

Brenda SA Yeoh, Kellynn Wee and Theodora Lam, *Migrant Workers in Singapore. Lives and Labour in a Transient Migration Regime*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2022; 440 pp, IBSN: 9789811255021

Due to the spread of COVID-19 around the world, various governments made unprecedented decisions restricting people's national and international mobility and closing borders. One population which has been greatly impacted by these decisions are migrant workers as non-citizens and non-permanent residents. Often in temporary employment, earning lower wages and having jobs that are less amenable to teleworking, migrant workers could be more affected than citizens to the restrictions imposed by states during the COVID-19 pandemic. The migration literature has been enriched by various works exploring the link between COVID-19 and migration, producing interesting outputs, such as the edited books by Triandafyllidou (2021) and Silva (2021). With regard to the specific context of the Asian region, the third issue of the *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, a special issue co-edited by Chan and Lan (2022), is dedicated to discussing the cases of Hong Kong (Chan and Piper, 2022), Taiwan (Lan, 2022; Cheng, 2022) and Japan (Vogt and Qin, 2022)

This edited book adds to this growing scholarship by offering a thorough and multi-disciplinary analysis of the way the Singaporean state and society have dealt with the presence of 1.3 million foreign workers when COVID-19 arrived. The book focuses particularly on the 300,000 foreign construction workers, mainly Bangladeshis, Indians and Chinese, who lived as part of a transient population in the city-state. Migrating to Singapore for a mix of reasons, including the expectation to earn money and the aspiration to metropolitan consumption patterns, foreign construction workers were treated as a transient and disposable population. They lacked security of residence, they did not have a right to family reunion and to form meaningful relationships, and were dependent on employers and recruiters, even in pre-pandemic times. COVID-19 disproportionately affected this population magnifying problems that were already there.

When COVID-19 hit the city-state, it quickly spread to foreign workers' overcrowded dormitories, which became the epicenter of the pandemic. From a marginal population in the fight against the pandemic, foreign construction workers soon turned into a major concern in Singapore. Specific risk containment strategies were implemented for foreign construction workers, differently from the local population. Even when restrictions were at their most severe and the city-state was locked down, no healthy person in Singapore was ever banned from leaving their home, as only social distancing was encouraged among the locals. Migrant construction workers, on the other hand, were locked down in their dormitories, without the possibility to go to work or to go back to their home countries. Many ended up financially and emotionally strained.

The authors of this book successfully show this continuity between a pre-pandemic condition, in which foreign construction workers were treated as a disposable population, and a pandemic one, in which the living condition of this group worsened extensively. The authors achieved this objective by selecting 11 previously published articles on immigrant workers in Singapore before the pandemic hit, and showing how issues that emerged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic could be traced back to the pre-pandemic period. Each article corresponds to a chapter and each chapter is preceded by a shorter section exploring how the pandemic exacerbated problems that already existed.

The book is structured in four main sections. The first section, "A regime of temporary migration" is dedicated to exploring how legal and political frameworks have contributed to construct migrants as undesirable in Singapore, legitimizing surveillance and policing by the government and the private industry. This treatment legitimized further segregation in a pandemic context. The second section, "Work conditions and health concerns" focuses on how work processes have made migrants vulnerable through precarious, dangerous and risky jobs, a condition that magnified during the pandemic. The third section of this book, "Social connections, personal lives," explores migrant workers' lived experiences, their participation in Singapore's social life through migrant activities and spaces, and their transnational connections with their families back home. The pandemic broke some of these patterns, allowing new ones to be created and reinforced some other old ones. The fourth

section, “A migrant’s eye view,” is the chapter featuring illustrations and a poem by two migrant workers, Joy Ho and Md. Sharif Uddin.

Critical of the Singaporean state in its differential treatment of local and migrant populations, the authors of this edited book emphasize that this segregation was deleterious not only for migrant workers, who were deprived of the means to earn money and have a meaningful life, but also for employers and agents, who experienced labor shortage, and policymakers, who were confronted with the massive resources needed to repatriate migrant workers.

This inspiring and compelling book is not only relevant to Singapore’s guest worker regime. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how important migrant workers are for the countries in which they work and for those they departed from. However, in a world characterized by intensifying neoliberalism, labor market deregulation and flexibilization of labor, migrant workers are often treated as a pure economic asset. Considering this truth, the authors of this book call for an urgent change of approach to migration, based on sustainable strategies rather than purely developmental logics. The authors do not only refer to economic sustainability, but also to a social one, allowing migrants to improve the liveability of their experiences and become part of the local community.

I would like to offer two comments on what I would have loved to see in the book. Firstly, I would have loved to know more about the rationale and process behind the selection of the 11 papers. Secondly, I would also have loved to see a more substantial contribution of migrant voices and expressions in the final section. Currently, this section includes a poem and illustrations done by migrant workers. Positioned at the very end of the book and comparatively shorter than the other sections, this part almost seems like an afterthought in the overall flow of the book. In my view, this part would have deserved more space and attention as it is a unique selling point and something that we rarely see in academic publications. These two comments should not be seen as a criticism to this otherwise insightful work, which I enjoyed in its entirety, but rather as points for expansion, discussion, dialogue and creation.

All in all, I would suggest this book to scholars, practitioners and students, interested to know more about how a model global city-state like Singapore, initially celebrated for its exemplary pandemic response, ended up losing control of the situation due to long-term neglect of its migrant workers.

Lara Momesso

University of Central Lancashire

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