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Precarious talent: Employment insecurity and settlement uncertainty among highly skilled Chinese and Indian immigrants in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges that highly skilled immigrant workers face and their adaptation, particularly through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). We employ the term "precarious talent" to capture an often neglected aspect of skilled migration. Using both survey data and interviews on skilled Chinese and Indian immigrants in Singapore, we find that these migrants confront varying degrees of employment insecurity and settlement uncertainty in the era of neoliberal globalization, contrary to the common perception of "foreign talent" as a privileged group. We also find that skilled immigrants actively use ICTs to mitigate precarity: they use Internet and social media to access timely job information, sustain social contacts across national borders, and adapt to life and work in a host society in which they seek to resettle permanently but often find themselves sojourning. However, the ability to effectively cope with precarity depends on their own socioeconomic status, context of reception, and homeland development. We discuss theoretical implications of our findings.

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Introduction

Skilled migrant labour, often referred to as “foreign talent,” is generally highly desired and favoured by migrant-receiving countries. Leslie Sklair (2001) considers highly skilled migrants “transnational elites” while Jonathan Beaverstock (2012) view them as the agents of global capital. From this perspective, the mobility of highly skilled migrants across national borders is seen as the choice of the privileged to seek opportunities for economic betterment. They are hailed as “heroes of the global free movement,” who traverse effortlessly across nation-state borders (Yeoh and Huang 2011).

Highly skilled migrants are a very broad category, however. They include a minority of transnational elites, such as global investors and entrepreneurs, CEOs of large corporations, and top-ranked business executives and employees, but a vast majority of them are professionals at varying ranks, ranging from doctors and nurses, university professors and researchers, school teachers, high-tech scientists and engineers, lab technicians, to middle-level managers in fast-growing industries. Much of the literature focuses only on the minority of transnational elites or uses this minority to misrepresent all skilled immigrants. As Favell, Feldblum, and Smith (2006, 7) note, “The dichotomy of highly skilled versus unskilled migration glosses over the stratifications within and across categories as well as significant mediating factors such as the gendered nature of some highly skilled movements”

This paper draws on the concept of “precarity” to the study of highly skilled immigrant workers. The positive perception of highly skilled migrants as a privileged group and the lack of attention paid to the disadvantaged situations they encounter has left a void in the literature on immigrant precarity, which has mostly concentrated on low-skilled migrant workers and refugees (Ferguson and McNally 2015; Jordan 2017; Schierup et al. 2015). However, our research finds that many highly skilled migrants are also subjected to employment insecurity and settlement uncertainties associated with unstable jobs, temporary residence, and risks of downward mobility.

Using both survey data and in-depth interviews, this paper takes a close look at the work and life of skilled Chinese and Indian migrants in Singapore. Critical of the

common perception of “foreign talent” as a privileged group, we employ the term “precarious talent” to capture an often neglected aspect of skilled migration. We will show that in the era of neoliberal globalization, the highly skilled are often treated as flexible labour like their low-skilled counterparts. They too are brought in on temporary work visas to meet the skill demands of domestic labour markets. Although they are economically much better off than low-skilled migrant workers, they are not immune to the vicissitudes of global production and the ever-changing labour markets of nation-states.

The paper will further examine how highly skilled Chinese and Indian immigrants adapt to this precarious environment, particularly through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Over the past three decades, a growing body of scholarship has examined the transformative effects of ICTs on migration and migrant adaptation. Prior research has underscored the role of ICTs in enabling international migrants to sustain transnational families and communities, engage in homeland economic and political activities, negotiate with state institutions and employers, and adapt to life and work in host societies (Baldassar et al 2016; Chen and Choi 2011; Madianau 2012; Nedelcu 2012; Zhou and Liu 2016).¹

In what follows we first offer a brief discussion of main theoretical insights into the phenomenon of skilled labour migration and precarity. We then provide an overview of immigration to Singapore and the expansion of ICT use among the city-state’s population including immigrants. Third, we analyse our data to examine two aspects of precarity—employment insecurity and settlement uncertainty—and the role of ICTs in mitigating precarity. Fourth, we examine the heterogeneity of highly skilled immigrants and factors influencing their diverse experiences. We conclude by highlighting theoretical and practical implications of this study.

Foreign talent and precarity: Some theoretical considerations

Precarity and skilled migration seem to be an odd pair that does not fit into the popular narrative of “the global race (war) for talent.” Developed and developing countries often

intentionally compete with one another to attract foreign talent by offering high salaries, generous fringe benefits, favourable working and living conditions (Florida 2005; Shachar 2006). However, the narrative of “the global race for talent” exaggerates the openness of migrant-receiving countries. Most of these countries still set various restrictions on the recruitment and settlement of highly skilled immigrants, except for a very small number of highly selected immigrants (Cerna 2016; Papademetriou and Sumption 2013).

Precarity of skilled immigrants is a product of neoliberal globalization. The effect of neoliberal globalization on workers’ precarity has been well documented in the literature. Since the 1970s, the rise and spread of neoliberal policy and ideology have gone hand in hand with economic globalization. The high velocity of capital mobility and deregulation of labour laws have rendered workers increasingly vulnerable. Workers are not only subjected to worsening terms of labour contracts but also to the high likelihood of job loss due to both the relocation of production and intensified market competition (Arnold and Bongiovi 2013; Harvey 2007). As a result, a growing proportion of the labour force works under precarious conditions, characterized by insecure and unstable employment and high degrees of anxiety from unemployment (Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2011). Immigrant workers are further disadvantaged in the labour market because their job is often tied to immigration status. Losing a job would lead to major changes in immigration status, and subsequently involuntary departure from the country of destination.

Highly skilled immigrants are not immune to these vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the global search for talent to meet the demand of neoliberal globalized production has turned an increasing number of skilled workers into migrants or potential migrants. For instance, the highly educated immigrants in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) countries reached 31 million in 2013, up 70 per cent over the previous decade (OECD 2014, 9). The expansion of skilled migration has intensified the competition among highly skilled immigrants as well as between skilled immigrant and native workers, causing native anxiety and backlash against immigration (Yeoh and Lam 2016). This would exacerbate the precarity of immigrants.

Precarity of highly skilled immigrants is also shaped by the context of reception, particularly the immigration regime of receiving countries, which in turn affect immigrants' settlement and integration. Cerna (2016) finds that the policies of receiving countries toward skilled migration have been diverging rather than converging. Only a handful of countries such as Canada and Australia recruit highly skilled immigrants without requiring job offers, whereas most of other OECD countries do so based on the labour market demand; and the process is often subjected to the ups and downs of the economy and domestic political dynamics. The paths to permanent residency and citizenship also differ. For example, the paths are much narrower in Singapore than those in Canada and Australia, with the United States lying in between (Zhou and Liu 2016).

The policies and economies of sending countries affect the precarity of highly skilled immigrants. The literature on immigrant transnationalism has highlighted that many immigrants, particularly highly skilled immigrants, maintain social and economic connections with the home country (Levitt, DeWind and Vertovec 2003). The development of ICTs, plus air travel and other high-tech means of communications, has further strengthened and expanded these transnational linkages and activities (Baldassar et al 2016; Nedelcu 2012). This holds implications for immigrant precarity as transnational connections and engagement in economic activities in the home country may provide immigrants with social support and alternative employment and business opportunities (Zhou and Lee 2013). It is particularly relevant to Chinese and Indian immigrants because the economies of both China and India have grown rapidly in recent decades.

In our view, treating immigrants as flexible labour creates new conditions for exploitation and exclusion regardless of skill levels. The term “precarious talent” captures the flexible supply of highly skilled immigrant labour in the globalized production process. It is intended to shed light on an often neglected aspect of high-skilled labour migration and draw attention to the blurring boundaries between low-skilled and highly skilled immigrants in the neoliberal era. We examine precarity in terms of two daunting challenges that highly skilled immigrants face—employment insecurity and settlement uncertainty. We argue that highly skill immigrants are vulnerable to precarity and that

ICTs help them mitigate precarity. We also argue that immigrants' ability to cope with precarity depends not only on their own socioeconomic status, but also on the contexts of reception and homeland development.

Data sources

Highly skilled immigrants in our study refer to those who hold at least a college degree and work in professional occupations, such as scientists, engineers, medical and healthcare professionals, university educators, and technology specialists. In this paper, we focus on highly skilled Chinese and Indian immigrants in Singapore. China and India have the world's largest populations and represent the largest foreign-born groups in many fast-growing cities around the world (IOM 2017). Immigrants from these two countries tend to be socioeconomically diverse, comprising both low- and high-skilled workers. However, those migrating to Singapore tend to be disproportionately high-skilled. Moreover, the expansion of domestic markets in China and India also creates job opportunities for return migrants.

Our data is drawn from a questionnaire survey (N=511) and 59 in-depth interviews conducted between June 2017 and September 2018. The survey respondents come from two sources: 310 were surveyed through an online survey company, and 201 respondents were sampled by our research team through the purposive snowballing method to diversify the profile of the respondents. We have compared the two sources of survey respondents found that their answers to the survey questions show a high degree of similarity. This indicates the validity of the data from both sources. Of all survey respondents, 84 per cent holds at least a college degree. We analyse our survey data to capture the general patterns and purposes of ICT use among skilled Chinese and Indian immigrants and their varying socioeconomic status and transnational activities.

In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face, each lasting from one to two hours. Interviewees comprise 38 Chinese immigrants and 31 Indian immigrants, and all of them hold at least a college degree. We use pseudonyms when we quote our interviewees. We asked open-ended questions which ranged from immigrants' modes of

entry, work, family life, identity, felt and experienced discrimination, ICT use, to long-term plans for settlement in Singapore. Our analysis focuses on describing the phenomenon of precarious talent and identifying factors that alleviate or aggravate precarity.

Immigration and non-resident population in Singapore

Singapore is a city-state, known as one of the “Asian Tiger” economies for rapid industrialization and high rates of economic growth. Its GDP per capita reached US\$57,714 in 2017, ranking 8th in the world (World Bank n.d.). As a global city and a regional financial centre, Singapore has achieved rapid economic growth by participating in the global division of labour and by plugging into the circuits of high-end global value chains. In 2017, approximately 37,400 international companies had its headquarters in Singapore, including 7,000 multinational corporations (EDB 2017).

The robust global economy and presence of multinational companies exert a strong pull on international migration. The city-state’s population stood at 5.61 million in 2017, with over 40 percent of the population foreign born (Singstat 2018; Yang, Yang and Zhan 2017). The population comprises 3.44 million citizens (including local born and naturalized citizens), 0.53 million permanent residents (PRs), and 1.65 million non-residents (29.4 per cent). Among the resident population (citizens and PRs), 74% were Chinese, 13% Malays, 9% Indians, and the rest “Others.” Among non-citizens, highly skilled immigrants made up 48 per cent (Singstat 2018, 3). In Singapore, highly skilled temporary immigrants are those holding employment passes (EP) or S-passes. In Singapore, an employment pass (EP) is granted to those who hold a professional job and earn at least 3,600 Singapore dollars (SG\$ henceforth) a month, while an S-pass is granted to those who hold a technical job and earn at least SG\$2,200 a month. Low-skilled foreign workers in Singapore are granted work permits and cannot apply for permanent residency.

The high proportion of immigrant population in Singapore is also the outcome of the nation-state’s policy since the early 1990s to tackle problems of low fertility and

aging and to recruit foreign talent to build a knowledge-based economy. China and India are two main sources of immigration to Singapore, accounting for 18 per cent and 6 per cent of the foreign-born population in 2015, respectively (Yang, Yang and Zhan 2017, 11). Immigrants to Singapore are also highly selective. The government classifies immigrants into foreign talent and foreign workers, which can be roughly seen as a division between highly skilled and low-skilled workers. The selection of highly skilled immigrants are made according to the needs of the city-state's economy. Singapore aspires to develop knowledge- or capital-intensive industries such as finance, logistics, IT, oil & gas, biochemicals, hospitals & pharmaceuticals, and higher education. This is reflected in our survey, with the majority of the respondents being engineers, technology specialists, professionals, researchers, and managers. Highly skilled Chinese and Indian immigrants in our survey shared similar occupational patterns, but the Indians were much more overrepresented in the category of engineers and technology specialists, particularly in the IT sector. For example, 37 per cent of Indian respondents, as opposed to 20 per cent of Chinese respondents, were engineers and technology specialists.

Immigration has become a highly politicised issue in the recent decade. With the influx of immigrants, local discontent towards immigration surged, forcing the government to tighten immigration policy (Ortega 2015; Yeoh and Lam 2016). A notable change is the significant narrowing of the pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for immigrants (Ho and Foo 2017). The number of new permanent residents dropped nearly two thirds, from 79,167 in 2008 to 29,265 in 2010, and remained at that level thereafter. In addition, the government implemented a series of policies to prioritize the hiring of local workers over foreign workers. Despite the stringent settlement policy, however, the number of foreign workers in Singapore continued to grow, up 23 per cent, from 1.3 million to 1.6 million between 2010 and 2017. The increase in highly skilled foreign workers was much faster, up 54 per cent for the period, from 242,000 to 372,100 (Singstat 2018). This suggests that most of the highly skilled immigrants would have to work in Singapore on a temporary basis, despite their intention to settle down. While the change in Singapore may have been partly attributed to its small size and the high proportion of foreign workers, the situation in the city-state represents a global trend: the last decade has witnessed the tightening of permanent immigration worldwide while the

number of international immigrants had grown from 220 million in 2010 to 258 million in 2017 (IOM 2017).

Precarious talent: Employment insecurity and settlement uncertainty

Employment insecurity

The problem of employment insecurity has been widespread among highly skilled immigrants in Singapore, even among those who have already acquired permanent residency or citizenship status. This is because the globalized production requires a flexible labour supply while the concentration of global capital also intensifies business competition in the city-state. Judith Chu, 55 years old, came to Singapore in 1998 and was granted permanent residency. She holds a bachelor degree in accounting and has been working as an accountant. Her employment experience reveals a very fluid labour market in Singapore, which has been shaped by intensive competition and the ups and downs of the economy. When asked about her employment, she replied,

I changed [jobs] quite a few times. The first company ... I worked for 5 years before it closed down. The next company I worked for around a year before it closed. The third company I also worked for around a year before it closed. My fourth company I worked for around a year before it also closed. For my fifth company, which was a seafood restaurant, I worked for eight years before it closed. Last year I joined a company where I worked for around one year and six months.²

Judith's case is not uncommon. At least 70 per cent of our interviewees have changed their jobs and some of them multiple times. A lack of job stability and security has forced highly skilled immigrants to be on the constant lookout for new job

² Interview No. CH13, 7 December 2017.

opportunities. And the Internet has become an important tool for them to find job information and advertise their skills. Among the survey respondents, 78.5 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they use phones or computers to gather information on possible jobs. Only five per cent disagreed with this statement while others reported neutral (also see Table 1). Many respondents also advised their skills on job websites such as LinkedIn or social media. These ICT channels have also made it easier for recruitment agencies to reach out to potential or current highly skilled immigrants in and out of Singapore. We found multiple cases among our interviewees who were contacted by recruitment agencies through the information they posted online, and two of them made the journey from overseas to Singapore in this fashion.

Among all highly skilled immigrants, those who are on work visas (EP or S-Pass) tend to experience greater employment insecurity than those who have acquired permanent residency or citizenship. Of the survey respondents who were on work visas, 56.6 per cent agreed that they were disadvantaged as an immigrant in the job market, as compared with 38.4 per cent of those who have acquired permanent residency or citizenship. Both EP and S-passes are tied to specific categories of job contracts. An immigrant must find another job in similar employment categories in Singapore within 30 days after losing the current job; otherwise he or she must leave the country. In recent years, in response to the discontent of the local population, the Singaporean government issued policies to prioritize the employment of resident workers, including both permanent residents and citizens. An employer would be scrutinized or penalized if its workforce consists of an unusually high proportion of foreign workers, particularly when it is found to choose foreign workers over local workers.

Victoria Wang, a 29-year-old Chinese immigrant, came to Singapore to study in 2004, attending high school first and then college. Victoria worked for a global marketing company headquartered in Singapore at the time of the interview. Even as a naturalized citizen, she constantly felt anxious about job security, but she agreed that those on a temporary work visa are much more disadvantaged. She said during the interview,

I think PR [permanent residents] and citizens definitely have a huge advantage compared to foreigners. ... let's say if you are not a resident here, which means every month you need to pay rental, and also your work permit or whatever pass might be expiring soon. So I think as a foreigner, you may be forced to make a decision on anything fast instead of slowly considering and weighing out your options. ... I also heard ... my friend's friends had issues with renewing their EP. So in this sense the company can easily take advantage of foreign employees.³

Victoria's remark indicates that immigrant workers are subject to unequal treatment at work as employers hold the power of applying for their foreign employees' work passes. The anxiety of employment insecurity is felt among all strata of highly skilled workers, including those who earn a very high income. Vivek, a 38-year-old Indian national, migrated to Singapore from Hong Kong with his wife and two children in 2016. He worked as a marine engineer for a global shipping company and earned at least SG\$12,000 (US\$8,700) a month. Despite his master's degree, years of work experiences, and a high salary, he felt a strong sense of precarity.

...many of us are working in the private sector. Today we get a job, [but] tomorrow morning you go to the office [and find] you have been slayed [meaning retrenched]. ...the moment you lose the job you have to move out from here. If it's only you, it would be fine because you know that you are a professional guy, you have proper education, you have proper experience, [and] you will find a job somewhere. But all of a sudden, it becomes very unsettling for your kids who are studying....⁴

³ Interview CH19, 6 May 2018.

⁴ Interview IN, 16 December 2017.

Vivek's comments indicate that for many highly skilled workers, particularly those who are in their late 30s and 40s, frequent migration may not be a privilege but a burden because job change and relocation would disrupt family life and children's education, an issue to which we shall return in the next section.

It should be noted that a number of interviewees expressed an understanding of Singapore's stringent immigration policy, even though they complained about their disadvantages in the labour market. For example, Paul Zhang, 38 years old, had migrated with his families to Singapore from China for five years by the time of the interview. He was working for a hospital as a medical technology specialist. He felt very disappointed that his application for permanent residency had been rejected twice, but he said,

I understand why the government reject my application. They [officials] have immigration requirements to uphold. It is normal from the point of view of the government, as it has to protect the country's interests. Of course personally I hope they will lower the threshold so that I can pass. But objectively I understand why they do so, and I would do the same if I were in the shoes of the government.”⁵

The reaction on immigration policy from Paul and other interviewees points to the fact that immigrants' precarious conditions are not only derived from immigration policy but also from structural factors arising from the globalized production under neoliberalism. After all, immigration policy itself has been a result of state actors' response to this process. In the case of Singapore, the reliance on migration while restricting permanent residency has been closely related to the city-state's role as a regional centre of global capitalist accumulation. The rapid inflow and outflow of international capital, the local backlash against immigration due to heightened competition, and the perpetual pressure to upgrade technologies all require a flexible

⁵ Interview CH08, 23 September 2017.

labour system resulting in the high turnover rate of the workforce, including both highly skilled and low-skilled immigrant workers.

Settlement uncertainty

With increased anxiety over unemployment and decreased likelihood of getting permanent residency in Singapore, highly skilled immigrants confront the uncertainty and anxiety with regard to long-term settlement even though many of them would desire and be willing to integrate into Singaporean society. As Tseng (2011, 766) noted, “with the exception of those at the top rank, most skilled migrants cannot afford to be rootless, for valid economic and socio-cultural reasons.” We found a high degree of transiency in highly skilled immigrants’ plan for the future.

When asked about their long-term plans, many of our interviewees reported not having one or the inability to come up with one. Jasper Liu, 31, came to Singapore to study international relations as a MA student in 2009. At the time of the interview, he was working as an editor for a publishing company, which was his third job in Singapore. Jasper intended to settle down in Singapore, but his application for permanent residency had been rejected multiple times. He admitted to us that he did not have a long-term plan.

The uncertainty of long-term settlement may not be a big issue for immigrants at younger ages as they are still exploring career options and possibilities in life. However, it would become a source of anxiety for those who have aged into their late 30s and 40s, especially those who are married and living with young children. Manu, a 42-year-old Indian national, migrated from India to Singapore in 2011 through an internal transfer of his multinational marketing company. He lived in Singapore with his wife and two children, one 13 years old and the other 6 years and a half. He was not granted permanent residency. However, he expressed a strong desire to stay in Singapore, at least for another 15 to 20 years, for the sake of his children’s education. He remarked during the interview,

... if I have everything in my control, ...my job doesn't get eliminated at my workplace, ... my EP keeps getting renewed every two years, I would want to stay in Singapore at least till the time both my children finish their education...then they move out I can be more mobile and figure out whether I want to stay here, go somewhere else, or go back to India...that [children's education] to me is my biggest priority ... [it will be a problem] when I moved my younger child. He was six and a half years old, [and] he in every respect is a Singaporean. ⁶

We have also found that Chinese and Indian immigrants are actively using ICTs to cope with the problem of settlement uncertainty, particularly to maintain transnational networks and prepare for the possibilities of sudden loss of jobs, relocation to overseas, or return migration in the future. This is the issue to which we now turn.

Coping with Precarity via the Use of ICTs

Prevalence of ICT use

The development of ICT infrastructure has considerably lowered the costs of distant communications and transnational social interactions, and this rendered the use of ICTs an integral part of immigrant life. ICT usages in this paper refer mainly to the Internet, social media, messaging apps, and ICT gadgets such as computers, tablets and smartphones. Among the 511 respondents surveyed, 97 per cent used the Internet on a daily basis. An even higher percentage, 98 per cent, used social media websites or apps on a daily basis, as Table 1 shows. Further examination shows that there is little difference between the highly skilled immigrants holding a college degree or above and the rest of the respondents in our sample in their use of ICTs. The lowering of ICT costs might be an important reason for this nearly ubiquitous access.

(Table 1 here)

⁶ Interview IN12, 28 October 2017.

The use of ICTs has benefited immigrants in various respects. For example, 71 per cent of the survey respondents reported using a smartphone, tablet, or personal computer to find information about Singapore prior to their migration while 77 per cent of the respondents agreed that the Internet helped them understand the local population. The proportion of the respondents using ICTs to communicate with families and friends in the home country was as high as 89 per cent. These findings have echoed the existing studies that demonstrate the functional roles of ICTs in immigrant life.

Coping with precarity

Highly skilled immigrants in Singapore have three options in making a settlement decision, which Manu alluded to in his remarks above and which were suggested by a majority of our interviewees. The first choice is to stay in Singapore *temporarily* as long as possible. This choice is similar to the “permanently temporary” status, a term often employed to describe the conditions of low-skilled immigrants (Hennebry 2012; Parreñas 2010). The second option is to move to another country where the path to permanent settlement or citizenship is more predictable than in Singapore. Australia, due to its geographical proximity, is considered a viable option, though more preferred destinations would be North America or Europe. The third option is to move back to the home country, India or China. Most highly skilled immigrants in Singapore are keeping these options open and weighing them constantly to see where future opportunities or happenstances would take them. ICTs play a crucial role in the decision-making process among highly skilled immigrants in Singapore, because the three main options all depend on the use of ICTs for collecting information, maintaining and expanding social networks, and running transnational economic activities.

The first option – staying in Singapore as long as possible – entails being able to keep the current job or find another job in Singapore in the event of retrenchment. Most of the highly skilled immigrants in our study reported watching job opportunities closely and constantly. As we have noted, 78.5 per cent of the respondents surveyed used ICTs to gather information on possible jobs. This even applied to those who acquired permanent

residency or citizenship due to the fluid labour market in Singapore, and it was more so for those who were working on a work visa. Dileep, 40 years old and holding a bachelor degree in engineering, had been in Singapore with his wife and three children for more than 10 years. He and his families did not want to move to another country or return to India, even though his application for permanent residency had been rejected multiple times. He was recruited by an IT company in Singapore in 2008, but the company was closed down in 2012. He then found a job at an IT trading company. To keep the current company afloat so as to maintain his job, or to look for another job in case his current company was down sized or closed down, Dileep had been using ICTs extensively to connect with business partners and friends. "...our work goes online on Skype [and] WhatsApp, so we have customers, suppliers, [and] everybody on it. I have friends and families in India, so we communicate on WhatsApp and Skype also. Almost 24 hours I'm online."⁷

The second option is to relocate to another country. This option is possible for those who possess highly marketable and transferable skills, and are actively looking out for jobs in other countries. Jagan, a 42-year old Indian professional with a doctorate degree in engineering, is a case in point. He migrated to Singapore in 2012 with his wife and two children and worked for an oil & gas company as the lead engineer. After his permanent residency application was rejected, he was actively looking for jobs in other countries even though his family desired to settle down in Singapore. Jagan maintained a large network of friends and colleagues from different parts of the world through WhatsApp and Facebook, and this network gave him access to timely job information in the industry. During the interview on 30 September 2007, he told us that he was applying for a job in Australia.⁸ In February 2018, he told us he had already relocated to Australia when we contacted him again. Jagan desired stability as he was already in his 40s and had two young children. Thus he migrated to Australia when the country offered him a job and permanent residency.

⁷ Interview IN05, 15 September 2017.

⁸ Interview IN07.

The third option is to return to the home country. Rapid economic development and the expansion of domestic markets in China and Indian has made this option increasingly possible. Not only the highly skilled immigrants have maintained close contacts with friends and colleagues in the home country through the Internet and social media, as shown in the previous section, but many of them have also been involved in businesses in the home country thanks to the application of ICTs. Of the 511 respondents surveyed, half reported making economic transactions in the home country such as running businesses and investing in stocks or properties while living in Singapore.

The economic development in China has made returning less like a downward mobility to the skilled return migrants, and the option is particularly appealing to those who have not secured permanent residency in Singapore. Fernandez Liu, 30, came to Singapore in 2011 initially to pursue his master's degree. He had been working as an IT professional for 6 years since his graduation. His application for permanent residency had been rejected multiple times. He did not have an immediate plan to return to China, but admitted that it is a real possibility. He told us that his former classmates in Shanghai were earning almost the same salary as his in Singapore and that he would move back to China in the future if his career goes downhill.⁹

Highly skilled Indian migrants in Singapore have yet to consider returning to India a favourable career option. This is probably because the Indian economy has not developed to the extent that highly skilled return migrants would find job opportunities comparable to those in Singapore. The low level of desirability for return to the home country among the Indian immigrants may indicate that they face a higher degree of settlement uncertainty than their Chinese counterparts. This difference brings us to the issue of heterogeneity of highly skilled immigrants.

⁹ Interview CH16, 15 January 2018.

Discussion: Precarity and heterogeneity of highly skilled immigrants

Our findings so far have illustrated that the highly skilled workers in Singapore experience precarity in the labour market and in their process of settlement. However, we also note that highly skilled immigrants are subjected to these uncertainties in varying degrees. As the terms of “transnational elites” and “agents of global capital” are not representative of all highly skilled immigrants, “precarious talent” should not be used to describe these immigrants indiscriminately. Our study finds that highly skilled immigrants are a heterogeneous group, and to what extent they are subjected to precarity depends not only on individual socioeconomic characteristics, but also on contextual factors, including receiving- and sending-country circumstances. Thus, the precarity that highly skilled immigrants face should be understood as a spectrum. Below, we analyse how precarity varies by socioeconomic status, immigration regime, and sending-country development.

First, precarity is associated with immigrants’ socioeconomic status. In general, immigrants who are in stable jobs and earn higher incomes have more means to mitigate their precarity. One of the means is to invest in businesses, real estate properties, and the stock market to accumulate assets or earn extra incomes. For those working in Singapore, they often invest in the home country. Our survey found a close relationship between level of income and investment activities in the home country. Of all surveyed respondents, comprising 430 highly skilled respondents and 80 immigrants who do not have a college degree, those who earned higher than SG\$60,000 (about US\$44,000) a year were much more likely to invest in the home country, as Table 2 indicates.² Interestingly, SG\$60,000 was approximately equivalent to the average annual income level in Singapore in 2017. This indicates that those who earn higher than the average income have more means for investment, in Singapore or in the home country, whereas those earning the average income or below may not have much left for investment after covering the living costs.

This finding suggests that the immigrants with higher incomes confront less precarity than others because they can invest in assets and businesses, which can mitigate precarity in the host-country labour market. However, a relatively large number of highly

skilled immigrants earn salaries at the average level or below in Singapore. Those earning significantly higher salaries comprise of a minority. Our study found that, of the 430 high-skilled immigrants surveyed, a relatively large proportion (44.4 per cent) earned an average annual salary of SG\$60,000 or below annually, and only 35.8 per cent earned an annual salary of SG\$84,000 and above, which is considered a high salary in Singapore. It should be noted that homeland economic engagement is not only determined by economic status but also by social and cultural connections with the home country and transnational communities. For example, Indian immigrants in our survey appeared more likely to invest in the home country. Those who engaged in homeland investment and business activities accounted for 58 per cent, as compared to 44 per cent of Chinese immigrants, despite comparable incomes that the two groups earned on average.

(Table 2 here)

Second, precarity varies by immigration regimes. The globalized production has created the demand and conditions for the international flow of highly skilled workers, but this general process interacts with domestic conditions of sending and receiving countries to produce different immigration regimes that shape the precarity of highly skilled immigrants. Unlike relatively liberal immigration regimes in many Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, Singapore has a much tighter immigration regime in terms of regulating movement and settlement (Ho and Foo 2017). For instance, low-skilled immigrants such as domestic workers and construction workers virtually have no pathway to permanent residency in Singapore and they must leave the country when their contracts expire, whereas they can find some pathway, although very limited, in the United States and Canada (Paul 2011). Highly skilled immigrants in Singapore also have much narrower pathways to permanent residency and citizenship than in the United States, Canada, and Australia. As noted above, many highly skilled immigrants, such as Jagan, have moved to Australia as the country can offer them permanent residency. It should be noted, however, that the highly skilled immigrants in these Western countries, like their counterparts in Singapore, also confront precarity, especially the problems of skill mismatch and overqualification (Beckhusen et al 2013; Wald and Fang 2009). In recent years, these countries have also sought to tighten their

immigration policy in response to nativist resentment and anger over immigration (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014).

Third, levels of homeland development differentiate highly skilled immigrants. As noted above, economic development in China has created increasing job opportunities. This can mitigate precarity for some Chinese immigrants in Singapore because they have the option to look for comparable jobs in China if they lose their job in Singapore. Although the journey of returning to the home country is not as smooth as it looks (our data has shown a considerable degree of anxiety over return), it does offer a source of agency or empowerment as it provides multiple options for these immigrants in the labour market (Zhan and Huang 2013). Most of the highly skilled Indian immigrants, however, did not consider return as a viable option because the domestic market had yet to offer comparable job opportunities. Among our interviewees (38 Chinese and 31 Indians), we found that 16 Chinese and 15 Indians were likely to return to the home country in the future. Twelve Chinese immigrants cited good career prospects in the home country as one of the main reasons for their return, but only one Indian immigrant did so. Indian immigrants would return mostly because of unstable employment and the low likelihood to secure permanent residency in Singapore. This difference between Chinese and Indian immigrants in Singapore indicates that research on the precarity of international immigrants should take into consideration home-country development, which has so far received little attention in the literature.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined two aspects of precarity—employment insecurity and settlement uncertainty—confronted by highly skilled immigrants in Singapore. We find evidence of “precarious talent.” We also find that the availability of ICTs makes it easier for highly skilled immigrants to access job information, sustain social contacts back home, and adapt to life and work in host societies. However, immigrants’ ability to effectively cope with precarity depends on their own socioeconomic status, context of reception, and homeland development.

Our study of precarious talent highlights important theoretical implications. First, immigrant labour is vulnerable to exploitation in the era of neoliberal globalization regardless of skilled level. The terms, such as precarity, insecurity, uncertainty, and permanent temporality, which are usually employed to characterize low-skilled immigrants, can also be applied to at least some of highly skilled immigrants. An in-depth examination of precarious talent complements the existing literature that overlooks the skill variations of flexible labour by either placing great emphasis on low-skilled immigrant labour or treating highly skilled immigrant labour as “transnational elites.” Our study suggests that the precarity of flexible labour in the context of globalization should be understood on a continuum of skill levels intersecting immigrant status. Among highly skilled immigrants, “precarious talent” and “transnational elites” may constitute two ends of the continuum of highly skilled immigrants, and the group cannot be fully understood by only examining one end. Thus, our study has broadened the study of immigrant labour and provided a nuanced understanding of the complexity of highly skilled immigrant labour.

Second, regulatory immigration regimes contribute to precarity of highly skilled migrants by setting up roadblocks to permanent residence and citizenship. Our study has shown that the degree of precarity is higher in Singapore where the majority of highly skilled immigrants have to work on a temporary basis than that in countries where pathways to permanent residency and citizenship are more predictable, such as Australia, Canada and the United States, but few countries are fully open to skilled immigrants. The contradictory role of nation-state in regulating skilled migration— attracting foreign talent while restricting their incorporation into the national polity— deserves further research. Our research suggests that the factors may include the need to maintain a flexible labour force and the resistance of native workers.

Last but not least, our study draws attention to the relationship between immigrants’ precarity and the development of homeland. In Singapore, highly-skilled Chinese immigrants appear to confront less precarity than their Indian counterparts because the economic development in China has created comparable job opportunities, which makes returning to the home country a viable option. This will broaden the

existing research that has largely examined immigrants' precarity in the context of the host society, and highlights the significance of both sending and receiving countries in affecting immigrants' work and life.

It should be noted that our study has some limitations. It only focuses on two ethnic immigrant groups in Singapore. Further research should be conducted on other immigrant groups in Singapore as well as skilled immigrants in other countries. Furthermore, the findings in this study would be more robust if we compared the differences and similarities between low-skilled and highly skilled immigrants in a more systemic way.

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Table 1 Survey Respondents' Characteristics and ICT Use

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	284	55.6
Female	227	44.4
Ethnicity		
Chinese	309	60.5
Indian	202	39.5
Age		
30 or Younger	148	29.0
31-40	244	47.7
41-50	79	15.5
Above 50	40	7.8
Education		
College degree or above	430	84.1
ICT use		
Daily access to internet	496	97.1
Daily access to social media	500	97.8
Agree or strongly agree with the following statements		
I used smartphone, tablet, or PC to find information about Singapore before I came to this city	364	71.2
I often use my smartphone, tablet, or PC to communicate with family and friends who are currently located in my home country	456	89.2
The Internet helps me understand the local population	395	77.3
Total (N)	511	

Table 2. Survey Respondents' Annual Income and Investment in the Home Country

Annual Income (Singapore Dollar)	Total (N)	Investment in the Home Country (N)	Investment in the Home Country (%)
Less than \$12,000	46	17	37.0
\$12,000-\$23,999	32	12	37.5
\$24,000-\$35,999	45	16	35.5
\$36,000-\$59,999	129	49	38.0
\$60,000-\$83,999	98	55	56.1
\$84,000-\$119,999	92	58	63.0
\$120,000 and above	68	48	70.5
Total (N)	510	255	50.0

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¹ Recent scholarship also draws attention to the negative role of ICTs in the exploitation, surveillance, and control of immigrants by employers, recruitment agencies, and state institutions (Lim, Bork-Hüffe, and Yeoh 2016; Wilding and Gifford 2013).

² Approximately 30 per cent of the respondents who earned less than SG\$24,000 held a dependent visa, and this suggested that they were not the main income earner in the family. Their family income were

likely much higher. Thus the proportion of the low-income immigrant families investing in the home country would be even lower than Table 2 suggests.