

Working Within the Aspiring Center: Professional Status and Mobilities Among Migrant Faculty in Singapore

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The growth of research universities in places like Asia and the Middle East has prompted the aggressive recruitment of qualified faculty, sparking an increased interest in the international movement of researchers, scientists, and scholars (Altbach and Balan, 2007; Cerna, 2016; Chou, Kamola, and Pietsch 2016). In the context of such heightened competition for academic “talent,” research studies have sought to understand individuals’ migration decisions and the probability of post-migration retention within their host institutions (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013; Robertson, 2006; Tremblay, 2005). Recent years have seen a large number of studies on international students, highlighting how these future professionals negotiate their career aspirations with family ties, amidst external factors beyond their control, such as immigration policies (welcoming or otherwise), experiences of discrimination, and employer requirements (Alberts and Hazen, 2005; Geddie, 2013; King and Raghuram 2013). However, fewer studies provide in-depth analysis of how migrant faculty who take on tenure-track positions encounter similar issues within their host societies and institutions. In contrast to the study of foreign students, research on migrant faculty generally portray their movement as primarily career driven, attracted to places that offer the best compensation for their knowledge and skills, as well as better sponsorship for research funding and expenditures (Guth and Gill, 2008; Kou et al., 2015; Rostan and Hohle, 2014). This perspective has largely informed talent recruitment and retention policies in nations seeking to enhance the status and prestige of local universities.

This paper identifies with a growing number of scholars who call for a more nuanced understanding of academic mobility within today’s increasingly stratified higher education systems (see Ackers, 2008; Carozza and Menucci, 2014). In particular, we emphasize the need to look at how academics make meaning of their mobility and how they plan their migration trajectories (Saint-Blancat, 2017). We focus specifically on the experiences of Asia-born faculty who migrated to take on tenure-track positions in Singapore after studying

or working in prestigious institutions in Europe and the US. These faculty members constitute a growing proportion of migrant academics moving towards emerging education hubs in Asia and the Middle East (Paul and Long 2016).

While researchers have investigated the movement of academics between developing countries and traditional centers of knowledge production in the West, fewer scholars have looked at migration flows to “aspiring centres” (Altbach 2006, 124) such as Singapore, where government agencies invest heavily in the aggressive recruitment of foreign faculty to improve both quality and reputation of its universities. This paper discusses how such movement reflects migrant faculty’s desire to achieve both personal and professional goals: a closer proximity to aging parents and family in their “home” countries, and resources to remain visible within a global academic community largely centered in the West. We argue that for most of the migrant faculty in our study, this situation brings about conflicting notions of social mobility, when defined in terms of professional prestige and status. These contradicting ideas influence their future mobility decisions, thereby reflecting and reinforcing current inequalities in global higher education.

Mobility and the Migrant Scholar

Research studies have generally depicted migrant faculty as professionals who lead extremely mobile lives, moving to embark on further training, take on academic positions, or collaborate with overseas colleagues. While some studies have focused on cross-border mobility within specific scientific fields (see Ackers, 2005; Paul and Long, 2016), others have noted increasing international mobility ‘throughout the whole system’ (Fontes, Videira, and Calapez, 2013, 440), with academics and researchers beyond Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) also engaged in cross-border movement and collaboration (see Rostan and Ceravolo, 2015).

Yet, in contrast to the broader literature on highly skilled migration, studies on migrant academics have largely depicted their mobility as an accumulation of economic and social capital (Bozeman et al., 2001; Kapur, 2005), where scholars are likely to move towards places where opportunities emerge. Colic-Peisker (2010) argues that such patterns reflect academics' tendency to express a stronger sense of belonging to professional networks, rather than the countries where they were born or grew up. These networks cluster in specific academic "centers" or places that have a concentration of institutions accorded a high level of prestige, which then provide affiliated scholars with a degree of authority in their fields (Altbach 2006; Mahroum, 2000: 514). International university rankings have emerged as a key indicator of such status, with heavy emphasis placed on research and publications.

Academic centers are often found in developed western countries like the US and the UK, thereby supporting the notion that migrant academics are also moving from poorer to wealthier nations. However, academic prestige does not map out as neatly in terms of the economic resources provided for higher education. In many cases, an institution can be considered an academic center, even if it does not offer sufficient research support or attractive compensation for foreign academics (Jons and Hoyler, 2013; Lee, 2014; Marginson and van der Wende, 2007).

In contrast, researchers have also noted a movement towards newer environments within emerging education hubs in Asia and the Middle East (Romanowski and Nasser, 2015; Sidhu, Chang, and Yeoh, 2015). While such venues lack the prestige the more traditional academic centers have acquired over time, they provide high wages and generous funding for research projects (Knight, 2011). Inflows of academics to Asian universities include a growing number of "returnees" or individuals who are returning to their "home" countries within the region, after a period of working or studying in the West (Paul and Long 2016). Studies on these migrant academics highlight reasons for migration beyond the accumulation

of social capital such as: a need to be near family and friends, cultural familiarity, and a desire to give back to their home communities. In most cases, these factors are often achieved at the expense of a scholar's career development and social capital among academic peers (Gu 2000; Lee and Kim 2010; Ortiga 2011).

While these findings provide insight into the migration decisions behind such movement, few studies have investigated how foreign faculty make sense of their "return" after they had made this decision. This paper contributes to this literature by discussing how both the pursuit of social and human capital, as well as a desire to return "home" coalesce within aspiring academic centers like Singapore, which is neither migrant academics' countries of origin, nor the current center of their respective fields. In previous work (Authors 2017), we investigated how university politics and pressures for promotion discourage Asia-born faculty within Singapore from exploring research collaboration with counterparts within their home countries, thereby weakening productive forms of brain circulation within the region. In the following section, we extend these findings further, discussing how migrant faculty's attempt to negotiate relations with communities in both the home country and academic centers in the West, lead to seemingly contradicting ideas of professional mobility.

Context: Singapore as the Aspiring Center

International policymakers and researchers have often referred to Singapore as a well-known example of an emerging education hub, given the rapid development of its universities, from institutions run mostly as a civil service to world class higher education institutions (Currie, Vidovich, and Yang, 2008). State-led projects established research centers and institutes within the country, where researchers kept pace with the demands of knowledge centers and industries across the world. Partnerships with prestigious universities from the West also provided an important source of symbolic capital, bolstering Singapore's reputation as a

knowledge and innovation hub (Lee, 2014; Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2011). Currently, Singaporean higher education institutions such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) continue to climb up the university rankings, now placed among the top 20 institutions in the world (QS University Rankings 2016).

Alongside these massive investments in university structures and partnerships, the rise of Singapore's universities also relied heavily on recruiting faculty and researchers from well-known higher education institutions around the world (Gopinathan and Lee, 2011; Yeoh and Lai, 2008). Such recruitment strategies reflected the general logic of offering financial and social capital as a way to attract foreign faculty. University administration advertised faculty positions in established international academic journals, offering generous compensation packages and research resources that rival those offered by Western countries (Paul and Long, 2016). While there are no existing statistics as to the number of migrant faculty within Singapore universities, Paul and Long (2016) estimate that close to 60% of tenure-track faculty members working in the country are foreigners. Singapore then serves as an important case in understanding the effectiveness and limitations of such strategies in retaining migrant faculty and which other factors shape individuals' experiences within the country's universities.

Methods

This paper is based on qualitative interviews with 47 migrant faculty members (17 tenured and 30 tenure-track) who were born and grew up in countries geographically close to Singapore (including Australia), but spent considerable time in Europe or North America

either working in academic positions or pursuing a doctorate and/or postdoc.¹ This sampling decision reflects the shift in the demographics of migrant scholars. While earlier studies have tended to portray migrant faculty as a group of Western expatriates (see Cohen 1977; Hindman 2009), recent years have shown a growing proportion of migrant faculty and researchers who were born outside the West and pursued postgraduate study in North America or Western Europe (see Lawrence et al 2014; NCES 2006). Within Singapore's universities, Asian born faculty members with Western degrees are also highly represented among the population of foreign faculty members. This paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the migration decisions driving the mobility of this increasing group of migrant faculty. For the purpose of this article, we define "migrant faculty" as academics not born in Singapore who moved to the country to take on tenure track positions within its universities.²

We conducted qualitative interviews with a total of 20 women and 27 men, all employed at three of Singapore's major universities. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. The first and third authors conducted all the interviews, talking to participants in their offices or laboratories. The research team recruited interviewees by sending invitation emails to faculty members from four major fields: STEM, Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Professional Schools. We then asked interviewees to connect us to other colleagues who might be interested in participating in the project ("snowball" sampling). To supplement this recruitment method, team members also promoted the project at university workshops and events, distributing fliers with project details to interested faculty members. Tables 1 and 2

¹ This paper is part of a larger project on the migration decisions and experiences of foreign scientists and scholars in Singapore. The research team interviewed a total of 105 foreign academics working in Singapore. Aside from the interviews included in this study, research participants originate from countries such as the US, UK, France, Germany, and Spain.

² Rostan and colleagues (2014: 282) differentiate migrant faculty from "circulating" faculty or academics who "work where they were born but have experienced border crossing either for study or professional purposes."

show the breakdown of the sample by country of origin and discipline (STEM, Social Science, Humanities, and Professional Schools).

Table 1. Interview Participants' Country of Origin

Country of Origin	
China	13
India	10
Philippines	4
Malaysia	4
Australia	4
Thailand	3
Taiwan	4
Japan	3
Indonesia	1
Korea	1
Total:	47

Table 2. Interview Participants' Academic Discipline

Discipline	
STEM	19
Social Science	17
Humanities	6
Professional*	5
Total:	47

*Professional category includes faculty teaching in Business, Education, Law, and Media Studies

Interview questions centered on participants' decision to come to Singapore. We asked about how they negotiated this migration decision with personal factors such as family and relationships, as well as career opportunities and challenges. While the time spent overseas varied widely, participants loosely referred to their countries of origin as "home," mainly defined as a place where they grew up, and, more importantly, where parents and siblings remain. As such, we refer to the "home country" in this way as well, while

recognizing that there is a growing literature that problematizes how this term is defined.³ We also asked participants whether they maintained international collaborations and how being in Singapore shaped their current research networks and agendas. Interviews were audio recorded. Interviewers took notes in cases where participants declined to be recorded. Research protocol and questionnaires received NTU's Institutional Review Board's approval.

As the team went through interviewee's personal narratives, we found that they often framed their current situation in Singapore in contrast to their home countries and the places where they had obtained their doctorate and/or postdoctorate experience. The team then analyzed these interviews in terms of how these comparisons shaped how they felt about their current status, as well as their future prospects and professional mobility. All members of the team are foreigners of Asian descent who, at the time of the interviews, were working as academic staff within a Singapore university. In this sense, we shared many similarities with the academics we interviewed for this study, and this common experience did provide a good basis for building rapport. However, there was also diversity in migration motivations and experiences of research team members. The second and third authors were individuals who were born or grew up in the West, and came mainly to Singapore for career reasons. Meanwhile, the first and fourth authors were originally from countries neighboring Singapore and were returning to Asia after a period of study and work in the US and Europe. These members of the team were motivated by both career and family reasons. These differences aided the team in assessing our own subjective views of these stories, and our open

³ Mallet (2004) provides a critical review of the notion of "home." Migration scholars have also studied issues of integration, belonging, and identity, using a more critical analysis of what the "home country" means to different immigrant groups (see Ahmed 1999; Espiritu 2003; Ralph 2009)

exchanges during data analyses provided avenues for reconciling our perspectives. The analyses provided below reflect our consensus.

Like other qualitative studies, this paper is limited in that we base our analysis on how interviewees make meaning of their migration decisions, their experiences in Singapore, and their professional status. We cannot make claims about all foreign academics in Singapore or all forms of mobility in other aspiring centers. We also acknowledge that there are many differences among nationalities, ethnicities, and academic disciplines. This paper focuses mainly on common themes across groups and our small sample does not allow us to make broad comparisons between different groups. However, we emphasize that our findings shed light on how some foreign academics in Singapore think about their mobility trajectories and the possibility of their future movement. Such perceptions have important resonance for policies on retaining talent – an aspect of the war for talent, which has received less attention in the current literature.

Migrating to the ‘Middle Ground’: Professional and Family Lives

In line with other studies on academic mobility, the migrant faculty in our study described their initial decision to leave home as a need to accumulate human and social capital. Many of them had pursued academic training in well-known universities in the West, hoping to work with a famous professor or join an established program in their fields. Yet, in deciding where to move after graduation, ties to family and home communities became a more salient factor (see Lee and Kim 2010). On one hand, all our interviewees for this study expressed a desire to obtain jobs in higher education institutions with reputable programs, good research support, and reasonable compensation. Poor job prospects in the US and Europe prompted them to look for opportunities beyond the West, and Singapore was one of the few places

with highly ranked universities that offered a vibrant research environment. They also appreciated Singapore's openness to foreign academics – given the difficulty of sometimes obtaining work visas in places like the UK.

On the other hand, interviewees were also attracted to the idea of being closer to family members they had left behind. Many of our interviewees did not want to relive their graduate school years in North America and Europe, where the long distance, expensive airline tickets and visa restrictions prevented them from seeing their families frequently or regularly. One Assistant Professor from China shared that he did not visit his parents for four years because of a tight laboratory schedule and a limited travel budget. His parents could not visit him as well, being unable to obtain a US visa from China.

Yet, in searching for work beyond the West, our interviewees did not see their home countries as ideal venues for their career development, given reasons such as limited support for research and relatively lower wages for academics. As such, they looked for destinations that would be both 'close enough' to home and 'good enough' for their academic careers. One Associate Professor from India shared that she had spent many years in the US before considering a move to Singapore. While her main motivation was to be closer to her parents, mainly her father who had just suffered from a stroke, Singapore's 'visibility' in her field made the country an 'appropriate place' for her to continue the high caliber scientific work that has defined her career. Similarly, an Assistant Professor who was born in Thailand, recounted how she actually had an offer from a teaching college in the US, yet saw her tenure-track position in Singapore as a better 'career move.' She had weighed this decision with a strong pull to be closer to her family, more particularly, her aging parents back home.

My mom is getting older, I lost my dad last year. You know, so it has made me think about how I want to spend my time. *Being here satisfies me in terms of my professional life and it is also helpful not to be so far away from my mom* [emphasis

added]. You know, it's only a two-hour flight [to go back home] and there are so many flights.

While many migrants maintain transnational connections between their current locations and home communities that are often far apart, this Assistant Professor's statement shows how geographic distance was a big factor in how most interviewees wanted to relate to their families back home. The migrant scholars in this study wanted to be able to fly home often to spend more time with family, support parents, and visit siblings. Such tasks would not be possible if one were to fly from North America or Europe. In many ways, coming to Singapore was a decision that balanced interviewees' needs in terms of their professional careers and personal family lives. Singapore served as a *middle ground* where migrant faculty could be close to their home countries and continue to contribute to their academic fields. In the following sections, we discuss how being in this position led to contradicting notions of professional status and mobility.

Upward mobility: Close but not 'too close'

As part of an aspiring center like Singapore, migrant faculty interviewed in this study felt a sense of being upwardly mobile, at least when compared to scholars who returned to their home countries or those who never left. While interviewees respected former professors and classmates, they felt that academia within their home countries were still 'behind' in terms of faculty support and research productivity, and, as such, lacked international prestige in the global academic community. One Assistant Professor explained,

The unfortunate reality is that I know a lot of people, even among my friends, who are trained in North America, then they go back to Japan and then you basically don't hear from them. I mean, yes, they got a job, they're doing okay, but, there's a lot of admin work, there's a lot of teaching work, and a lot of teaching that is not [in

their field]. And therefore, they can't actively produce after that, right? So for personal reasons, in terms of family, I would really enjoy being in Japan. But, with very few exceptions, positions in Japan are really not good, well at least in my field.

In this interviewee's perspective, returning to Japan meant sacrificing research work for administrative and teaching duties, something that he felt would be 'not good' for his own professional development. Other interviewees echoed the same sentiment, emphasizing how Singapore offered a university system that was 'like the US,' wherein faculty would be given the freedom to focus on research.

The foreign scholars in our study also voiced concerns about how academia in their home countries remained saddled with 'traditional politics' and 'biases' that made it harder for faculty to do their work. One Associate Professor explained that she decided against returning to China because she felt that career opportunities in local universities largely depended on 'who you know,' and academics spent a lot of time finding ways to connect to influential people. While such politics are also likely to exist in places like Singapore and elsewhere, she believed that such systems were less hierarchical and more meritocratic. Describing herself as someone who is terrible at 'politicking,' this interviewee felt that Singapore was a better place to further her career based on her research, rather than her networks,

We spent many years outside China where you do things very simple. Sometimes, you don't know how to talk to people. For us, you just present the facts, you don't think so much about, 'What happens if I say this?' I heard some stories from friends who have gone back...you have to do lots of socials, networking. The structure there is quite complex. I still prefer Singapore. The research environment is healthier.

For a Professor originally from Malaysia, returning home would not only mean contending with university politics, but wider social disparities. As an ethnic Chinese, he informed us that he believes existing state policies favoring ethnic Malays would have made it difficult for him to receive the same opportunities in Malaysia as he did in Singapore, ‘I don’t think they would have made me Head of Department!’ In this sense, his perception of state policies back home encouraged him to achieve much more in his career than others (with similar ethnic backgrounds) who had returned home.

In many ways, comparisons between Singapore and the West also included the standards that universities set and expected of their faculty. While many migrant academics were critical about Singapore’s rising expectations in terms of research output, they also felt that emphasis on peer-reviewed journals and international publications was an important element of academia that was often lacking in their home countries. One Assistant Professor from Korea shared that,

Korean academics can just survive with just one or two publications in American journals [for their entire career]. Then they can just produce for Korean journals. I mean there are good studies, fairly interesting ones, but still, the standard is not quite [the same]...and also, it does not take too much time [to publish], unlike the American journals...So in a sense, if I go back to Korea, it means that it’s okay to stay completely away from mainstream academia.

This interviewee’s statement reveals how foreign scholars value publications as a means of remaining within a ‘mainstream’ academic community. Returning to their home countries meant possibly losing institutional and personal motivations, as well as the resources, to keep producing work at ‘international’ standards. Reflecting existing hierarchies among higher education institutions, many of our interviewees ranked Singapore as a place where their

home countries are still trying to ‘catch up.’ As such, they saw themselves in an upwardly mobile position in terms of their career.

Downward Mobility: Working away from the Center

Migrant faculty in our study did not only work to maintain ties with their families back home, they also actively cultivate and develop ties with an international academic community, comprising of fellow researchers and scholars from either the same disciplinary background or substantive research area. Many of these scholars obtained their doctorates from prestigious Western universities, traditional academic centers where they had opportunities to meet with well-known professors at formal and social events organized by their departments. Being at the center of their academic communities provided social capital in terms of allowing interviewees to actively participate in the latest trends within their fields. As such, coming to Singapore meant being ‘isolated’ from these scholarly networks. Interviewees worried about maintaining their ‘visibility’ among academics in the West, and often felt a sense of *downward mobility* as compared to peers who had chosen to remain within the US or the UK.

Interviewees’ concerns about academic status went beyond research publications. While they had published extensively in their own fields, they worried about accessing informal networks and professional community events that allowed them to promote their work, gather new ideas, and make themselves known to other scholars in their fields. The specific ways these networks benefited scholars varied in terms of discipline. Interviewees from STEM fields talked about the importance of knowing what other researchers were working on before these findings were published in journals. As noted by one Associate Professor, relying on publications meant reading about research projects ‘that have already been going on for years’ – and such information would be ‘useless’ for scholars seeking to

develop new innovations or release original results. On the other hand, social scientists and humanists stressed the importance of testing their arguments with peers, even before sending their work out to academic journals. While these scholars faced a different kind of pressure in justifying the ‘novelty’ of their research findings, they also saw conferences and seminars as an important way to get the feedback from the would-be reviewers of their work.

Despite these differences, interviewees’ narratives showed a common emphasis on the pressure to make their presence felt in their respective academic communities – to not only obtain feedback on academic work, but to also build one’s reputation and authority as a scholar. In some ways, being in Singapore did not provide them the same social capital as those who had remained in academic centers in the West. One Assistant Professor from Japan described this process,

You have to sort of do the work to a certain extent of getting your work out there and making it known...and a lot of that happens in person. You want to be the person who is known to be friendly, and you know, known to be knowledgeable in certain areas. And later, someone might say, ‘Hey we want to have a conference and we should invite this person, or we need a reviewer for this article’ and you want them to think of you...That’s the kind of currency you buy by showing up [at a conference].

The need to obtain such ‘currency’ from academic conferences and gatherings was especially pertinent for untenured professors. Interviewees working towards tenure were well aware that their future academic dossiers would be later sent to well-known scholars, mostly based in the US and Europe. Securing a favorable evaluation then meant ensuring that future reviewers would ‘know’ their work, or at least put a face to a name. As stated by an Assistant Professor from the Philippines,

You need to get your work out there because one of the tenure requirements would be how well do people receive your research. And when asked if they have read [my] work and they don't even know me, it's like, 'Oh no.' So I think it's helpful to be in the premier conference in our area. It's something that you *have* to do if you want to continue being a tenure track faculty.

Singapore universities provide large funds for conference travel and attendance, yet the reality of geographic distance and teaching and administrative duties made it difficult for scholars to attend all the important events in their field. While some interviewees worked through physical exhaustion just to travel to North America three or four times a year, the majority of our interviewees only attended conferences twice a year. One Associate Professor from India explained:

Going to the US means that you're going to miss one week of classes...So that always gives you a pause, how many can you do in one semester? Even then, your institution might not want you to do three conferences. Missing three weeks of classes in the middle of the semester is definitely a big no-no. It's not like you're hopping to the next city for a seminar, or giving a talk.

The issues that this interviewee described are especially magnified for foreign scholars with families. For example, one Associate Professor from China was forced to forego international travel for several years at the time she gave birth to her second child. While this decision was not detrimental to her status in her school (she was already tenured at this time), she felt it severely affected her 'presence' among computer scientists in her field:

Some friends told me, 'I haven't seen you for years! I thought you moved to another research direction.' That's because they go to major conferences and did not see me...I didn't stop publication, it's just that they could not see me.

Interviewees were well aware that the value placed on American or European conferences were greater and many hoped that places like Singapore would contribute to shifting more attention towards Asia along these same terms. Yet, they also admitted that there was little one could change about the current situation. While local academic associations worked actively to organize events within Singapore and Southeast Asia, the smaller academic community within the region was not enough to generate the kind of intellectual discussions common in North America and Europe. One Associate Professor wryly noted that it is not always easy to convince ‘famous’ professors to give keynote speeches for conferences in Singapore, not because of a lack of interest but a lack of time. Just as Singapore-based scholars struggle to attend conferences in the West, academics in North America and Europe could not always make time for the long journey to Singapore during teaching semesters.

For a number of interviewees, the feeling of downward mobility was also linked to being affiliated with an institution that few scholars were aware of within their particular disciplines. While Singapore universities are well-placed in world rankings, not all schools and departments enjoyed the same prestige within specific disciplines. Some foreign scholars were confident in the name Singapore had built within their fields, yet others felt frustrated at the extra work needed to “introduce” their peers to Singapore universities. Interviewees admitted that such disadvantages were not limited to Singapore-based scholars alone, with many smaller institutions in the West seeking the same recognition within academia. However, given the large number of publications generated each year, interviewees felt that they had to put in the extra effort to get others to read their work. One Assistant Professor from Australia shared that he actively attended as many conferences in his field in order to promote his newly published book. While released by a prestigious university press based in the US, he felt he still needed “extra exposure” in order for other academics to review the book or recognize its contribution to the field.

When my book came out, I went to a lot of conferences that year because I felt like you had to say “This is my work. This is what I am working on.” Just put your face in front of people and then they might look at the book, right? Because if they never heard of you, they’re never going to find your book. The [reputable press] helps but (pause) there are a lot of books out there (laughs).

Given the work of maintaining a visibility in ‘mainstream’ academia, a number of interviewees utilized their own transnational links to family back home, relying on parents and siblings to help with household matters such as childcare. One Assistant Professor with three children shared that he once had to fly his mother from the Philippines to Singapore, to help take care of the household while he was away for a conference. Other interviewees shared similar strategies, flying in parents and siblings to help care for their children while they were away from the country. These struggles added to interviewees’ concern about furthering their academic careers, while feeling detached from their academic communities.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the movement of Asia-born academics from traditional centers in the West towards Singapore, a rising research and higher education hub whose universities have gained prominence in the international higher education landscape. We showed how such movement is largely driven by the desire to find an ideal ‘academic home,’ where migrant faculty could be close enough to aging parents and family, while working in universities that provide the resources to remain ‘visible’ in a global community of scholars. These findings provide an alternative explanation to contemporary academic mobility, where scholars have largely framed the movement of academics as either: 1) an accumulation of human and social capital (as seen in the move towards academic centers mostly situated in the West); or 2) a desire to return to a home country, where family ties, cultural familiarity, and a need to

contribute to one's community are common factors. Rather than seeing these two drivers of mobility as in conflict with each other, this paper shows how the emergence of aspiring centers like Singapore serves as an opportunity for migrant academics to satisfy both needs. The case of the Asia-born migrant academics in this study can be seen as a 'quasi-return,'⁴ where they grapple with the complexity of balancing professional development and family ties, yet their deliberate decision to remain in Singapore indicate that they also wish to maintain a level of social capital among professional peers that would otherwise be more difficult if they were to return 'home.' Our paper shows how migration experiences towards such places elicit feelings of both upward and downward mobility, as migrant academics compare themselves to colleagues who had never left home, and to those who chose to remain in the West.

Our findings have policy implications for governments and higher education institutions with aspirations to be research and higher education hubs—within the region or internationally. The case of Singapore revealed that its local universities built their international reputation through a combination of heavy government investment in research and higher education, as well as the successful recruitment of many foreign faculty who perform the research and teach and train the students (see Paul and Long, 2016). Given that a growing number of doctoral students in North America and Europe originate from outside of these regions, state and university policies in emergent research and higher education hubs can target those wishing to move closer to home (but *not* home) and continue to expand their research. This strategic approach is likely to result in altering extant geographies of higher education into 'regions of higher education,' rather than country or institution-specific. Indeed, our findings highlight the need to further explore a form of academic mobility that reflects a return to particular regions, rather than specific countries of origin (the 'quasi-

⁴ We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this term.

returnees’). These ‘quasi-returnees’ are more likely to be the ones who bridge the theoretical debates in their discipline, often dominated by ‘Western’ perspectives, with the empirical observations from their respective geographical regions or affiliated countries and institutions. They are the academic middlemen between their ‘home,’ ‘institutions of research training,’ and the aspiring centers where they are based. Therefore, continued and improved state and institutional support for academic research in terms of facilities and funding resources can encourage such movement, as migrant faculty seek ways to continue their work beyond traditional centers of knowledge in the West.

Our findings have also spotlighted the tensile points in the transformation of the global higher education landscape from the perspective of individual (migrant) faculties. In the case of Singapore, while our interviewees are productive researchers in their fields, they revealed that their professional satisfaction and likely retention still depended on how they define their status within their respective academic communities. Migrant academics in our study trained in Western institutions continue to regard these places as ideal sources of social capital, as global standards for university rankings and prestige favor networks and publications based in established institutions in the US and Europe. While this may change in the future, for now the interviewees in our study expressed (some) dissatisfaction with their current status in the global academic community (see also Sidhu, Yeoh and Chang, 2015). This expressed sense of downward mobility signals the potential likelihood of migrant faculty leaving the institution and the region, with this likelihood increasing when competing opportunities in American or European universities are presented. The loss of faculty is a big cost to any university, disrupting teaching programs and leaving research agendas unfinished (Lawrence et al., 2014), not to mention the growing resentment among locals who believe these faculty positions should be filled by those with deeper ties to the local community. Such costs can be particularly salient for universities that rely heavily on recruiting faculty

from overseas, as is the case in many emerging institutions in Asia and the Middle East. These limitations emphasize the need for more creative policies, not only for talent recruitment, but their retention. Here, in addition to travel funding, organizational policies and practices can offset the perceived sense of downward mobility through, for instance, more flexible teaching schedules and less administrative duties and demands, which would allow academics to attend overseas conferences and workshops throughout the semester. In so doing, as our interviewees confirmed, the gatherings would allow academics to keep abreast with developments in the field, while also providing exposure and visibility for affiliated universities in the international arena.

The recommended policies and practices, however, are not likely to completely alter the current hierarchies in the global higher education system. In many ways, this paper raises the broader issue of how rising universities in Asia can work towards decentering the status of particular Western institutions in determining the standards of academic authority and prestige. Perhaps, universities in Asia can promote and develop more diverse systems of tenure and promotion, where traditional requirements for publications in Western journals can be balanced with work that emphasizes regional collaboration efforts and local development projects. Such movements are already present in some parts of the world, and would contribute to mitigating migrant academics' perceptions of downward mobility, and encourage their further investment in developing their host institutions and home regions.

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