established structures rather than directly challenging them. Although middling migrants cannot easily resist the hierarchies that structure Singapore's construction industry, they find ways to bend these structures toward slightly more humane configurations through daily practices of mediation, translation, and occasional advocacy. Their limited agency reveals the capillary nature of power in Singapore's construction industry, flowing through multiple channels, creating different pressures and possibilities at different points within the system. As middling migrants, Denpo, Yulia, and Wang conduct and modulate these flows of power, occasionally redirecting them in small but meaningful ways that create spaces of possibility within highly constrained circumstances.

This interstitial agency helps explain why middling migrants rarely engage in open resistance despite their acute awareness of injustice. Their precarious position makes confrontational tactics extremely risky, while their partial incorporation into Singapore society creates incentives for accommodation rather than challenge. Instead, they develop sophisticated tactics of navigation, negotiation, and selective intervention that allow them to pursue valued goals, such as family security, professional recognition, financial stability, without directly threatening the hierarchies that both enable and constrain their advancement.

### 7.5. The Politics of Partial Belonging

Middling migrants' experiences demonstrate how belonging in Singapore operates not as a binary state but as a complex spectrum shaped by intersecting factors of race, nationality,

family arrangements, and temporal orientations. Their partial incorporation into Singaporean society illuminates the graduated nature of citizenship in contemporary Singapore and its implications for how individuals navigate their personal and professional lives within structurally constrained circumstances.

### 7.5.1. Racial Dimensions: The Administrative Flattening of Complex Identities

One of the most interesting aspects of Denpo's story is how his complex ethnic background intersects with Singapore's rigid racial classification system. During a casual lunch in his van, Denpo surprised me by pulling out his old Burmese ID card, revealing that he was actually of mixed Shan-Indian-Chinese heritage. "My father's side Shan-Indian, mother's side Shan-Chinese, and my grandmother Pakistani," he explained, tracing his complex genealogy with evident pride.

This moment of disclosure underscores how Singapore's migration regime flattens complex identities into simplified administrative categories. On all his Singapore documents, Denpo is classified simply as "Myanmar," a designation that erases the intricate ethnic and cultural identities he carries. Yet even as official systems reduce him to a singular nationality, Denpo maintains and asserts his more complex self-understanding. This tension between administrative simplification and lived complexity shows how racial capitalism operates not only through explicit racial hierarchies but through seemingly neutral bureaucratic categories that produce similar effects.

For Denpo, this flattening of identity into the category "Myanmar" has concrete implications for his experience of Singapore's social landscape. Unlike ethnic Chinese migrants who might find cultural affinities with Singapore's Chinese majority, or Indian migrants who might connect with local Indian communities, Denpo's complex heritage places him outside

Singapore's dominant racial categories. This positioning both limits his access to certain forms of social capital and creates spaces of relative autonomy from the expectations associated with more recognized groups.

The incident shows the lasting influence of colonial racial taxonomies within Singapore's contemporary migration regime. The CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) framework that structures Singapore's approach to multiculturalism emerged from British colonial practices of racial categorization, which sought to render diverse populations legible for administrative purposes. For middling migrants like Denpo, navigating this system involves a constant negotiation between official categories and personal identities, between public performance and private maintenance of more complex self-understandings.

This administrative flattening operates differently for Wang Da Gang, whose Chinese ethnicity aligns with Singapore's majority population. While Wang benefits from certain cultural and linguistic affinities with Singaporean Chinese, his mainland Chinese nationality introduces different complexities. As he noted during our conversations, Singaporean Chinese often view mainland Chinese through stereotypes of being "loud," "uncultured," or "money-oriented", categorizations that Wang works to distance himself from through careful self-presentation and emphasis on his business success and technical skills.

Yulia's experience offers yet another configuration of racial positioning. As an Indonesian in Singapore, she navigates perceptions shaped by the predominant role of Indonesian women as domestic workers. Her corporate position at Super Cool represents a departure from these stereotypes, yet she must constantly manage assumptions about her capabilities and authority. During client meetings, she noted, new clients sometimes mistake her for an administrative

assistant rather than an assistant director, requiring small but significant performances of authority to establish her actual position.

These varied experiences demonstrate how racial and national categories create differential access to recognition and resources within Singapore's construction industry. Hiring patterns show clear national segmentation: technical and supervisory roles typically go to Chinese and Malaysian nationals, while Bangladeshi and Indian workers remain concentrated in general labour positions. Even when individuals possess similar qualifications, their racial and national positioning shapes how their skills are recognized and valued. Denpo's university degree from Myanmar carried little weight in Singapore's credential-focused system, while Wang's vocational training in China received greater recognition despite its arguably lower academic level.

These patterns connect to broader regional histories of racial formation that continue to shape contemporary hierarchies. The privileging of Chinese labour within Singapore's construction industry recalls colonial labour hierarchies where European administrators positioned Chinese workers as more "industrious" and "skilled" than South Asian or Malay labourers. Similarly, the concentration of Bangladeshi workers in the most physically demanding and lowest-paid positions perpetuates colonial categorizations of certain bodies as naturally suited to hard labour. Middling migrants navigate these historically informed hierarchies daily, developing strategies for advancement that both work within and occasionally challenge these racialized assumptions.

What makes these racial dimensions particularly significant is how they operate through seemingly neutral administrative categories rather than explicit racial discourse. Immigration

statuses like Work Permit, S Pass, and Employment Pass appear as technocratic designations based on skill and salary, yet map onto racial and national categories with remarkable precision. This administrative racialization allows racial hierarchies to persist without requiring explicitly racial language, creating "racism without racists" (Bonilla-Silva, 2017), where systems produce racialized outcomes through ostensibly race-neutral mechanisms.

Middling migrants navigate these racialized hierarchies through various strategies of accommodation and occasional resistance. For instance, Wang's emphasis on distinctively Chinese business practices while adapting to Singaporean regulatory expectations demonstrates a strategic deployment of ethnic capital that turns racial positioning into economic advantage. Likewise, Yulia's careful self-presentation as a professional Indonesian woman rather than a domestic worker represents a conscious negotiation of racial and gendered stereotypes that create distinct barriers for women of certain nationalities.

### 7.5.2. Family Arrangements: Citizenship Shaping Intimate Relationships

The implications of differentiated citizenship extend far beyond the workplace, profoundly shaping middling migrants' family arrangements and intimate relationships. Their strategies for managing transnational kinship ties, spousal relationships, and children's futures show how thoroughly citizenship regimes infiltrate the most personal dimensions of migrant lives, creating distinct configurations of separation, reunification, and intergenerational belonging.

Denpo's struggles to secure permanent residency for his family exemplify how citizenship hierarchies materialize in intimate domains. As we examined the neatly organized file folder containing multiple rejection letters from the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), the human cost of administrative decisions became painfully apparent. Despite his own PR status, secured in 2006 during a period of more open immigration policies, Denpo has been unable to obtain the same security for his wife Mai and their children Alice and Aidan.

This separation within citizenship status creates concrete practical challenges. Without PR status, Mai remains on a long-term visit pass despite having lived in Singapore for over twenty years. The children, though born and raised in Singapore, hold dependent passes that require annual renewal and position them as perpetually temporary despite having never lived anywhere else. These statuses limit their access to education, healthcare, and housing. Denpo's family pays higher foreigner fees for schooling and medical care, while remaining trapped in the rental market due to ineligibility for subsidized HDB housing.

The educational challenges have been particularly difficult. Alice could only enter primary school at age eight, after Denpo paid for her to study at an international school for six months to secure admission to a local institution. As she approaches her O-levels, they worry about the higher fees she'll face for any post-secondary education. When Alice asked me directly, "Is it weird, that I have been born here, and I have lived here for 13 years, but still I have no PR status?", her question indicated a growing awareness of her different status compared to her Singaporean classmates, a difference not of her making yet profoundly shaping her educational opportunities and sense of belonging.

Denpo has explored multiple pathways to secure his family's position: seeking professional assistance from immigration agents, strategizing about Mai's employment to enhance their application, and collecting certificates from every course and training program the family has completed to demonstrate their commitment to self-improvement. "They wanted $3,000 just to start, with no guarantees," he explained about the immigration agents he consulted. When discussing his wife's work history, he wondered aloud, "Is it better to put 'housekeeper' or should she return to eldercare?" These efforts represent a form of flexible citizenship'(Ong,

1999), where migrants enact strategic practices to maximize family security and opportunity within constraining immigration regimes.

But while Ong's concept centred on affluent Chinese entrepreneurs deploying capital mobility across borders, a flexibility born of privilege and liquidity, Denpo's flexibility manifests differently: a construction worker with limited resources accumulating modest credentials, pivoting occupational identities, documenting every possible marker of integration. What emerges is a flexible citizenship *from below* that operates through tactical accumulation, rather than capital mobilization. This expansion of Ong's framework bridges theoretical divides between elite and working-class migration studies. The underlying strategic logic persists across the socioeconomic spectrum, but the practices diverge dramatically based on position within global hierarchies. Where wealthy migrants deploy financial capital as their primary currency of worthiness, Denpo's family must substitute alternative forms of value, such as credentials, employment histories, evidence of self-improvement. His meticulous collection of certificates indicate how immigration regimes produce distinct adaptations while maintaining the same fundamental demand: prove your value to the nation-state, though the standards of proof vary with class position.

Wang Da Gang's family arrangement presents a striking contrast to Denpo's determined pursuit of family reunification. As mentioned earlier, despite his two decades in Singapore and acquisition of PR status, Wang maintains a split household with his wife and children remaining in China. For Wang, this split household arrangement reflects both immigration constraints and cultural preferences. Wang's comments demonstrate how economic provision becomes a primary form of relationship maintenance across distance. "As long as I bring money home, she's fine," he explained with a laugh that didn't quite reach his eyes. "If I don't bring money,

then she might run away." Despite the emotional costs of separation, which emerged in Wang's wistful descriptions of brief visits home, this arrangement allows his family to maintain property ownership, educational access, and social connections in China while benefiting from higher Singaporean wages.

The children in these different family arrangements experience citizenship constraints in distinct ways. For Denpo's Singapore-born children, differentiated citizenship creates a paradoxical experience of being simultaneously "from here" yet officially designated as foreign. Their fluent Singlish, local school friendships, and deep familiarity with Singapore's social landscape coexist with exclusion from rights and recognitions accorded to citizen children. As Alice entered adolescence, these contradictions became increasingly apparent, prompting her questioning of why birth and lifelong residence in Singapore hadn't translated into more secure belonging.

Wang's children in China, by contrast, experience their father primarily as an economic provider and occasional visitor rather than daily presence. This absence creates particular challenges around paternal authority and family bonding. During our conversations, Wang expressed concerns about maintaining meaningful relationships with children he sees only a few weeks each year, a common worry among transnational fathers that highlights the emotional costs of migration regimes that separate families across borders.

Denpo's meticulous organization of rejection letters from immigration authorities, Wang's twice-yearly visits to children he barely knows, and Yulia's careful performance of professional femininity, all represent the personal costs of maintaining intermediary positions within Singapore's construction industry. These costs are not incidental but central to how

intermediation functions, creating flexible workforce arrangements that serve Singapore's development while maintaining fundamental hierarchies.

These varied family arrangements demonstrate how thoroughly citizenship shapes intimate relationships in ways that exceed legal categorization. Separation and reunification, authority and care, presence and absence, all become reconfigured through migration policies that determine who can live where, under what conditions, and with what rights to bring family members. Middling migrants develop creative strategies to maintain meaningful family connections despite these constraints, yet these efforts always occur within structurally imposed limitations that shape affective circuits (Cole and Groes, 2016) of transnational families.

### 7.5.3. Temporal Horizons: Divergent Orientations to Past and Future

Beyond racial positioning and family arrangements, middling migrants exhibit distinctive temporal orientations that reflect their particular relationship to Singapore's differentiated citizenship regime. Their varied conceptions of past, present, and future illuminate how citizenship shapes current status and also projections of possibility, memory formations, and intergenerational aspirations.

Denpo's orientation toward the future exhibits aspirational permanence, a determined investment in multigenerational settlement despite persistent institutional barriers. His meticulous organization of immigration applications, careful preservation of school records and certificates, and ongoing pursuit of permanent residency for his family all represent yearnings for "normal lives" (Jansen, 2015; Jansen, 2016), concrete practices through which people maintain forward momentum and attempt to establish predictability despite uncertain futures. This future orientation manifests concretely in Denpo's careful preservation of

documents related to his family's immigration status. Each application, separated by plastic dividers, organized chronologically, key passages highlighted, represents not merely bureaucratic necessity but material practice of hope.

Wang Da Gang's temporal orientation, by contrast, represents a form of sojourner consciousness (Reid, 1996), a perception of one's time in the host country as extended, but ultimately temporary. Despite over twenty years in Singapore and acquisition of PR status, Wang maintains his primary identity orientation toward China. "I plan to stay in Singapore for another 5 or 6 years, work until I'm 60," he explained. "Then I want to retire once I've saved enough." This planned return migration signals a fundamentally different orientation to citizenship than Denpo's aspiration for multi-generational integration.

Wang's relationship to time manifests in his business practices and material investments. Unlike Denpo, who allocates significant resources toward housing and education in Singapore, Wang directs his financial investments primarily toward property in China. These allocation decisions reflect provisional permanence, where migrants exist in a state of extended temporary residence without full commitment to permanent settlement.

The contrasting temporal orientations of Denpo and Wang show how citizenship regimes shape temporal horizons in ways that exceed individual preference. The relative ease with which Wang secured PR status during Singapore's more open immigration period in the early 2000s, compared to Denpo's ongoing struggles to secure the same for his family after policy tightening, demonstrates how immigration timing creates distinct cohorts with different temporal possibilities.

Yulia's temporal orientation presents yet another configuration. Her preparation for Super Cool's expansion into Indonesia, maintenance of property investments in Jakarta alongside Singapore residence, and cultivation of business networks across Southeast Asia all demonstrate a temporality oriented toward regional mobility rather than fixed belonging in either Singapore or Indonesia.

This flexible orientation emerges in Yulia's reflections on her relationship to both countries: "Now, I feel lost when I come back to my own country. When I come back to Singapore, I feel, this is home. I got used to all the comforts in Singapore." Yet this sentiment coexists with ongoing investment in Indonesian connections and aspirations to leverage her Singaporean experience for future business opportunities across Southeast Asia.

Middling migrants' divergent temporal orientations directly shape how they perform their intermediary functions. Denpo's long-term settlement aspirations make him a more reliable translator of company policies to workers, as he personally embodies the possibility of advancement within the system. Wang's planned return to China creates greater flexibility in his business operations, allowing him to accept higher-risk contracts that Singaporean companies might avoid. Yulia's transnational orientation positions her as an effective broker for Super Cool's regional expansion.

The state's linear modernization narrative obscures a messier reality: construction depends on intermediaries whose temporal commitments fragment in multiple directions. Consider the contradictions: Denpo dreams of multigenerational settlement while policy treats migrants as temporary inputs; Wang maintains his Chinese identity after two decades in Singapore, defying integration narratives; Yulia operates across Southeast Asian borders, refusing the neat

boundaries of national development. These contradictions however are productive rather than problematic. The industry gains flexibility precisely because different intermediaries manage different temporal pressures, some anchoring operations locally, others maintaining regional connections, still others bridging between temporary and permanent settlement.

### 7.6. Conclusion

Through the ethnographic portraits presented in this chapter, I have shown how middling migrants navigate this terrain of partial inclusion, creating meaningful lives and aspiring toward greater security while remaining subject to constraints that citizen-contractors do not face. Most significant for the dissertation's broader argument about intermediaries in Singapore's construction industry, middling migrants occupy a distinctive position within the ecosystem of mediation that facilitates the city-state's development model. Unlike contractors, whose intermediary functions primarily involve bridging between state regulation and market demands, middling migrants mediate between management and labour, between different linguistic and cultural worlds, and between competing moral obligations.

This distinction demonstrates how thoroughly intermediation has been disaggregated in contemporary Singapore. Functions that colonial intermediaries like the kepala and mestizo unified within single roles, including recruitment, supervision, cultural mediation, discipline, have been distributed across specialized positions, creating a more flexible system of labour management that can be calibrated according to changing economic needs. This disaggregation allows for more precise calibration of authority, responsibility, and identification, maintaining hierarchical control while creating limited pathways for mobility that legitimate the system without threatening its fundamental structure.

The monthly welfare meeting where Denpo simultaneously educates workers about legal constraints on protest while leading them in multi-faith prayer exemplifies this calibrated incorporation. By framing collective action as legal violation rather than legitimate grievance, he reinforces hierarchies that disadvantage migrant workers. Yet by acknowledging shared position "as foreigners" and creating space for religious practice within corporate settings, he simultaneously mitigates the harshest edges of these hierarchies. This complex balancing act, maintaining order while providing limited recognition, encapsulates how middling migrants function within Singapore's construction industry.

Middling migrants' partial incorporation represents a carefully calibrated form of inclusion that serves specific functions within Singapore's development model, operating simultaneously as a mechanism of control and limited opportunity. By creating pathways for select migrants to achieve relative stability and recognition, Singapore's migration regime legitimizes its overall selectivity while maintaining fundamental inequalities. Middling migrants' success stories, such as Denpo's rise from general worker to assistant manager, Wang's establishment of a small business after starting as a formwork labourer, and Yulia's advancement from administrative assistant to regional business representative serve as powerful narratives that justify the system's meritocratic claims despite its structural constraints. But these same stories suggest that citizenship is an ongoing negotiation between structural constraints and human agency. The everyday practices that middling migrants like Denpo, Wang, and Yulia engage in don't fundamentally challenge Singapore's differentiated citizenship regime but bend its edges toward slightly more humane configurations.

As we take the lift to Peninsula Plaza's rooftop carpark, the mechanical doors open to reveal a breathtaking panorama of Singapore's civic district. The evening light bathes the neoclassical

dome of the National Gallery in golden hues, while beyond it, the futuristic skyline of Marina Bay rises against the darkening sky. The floating platform where the National Day Parade is held sits prominently in the harbour, surrounded by the gleaming towers of Singapore's financial district. "This is our family's open secret," Denpo says with a conspiratorial smile, gesturing toward the spectacular view. "We come up here every National Day to watch the fireworks and the parade. Perfect view, no need to queue, no ticket."

Alice runs ahead to the edge of the carpark, pointing excitedly toward the floating platform. "That's where all the soldiers march," she explains to me. "We can see everything from here. The planes flying overhead, the fireworks, everything." Her familiarity with Singapore's national celebration contrasts sharply with her precarious legal status, highlighting the gap between lived belonging and official recognition. Aidan, meanwhile, darts between parked cars with uninhibited joy, his Singapore national football team jersey fluttering as he pretends to be one of the fighter jets that perform aerial displays during the parade. "F-16!" he shouts, arms outstretched, embodying the carefree belonging that children can maintain even amid the legal uncertainties that preoccupy their parents.

This annual ritual of participation in Singapore's most important national celebration, watched from the margins rather than from official viewing areas, perfectly encapsulates the condition of partial belonging that defines middling migrants' experience – close enough to participate in national life, yet still positioned at its periphery.

## 8: Conclusion

The bistro where contractors had gathered for after-work drinks was closing down. Rising rents and dwindling footfall had finally made it unviable, the owner explained when I stopped by to see empty chairs stacked on familiar tables. Yet the networks that had sustained themselves in that space proved more enduring than the physical venue. A few weeks ago, as I neared completion of this dissertation, I encountered several of the same contractors I had first met three years earlier. This time, we met not at a golf club or KTV lounge or coffee shop, but at my grandmother's funeral.

She had lived through Singapore's transformation from kampong to metropolis, her own life spanning the decades when contractors like those gathered in her memory had built the city around her. In her early years, after relocating from a kampung in Upper Thomson to one of the first flats in Yishun, she had herself mixed concrete, using a rudimentary mixer, helping to build the very BTO blocks that rose next to her own. The setting carried its own quiet logic: elaborate wreaths lined the void deck, each bearing company logos in gold lettering, transforming personal grief into displays of industry solidarity. The contractors sat at round tables draped with white cloth, the same wedding banquet setup repurposed for mourning, plastic chairs arranged in careful circles around shared memories and shared business.

In the background, Buddhist chanting provided a steady backdrop as conversations moved between condolences and tender opportunities, between stories of my grandmother and intelligence about delayed payments. An overeager relative, learning about my research, suggested I use this gathering to reach out to more contractors. "Captive audience," he whispered in Chinese, gesturing toward the tables where men nursed Heinekens while

discussing the latest safety regulations. The suggestion felt inappropriate yet somehow fitting – death had become another venue for the networks that defined their working lives.

Three years had passed since I first began studying these figures. Three years of supposed industry transformation, of government pushes for digitalization, productivity initiatives, new regulatory frameworks. Yet, here were the same relationships, the same informal coordination, the same careful navigation between official requirements and practical necessities. What struck me was their capacity to reconstitute themselves across the most unlikely spaces, finding ways to maintain what mattered even as the venues shifted from bistros to void decks, from scheduled gatherings to moments of collective mourning.

This persistence captures something essential about the contractor figure that has run through this dissertation. Despite decades of state efforts to modernize, rationalize, and formalize Singapore's construction industry, contractors continue to operate through networks and practices that resist such transformation. Their endurance reveals how intermediaries function as permanent infrastructure within developmental capitalism. Contractors occupy a gap that existing scholarship has largely overlooked: the space between policy formulation and practical implementation, between structural forces and individual experiences, between formal equality and lived hierarchy. Why do intermediaries proliferate alongside institutional strengthening rather than disappearing through rationalization? The answer lies in how developmental capitalism generates contradictions that formal institutions cannot openly resolve, creating systematic needs for figures who can manage these tensions without forcing the state to choose between incompatible goals.

The theoretical trajectory I've traced – from developmental state scholarship (Johnson, 1982; Evans, 1995) through flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1989) and racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983; Lowe, 2015) to brokerage (Stoler, 2002; Björkman, 2015; Kaminer, 2024) and moral economy (Thompson, 1971; Ferguson, 2013) – reveals a persistent puzzle. Early frameworks assumed institutional strengthening would eliminate intermediaries (Wolf, 1956; Boissevain, 1974). Yet, intermediaries proliferate. Flexible accumulation theorists noted subcontractors without examining them. Racial capitalism analysis identified hierarchies without tracing their daily enactment. Even scholarship recognizing intermediaries as constitutive (Stoler, 2002; Björkman, 2015) has documented them primarily at capitalism's margins or in transitional moments rather than at the core of successful developmental states.

Singapore's contractors and middling migrants resolve this puzzle by showing how intermediaries serve as permanent infrastructure of developmental capitalism rather than transitional accommodations. This builds on Kaminer's (2024) analysis of how capitalist-colonial contradictions generate systematic needs for intermediation, though the mechanisms differ. Kaminer demonstrates how Israel's state explicitly assigned recruitment to successive institutional brokers across different periods. Singapore reveals a different pathway: regulatory frameworks generate coordination needs without formally assigning anyone to fill them. Work permit conditions, multilingual requirements, and fragmented liability create systematic gaps that contractors emerge to occupy. Both cases show developmental states depending on intermediaries to manage contradictions formal institutions cannot resolve – Israel through explicit delegation, Singapore through regulatory conditions that make intermediaries necessary.

This dissertation contributes to overlapping conversations about capitalism, migration, and development that rarely speak to each other. My ethnography offers what these literatures need but often lack: sustained attention to how intermediaries make abstract systems operational through daily practices. Three interrelated contributions emerge from this analysis. First, developmental capitalism depends fundamentally on figures who coordinate across incompatibilities. Singapore's construction boom required someone to translate between state tenders and Tamil-speaking workers, between safety regulations written in English and multilingual worksites, between rapid accumulation demands and worker welfare requirements. Contractors emerged because strong developmental states generate systematic coordination challenges that formal bureaucracy cannot address. Their persistence alongside Singapore's institutional sophistication reveals how development creates rather than eliminates needs for intermediation. This challenges developmental state literature's assumptions about rationalization (Johnson, 1982; Evans, 1995) by showing how institutional strength produces rather than reduces intermediary positions.

Second, racial capitalism operates through intermediary positions rather than simple exclusion. Chinese contractors managing South Asian workers, middling migrants supervising temporary workers, naturalized citizens maintaining transnational networks – these arrangements systematically link mobility opportunities to managing racialized hierarchies. This extends racial capitalism scholarship (Robinson, 1983; Melamed, 2011; Lowe, 2015) beyond structural analysis to reveal specific daily practices through which differentiation becomes operational. When contractors assign nationalities to tasks or evaluate worker "attitudes," they perform the translation work that makes citizenship categories functional for capital accumulation. The contribution lies in documenting how racial hierarchies get actively produced through intermediary practices rather than simply implemented from above.

Third, moral economy has evolved from resistance mechanism to coordination tool within developmental capitalism. Where Thompson (1971) documented moral economy as defense against markets and Ferguson (2013) revealed it as aspiration within hierarchy, Singapore's intermediaries deploy moral relationships to manage systemic contradictions. The contractor who covers worker medical bills while maintaining dormitory overcrowding, the middling migrant who advocates for his crew while enforcing differential discipline – these represent coordinated practices rather than contradictions. Moral relationships make exploitation sustainable by transforming structural violence into personalized care, generating loyalty that prevents collective resistance while enabling continued extraction. This contribution traces how capitalism increasingly depends on moral mediation to reproduce itself.

The theoretical contribution of this work lies in bringing two figures into conversation that scholarship has kept apart. Brokerage literature has examined how intermediaries navigate between institutions, translating across bureaucratic boundaries and regulatory frameworks. A separate tradition has traced mediators who move between social worlds, managing cultural difference and interpersonal obligation. Contractors in Singapore occupy both positions at once. They do not serve the state or capital but operate in the space between them, drawing authority from neither fully while remaining accountable to both. This duality proves essential to their coordinating power. The contractor who secures a government tender must satisfy regulatory requirements while delivering profit margins, must demonstrate compliance while maintaining the operational flexibility that makes projects viable, must speak the language of safety audits and productivity metrics while coordinating through relationships and tacit understandings that resist such formalization.

Equally significant is what this dissertation reveals about migrants as mediators. Brokerage scholarship has largely focused on citizen intermediaries managing foreign others, positioning migrants as objects of coordination rather than coordinators themselves. The middling migrants I studied challenge this framing. The Bangladeshi supervisor who worked his way from general labourer to site manager does not simply receive instructions from above and transmit them below. He translates between worlds: contractor expectations shaped by Singaporean business culture, worker needs rooted in village obligations and remittance pressures, regulatory requirements written in languages his crew cannot read. His mediation makes the contractor's coordination possible. This points toward scales of mediation and brokerage that existing scholarship has not adequately theorized. The contractor mediates between state and market, the middling migrant between contractor and worker. Each scale enables the next. Each position depends on those above and below it. Together they constitute cascading layers of intermediation through which developmental capitalism actually functions, an architecture of mediation that no single figure controls yet all help reproduce.

Developmental state scholarship has asked how states direct investment, discipline capital, and coordinate industrial upgrading. These questions assume that implementation follows from policy, that state capacity translates into developmental outcomes through bureaucratic execution. My research suggests a different set of questions. The gap between policy formulation and construction site is not a failure of implementation but a constitutive feature of developmental capitalism. States pursuing rapid transformation generate contradictions they cannot openly resolve: between accumulation speed and worker safety, between cheap foreign labour and citizen political legitimacy, between meritocratic ideology and ethnic hierarchy. Acknowledging these contradictions would force choices that developmental states prefer to

defer. Intermediaries emerge precisely because they can manage tensions the state cannot admit exist.

This reframes what we study when we study development. Rather than asking whether states possess adequate capacity to implement their visions, we might ask what coordination challenges state visions systematically generate and who emerges to absorb them. Rather than measuring policy against outcome and attributing the gap to institutional weakness, we might trace the intermediary figures who inhabit that gap and ask what their practices reveal about development's actual operations. Migration scholarship faces parallel limitations. Documenting differentiated citizenship regimes reveals the architecture of stratification but not its daily enactment. Tracing how S-Pass holders differ from Work Permit holders in legal status tells us less than following the supervisor who manages both, observing how he calibrates authority differently with each, how he translates contractor demands into instructions that account for what different visa categories make possible. The intermediary's practice reveals how abstract categories become lived hierarchy.

### 8.1. (Post)-Colonial Sedimentations

These dynamics invite comparison with other postcolonial contexts that inherited similar colonial labour management systems. Singapore's contractor figure did not emerge from nowhere. The ethnic intermediaries who coordinate construction today descended from colonial arrangements that organized labour through racial categories and delegated management to community headmen, a historical fact I discussed in Chapter 2. British Malaya sorted Chinese, Indian, and Malay workers into separate labour streams managed by their own kepala and kangani, figures whose authority derived from straddling colonial administration and community networks. Independence transformed but did not eliminate this inheritance. The towkay who manages Bangladeshi workers through a Burmese supervisor operates within

structures whose racial grammar colonial rule established, even as the specific categories and hierarchies have shifted.

Contemporary migration infrastructures reproduce these imperial geographies. The recruitment agents who channel Bangladeshi workers to Singapore operate through networks that trace older circuits of colonial labour mobility, their village-level contacts and urban processing centres occupying positions that kangani recruiters once held. The debt arrangements binding workers to employers echo indenture's financial structures, updated through recruitment fees and salary deductions that function similarly to bind labour through obligation. Contractor preferences for Bangladeshi workers as "hardworking" or avoidance of hiring from certain countries as "troublesome" rehearse racial logics that colonial labour management systematised, sorting populations by imputed characteristics that justified differential treatment. The contemporary recruitment agent occupies a position structurally continuous with the colonial recruiter, leveraging local knowledge and debt relations to channel workers toward metropolitan labour markets. Singapore's developmental narrative performs a kind of post-colonial erasure, presenting the city-state's transformation as a triumph of good governance and pragmatic policy while rendering invisible the imperial infrastructures, racialised labour hierarchies, and ongoing extraction from poorer economies that made such transformation possible.

This colonial sedimentation suggests Singapore may illuminate patterns across former colonial territories and beyond. The Gulf states built their construction booms through migration regimes that bear striking resemblance to Singapore's, channelling South Asian workers through kafala sponsorship systems that bind labourers to employer-intermediaries in ways that echo colonial indenture (Iskander, 2021; Wright, 2021). Hong Kong's foreign domestic worker

system creates its own intermediary figures, recruitment agents and employment agencies who navigate between regulatory frameworks and household needs, their practices shaped by colonial legacies of racialized service labour (Constable, 2007). Each context transformed colonial arrangements for postcolonial accumulation, yet the comparative work of tracing how these transformations differ, how intermediary figures emerge and operate across these varied configurations, remains largely undone.

What distinguishes Singapore may be the strength of state capacity channelling intermediaries toward developmental ends. Colonial intermediaries often frustrated metropolitan objectives, using their in-between position to preserve worker autonomy or extract personal advantage. Frederick Cooper's Mombasa dockworkers maintained bargaining power and resisted colonial attempts at labour stabilization (Cooper, 1987). Singapore's regulatory architecture achieves something different: intermediaries whose profitability depends on delivering the disciplined temporary workforce the state requires. The contractor who deviates too far from state expectations loses access to government tenders. The middling migrant who advocates too forcefully for workers risks his own precarious status. The system aligns intermediary interests with developmental goals through calibrated incentives rather than direct control. Whether this alignment represents a distinctively Singaporean achievement or an intensified version of dynamics present across postcolonial developmental states remains an open question, one that comparative research following intermediary figures across different national configurations might begin to answer.

The methodological contribution matters as much as empirical findings. Studying capitalism ethnographically requires attention to figures operating between domains scholars typically examine separately – state policy and workplace practice, capital accumulation and labour

discipline, formal regulation and informal arrangement. Contractors and middling migrants occupy precisely these in-between spaces, making them valuable for understanding how economic systems actually work rather than how they appear in policy documents. Their practices reveal daily translation work, relationship management, and strategic improvisation required to make contemporary capitalism functional. This approach builds on anthropological work examining intermediary actors across different economic domains (Tsing, 2009; Appel, 2019; Björkman, 2015) while centering their role within successful developmental states rather than at capitalism's margins.

The persistence of contractor networks across changing circumstances, from bistros to void decks, from scheduled meetings to chance encounters, suggests that certain forms of coordination prove remarkably durable despite technological and regulatory change. This durability points toward questions that require continued ethnographic attention. How will contractor practices evolve as Singapore pushes harder for "Industry Transformation" emphasizing automation and digitalization? Will the gray zones that currently make the system functional be eliminated, and if so, what will replace them? How might contractors' forms of moral economy and collective coordination point toward alternative ways of organizing economic life?

The contractor figure ultimately reveals both the possibilities and limitations of Singapore's developmental model. Their success demonstrates how rapid transformation is possible when states create spaces for intermediary actors to emerge and flourish. But their continued necessity also exposes the limits of modernization projects that seek to eliminate informal practices and personalized relationships. The contractors documented in this dissertation embody forms of knowledge and practice that resist formal codification, yet remain essential

to how contemporary capitalism operates. The contractor's story is ultimately about navigation, adaptation, and survival within systems of organized complexity, a fundamentally *human* story that exceeds the narrow confines of economic theory while remaining thoroughly embedded in economic life.

### 8.2. Looking Forward

The contractors I studied are aging. Mr. Wee is in his late fifties, contemplating retirement but uncertain whether his children, both university-educated professionals, will take over the business. "They have better options," he told me. Jimmy's son works in finance. Seng's children are still in school, but he's already planning for them to pursue white-collar careers rather than follow him into construction. Across the industry, succession presents a persistent problem. The skills these contractors possess – relationship management, regulatory navigation, multilingual coordination – resist easy transfer or formal training. Singapore's government recognizes this challenge. The Construction Industry Transformation Map, launched in 2017, aims to increase productivity through digitalization, prefabrication, and automation.[84] The Singapore Green Plan 2030 adds another layer: construction must decarbonize, adopt sustainable materials, and integrate green building standards.[85] These transformations position the contractor figure as obsolete, a relic of labour-intensive construction that advanced technology will replace. Yet my research suggests a different trajectory. The push toward "smart construction" and green building doesn't eliminate the need for intermediary coordination; it multiplies it. Contractors now navigate between additional frameworks: traditional subcontractors who resist new methods, tech vendors promoting Building Information Modelling systems, sustainability consultants demanding green

[84] Building and Construction Authority. "Construction ITM Launch at SCPW, 24 October 2017: Media Factsheets." Ministry of Trade and Industry, 24 Oct. 2017.
[85] Government of Singapore. 2021. Singapore Green Plan 2030. Singapore: Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment.

compliance, and regulators enforcing increasingly complex codes. Rather than disappearing, the contractor role fragments and multiples – new specialists emerge to manage different aspects of what contractors once coordinated holistically. This proliferation raises questions about whether contractor knowledge can survive its own transformation. The informal networks, tacit understandings, and relationship-based trust that currently make projects functional resist codification into digital systems. When contractors retire without successors, where does their accumulated knowledge go? Can algorithmic coordination replace the kind of situated judgment that allows contractors to navigate between competing demands? Or will the industry discover, as it pursues modernization, that certain forms of human mediation prove irreplaceable? The contractors gathered at my grandmother's funeral represent a generation that built Singapore's physical infrastructure while embodying forms of coordination the state alternately depends upon and seeks to eliminate. Their persistence across three years of supposed transformation suggests that pronouncements of their obsolescence may be premature.

The contractor's story remains unfinished. As Singapore pursues its transformation agenda – digital, green, automated – the intermediary figures who made the previous model functional face an uncertain future. Whether the forms of knowledge and coordination they embody can survive technological disruption, whether new modes of intermediation will emerge, and whether development can operate without the human work of translation they perform; these questions require continued ethnographic attention. What happens when the intermediaries who smooth capitalism's contradictions can no longer reproduce themselves? Singapore's construction industry may soon provide answers.

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