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Mobility and desire: international students and Asian regionalism in aspirational Singapore

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Higher education is playing an important role in Singapore’s most recent cycle of modernization: to re-make itself into a global city through the continued accumulation of capital, ‘talent,’ and knowledge. This paper is a critical analysis of the accounts of a group of international students enrolled at the National University of Singapore, a key strategic site in Singapore’s bid to reconfigure itself into a knowledge hub. We discuss international student negotiations of Singapore’s global city imaginings against a policy context that foregrounds a desire for regional students in the state’s imagination and aspiration. In inquiring what political work international education is called upon to do to further Singapore’s progressive developmentalism, we open up an analytical space for understanding the global city as both a cosmopolitan metropolis that is continually being refashioned by the desires and aspirations of new student actors, and a place of transit from which students leave having acquired valuable navigational capacities.

Keywords: global city; difference; internationalization; transnational mobilities; globalization; higher education

Introduction: ‘building a home for talent’

Since the Asian Financial Crisis, Singapore’s policy-makers have intensified efforts at diversifying the city-state’s economy in order to maintain its competitive advantage. A crucial dimension of this project involves making Singapore into a knowledge hub – a desirable place for capital and ‘brain power’ represented in the knowledge, credentials, and networks of highly skilled professionals, scientists, entrepreneurs, and international students (Ong, 2007). Toward this end, Singapore has embarked on a series of rebranding exercises to consolidate its identity as an Intelligent Island, Global Schoolhouse, Asia’s Biopolis, and Global Asia Business Hub, distinguishing itself from its histories as trading entrepot and manufacturing outpost (Economic Development Board [EDB], 2013). Notwithstanding shifts in identity, Singapore depicts a consistent political rationality of governing the economy with the state at the helm, articulating and regulating global flows, and providing discursive and material resources to steer education and research toward productive ends. With knowledge-economy metaphors at the heart of this imaginary, the National University of Singapore (NUS) has become a key site for both the elaboration of these metaphors and the financial and political investments that have given it material form. NUS itself has become a key strategic actor in Singapore’s aspirations to become a knowledge and education hub, a Global Schoolhouse. This paper

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offers an examination of international student experiences of this project, which points to some of its contingencies, contradictions, and incompleteness.

Formally announced in 2002, but operational from 1998, Singapore’s Global Schoolhouse has three thrusts: ‘first, for the education sector to be an engine of economic growth; second, to build industry-relevant manpower (sic) capabilities for the economy; and third, to help attract, develop and retain talent for the economy’ (Lim, 2012). Captured in this succinct ministerial statement is the extent of Singapore’s ambition to assemble a multilayered project that marshals education and research toward the development of new spaces of knowledge-intensive production peopled by a class of entrepreneurial subjects, from ‘creative’ school students and business savvy ‘cognitariats’ to life scientists and ‘technopreneurs’ (Olds, 2007). This aspiration is materialized in large numbers of international students enrolled in Singaporean schools and universities. While numbers and countries of origin are generally not publicized by either universities or the government, we estimate that there were some 84,000 in 2012, roughly half enrolled in public institutions and just over two-thirds in tertiary institutions (Lim, 2012).

Singapore’s history of importing and translating ‘world class best practices’ extends to the sphere of higher education. From student admission policies to curricular and pedagogic innovations, to strategies of internationalising the student and academic bodies of local universities, Singapore has looked outwards in its bid to become the ‘Boston of the East’ and to contribute to wealth creation and value generation (Sidhu, Ho, & Yeoh, 2011). Its universities have succeeded in making a place for themselves in ‘world class’ university rankings within a relatively short period of time. This has been achieved by benchmarking against institutions with global reputations, mobilizing techniques of audit in research performance and by rewarding ‘continuous improvement’ on the parts of individuals and departments (Yew, 2011, pp. 282–283). The recruitment of high-profile foreign researchers has also contributed to boosting research outputs. The inclusion of international students under the ‘foreign talent’ category, however, has proven more problematic.

Unlike the education-exporting Anglophone countries (UK, Australia, NZ), Singapore’s international education project exceeds the shorter-term objective of seeking revenue from fee-paying international students to include the provision of educational aid and the consolidation of regional networks to enable Singaporean firms and citizens to exploit opportunities in Asia (Economic Development Board [EDB], 2013; Yew, 2011). From the 1990s, the region has been portrayed by the state as ‘an external wing’ of the domestic economy, ‘a mere 7 hour flight from Singapore,’ a space ‘culturally familiar’ to multicultural and multilingual Singaporeans, to be networked into their diasporic imaginations for individual and national economic good (Yeoh & Willis, 1997). As we show later, this positioning of Singapore at the centre of an imagined geography of Asian opportunity resonates with the desire of NUS to recruit regional students.

By reflecting a historical continuity with earlier development policies that foregrounded foreign experts, expertise and imaginaries the Global Schoolhouse following Ong (2007, p. 86), is ‘a space for the actualizing of national desire for global values and prestige, as well as the desire for the elite stranger, as a producer and enabler of these values.’ The construction of this space illustrates the impressive coherence in Singapore’s policy architecture, although as we show later, even the most sophisticated policies will necessarily yield unexpected effects. Along with enviable levels of resourcing, this architecture can give the impression that nothing stands in the way of the city-state realizing its desires to become a knowledge and education hub. As Sanderson (2002) notes:
There is no questioning the volume of facts or plans emanating from government departments, Singaporean institutions, and the media in print and electronic form. (p. 100)

However, as Sanderson goes on to reflect, the project cannot be complete, closed and without contradiction. He points to the absence of discourse that might promote a ‘deeper understanding’ of international education within Singapore itself. This would extend to evaluating ‘issues concerning education policy, pedagogy, curriculum and the international student experience’ and sustained reflection on the ‘complexities of having large populations of students from other countries study in Singapore’ (Sanderson, 2002, p. 100) These complexities include the anxieties and politics generated by public perceptions that international education is eroding the educational entitlements of Singaporeans (Koh, 2003), a point to which we return later. It is in this context, that official numbers of international students are not publicized.

Our paper responds to Sanderson’s observation through a critical study of the myriad influences which lead international students to ‘choose’ Singapore as a place to study and their social experiences at NUS. Bringing together insights from governmentality studies and Deleuzian theorizations on ‘desire,’ we examine the imaginative geographies of Singapore and NUS as held by international students, the practices of the Singapore state in generating these imaginaries and the encounters and interactions experienced by international students. We suggest that notwithstanding the political ambition to build Singapore into a ‘global city,’ and site for the accumulation of cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital, its international education project remains a work-in-progress and subject to successfully wedding these aspirations to the desires of international students.

**Theoretical framings**

Singapore’s policy-makers have leaned towards imagining international students as a source of network capital to further relations between the city-state and regional economies. Reinforcing these instrumental conceptions is a growing body of academic literature (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), which constructs international students as rational calculating subjects who seek Anglophone higher education credentials for the central purpose of securing cultural and social capital (Waters, 2008).

However, such a focus reifies a kind of calculative rationality that universalises the individual international student (and receiving countries like Singapore) as a particular kind of subject of ‘neoliberalism.’ While there is a need to attend to structural forces, state policies and institutional discourses, our point, following Lin (2012), is that research into student mobilities must also take into account disjunctions, dissonances, and contingencies. Students are drawn into mobilities that may not be pre-determined, nor completely rationally calculated, but rather assembled contingently by a multitude of actors. Our interest is to use a more variegated lens through which to examine the growing mobilities of international students into and through Singapore without falling back on individual calculative rationalities or the overarching influence of institutional discourses.

Raghuram (2013), drawing inspiration from governmentality studies, directs our attention to the contingent manner in which student mobility is ‘assembled,’ and simultaneously constituted through multiple aspirations, interests, and forces:
Institutions need to recruit students, to engage them and to persuade them of the benefits of partaking in the global circulation of knowledge. Students need to see the effects of and be affected by the institutional reach of education providers. They need to identify with knowledge institutions, their ability to enhance the students’ status and employability and to recognise the institutions as key players in global knowledge. (Raghuram, 2013, p. 148)

At its simplest, governmentality is an expansive form of power – ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1991). What distinguishes governmentality from other frameworks is an understanding of power that is productive, contingent, unpredictable, and multiscale. Power is not concentrated in the state but exercised at multiple levels of society, for example, through the government of the self, the family, and other social institutions.

Governmentality studies offer a useful set of tools to move beyond conventional studies of Singapore which over-state the importance of sovereign power whether through critiques of its authoritarian politics, or celebrations of seemingly coherent and rational policy-making activities (Olds, 2007). It brings multiple agents into the calculus of governing, including international students, their families, universities, and home countries. Governmentality allows us to identify temporal and spatial shifts in the rationalities and targets of state governance. Importantly, it allows us to examine the multiple projects that give substance to Singapore’s current aspirations to become a regional knowledge and education hub, making visible contestations and contradictions.

To understand the fine-grained texture of students’ ‘choice’ to be mobile, we supplement a governmentality analytic with Deleuzian theorizations on desire (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). A focus on ‘desire’ extends our analysis to more fully incorporate the multiscalearity of international education as it articulates from the level of the student body, through university, urban, national, regional, and global spaces. Thus we address the complementary (and contradictory) desires of individual, familial, social, and state agents in shaping student mobilities. There are three elements to this perspective that need to be understood as mutually constitutive. First, desire is conceived of not simply as influencing what individuals choose to do but also as a force that is socially generated. Desire, in this respect, cannot be constrained to the realm of fantasies we lack (à la Freud and Lacan), or as something that can be mastered through calculated choices, but rather needs to be conceived as ‘the psychical and corporeal production of what we want’ (Holland, 2010, p. 68). We do not desire objects (an overseas degree, for example) in themselves, but rather ‘desire to be drawn into another world expressed by that object’ (Kerslake, 2010, p. 51). Put another way, mobile subjects like international students do not necessarily desire the object of an ‘overseas degree’ in itself but rather what it expresses in terms of the value of overseas education socially, culturally, educationally, and in terms of future trajectories. We can hence understand desire as not only taking us to other places, literally in student mobilities, but also about transforming ourselves and the social spaces we inhabit. The ‘desire to circulate’ generated through international student mobilities reflects a growing normalisation of transnational mobility (Raghuram, 2013), but is also entangled in the discursive production of hierarchies of knowledge and governmental rationalities that have characterised the globalisation of higher education (Robertson, 2011).

Second, desire is inseparable from imagination, which takes us toward the objects we desire and into the world they are entangled with. In this regard, desire does not emanate from an object (overseas diploma) or being (successful returnee graduate) but rather from ongoing ‘repetitions’ that motivate us to act – to orientate ourselves toward objects and
worlds. While this emphasis speaks to the transformative potential of desire, it also highlights the manner desire is shaped by discourses that prescribe certain objects and aims and proscribe others (Holland, 2010). This process is carried out through coding, overcoding, and decoding of objects and behaviours as more or less desirable and undesirable. Desire is then generated through ‘collective imaginaries, or utopian fantasy-scripts for repertoires of practices’ (Nonini, 1997, p. 204). These imaginaries sometimes encourage an emphasis on calculative rationality – its potential to lead to capital accumulation. There are also other imaginaries at work here, however: a desire to escape from social and institutional constraints, to embody different positions as ‘global subjects’ or ‘cosmopolitans,’ or a yearning for adventure and experience (Kim, 2011).

Finally, then, desire is also a ‘difference engine,’ always pregnant with transformative potential. Desire is about becoming much more than being – our desires focus on the future and motivations to escape natural, cultural, or governmental limitations on the body (Massumi, 1992). Desire, then, also generates new modes of being in the world that are not knowable in advance. Student mobility is thus a particularly fertile terrain for examining the generation of difference. Despite the energy institutions and the state invest in crafting imaginaries of linear trajectories – from study to graduation and employment – research suggests substantial variability in the mobility trajectories and life opportunities generated through overseas study. This is apparent for both elite international students seeking the reproduction of exclusive class position (Brooks & Waters, 2011) as well as students from modest backgrounds striving for upward social mobility through overseas study (Robertson, 2013). International study carries substantial unpredictability – in the experiences students have, the practical outcomes of education, and the subject positions they inhabit.

Our research highlights this unpredictability and the manner in which desires to circulate can become entangled in both subtle and radical transformations of the self, the social spaces one inhabits and the global city. Indeed, it suggests to us that desires to circulate are more appropriately understood in Deleuzian terms as desires to be in circulation, or better to become in circulation. This far more open and emergent conception of desire not only transcends neoliberal notions of demand and choice in conceptualizing educational mobility but also captures the desire for, and inevitable production of, new ‘ways of being’ brought about by overseas study. It provides a platform for re-engaging in questions of international student mobility, and for linking these questions more effectively to the aspirations of universities, nation states, and other actors with a will to shape international education spaces.

This study

The research informing this paper is part of a larger research project investigating globalizing practices and international student mobilities in nine leading East Asian universities. Here, we report on analyses of 21 biographical interviews with international students selected through snowball sampling. The students were undertaking post- and undergraduate degrees across a range of disciplines at NUS, drawn largely but not entirely from the main source countries (China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia). Interviews explored decisions to study abroad, experiences of academic learning, social relations on and off campus, and future aspirations. Supplementing student accounts are insights on university strategy drawn from interviews with seven NUS senior management members.
All interviews were transcribed and analysed for common themes and these were related to the literature on international student mobility and to the theoretical frameworks.

**The university as a site for aspirations**

In 2005, following global trends aimed at the reconfiguration of higher education, Singapore’s public universities were corporatized. Universities were henceforth expected to align their operations more closely with knowledge-based industries, attract foreign talent, establish research-intensive profiles and international reputations, and transform themselves into entrepreneurial entities (Sidhu et al., 2011). In contrast to ‘New Public Management’ policies elsewhere, Singapore’s universities retained access to enviable levels of state funding, supplemented by respectable endowments, which point to a type of ‘statist corporatisation’ with different effects on university cultures compared to their counterparts in Anglophone liberal democracies.

To transform itself from a national, largely teaching-oriented university to a ‘global knowledge enterprise,’ NUS embarked on ‘chang[ing] the mindsets of staff to ‘become resourceful, innovative and pioneering’; build[ing] a borderless knowledge community, and produc[ing] citizens of the world, versatile and alert to global as well as local opportunities, willing participants in lifelong learning, with a sense of personal responsibility and moral obligation to contribute to society’ (Shih, 2000). Today the university aspires to be ‘A leading global university centred in Asia, influencing the future’ (National University of Singapore [NUS], 2013).

Crucial to its strategic maneuverings to achieve ‘distinction’ is alliance building with elite research universities in Europe and North America with a modest number of partnerships with esteemed Asian universities. Here, NUS echoes state aspirations, to establish Singapore as a broker of knowledge and network capital between an imagined ‘East’ and ‘West’ as confirmed by its President, ‘We are executors of government policy but also beneficiaries.’ NUS’ brand strategy, at the time that our study rested on ‘[our] ability to interpret Asia for the international order’ (senior executive manager, NUS).

Reputation making in and outside of the region requires the university to steer its strategy toward creating an image of dynamism and continuous improvement:

> one of the things that I hear very often from peers in is that [10] years ago [NUS] was good but not that great. But today, we think you all are really very different, very good. And I would say, it's not just what you have done or achieved, but the perceived level of ambition, trajectory of growth, and, the new things that you’re doing. (President of NUS, emphasis added)

These aspirations to capitalize on Singapore and NUS’ position by ‘going global’ interact in important ways with wider desires to circulate among students (Brooks & Waters, 2011). In our research, students often spoke about their own mobilities in ways that aligned with broader emerging norms around ‘middle-class’ youth mobility, the value of travel, the influence of family, and the pressure exerted by home country education systems. These narratives highlight the **social force** of desires to circulate both to generate mobile populations and to shift the social spaces that individuals inhabit.

Mobility has become an invaluable part of young people’s progression in and through the world. As Conradson and Latham (2005) note:
a period spent abroad – whether to study, develop a career, as part of travelling, or as an experimentation with the possibility of emigrating permanently – is becoming a taken-for granted part of the life cycle. (p. 288)

This normalization of mobility is encouraged through circulation of media-generated imaginaries of the world that can inspire a desire to experience or consume difference (Appadurai, 1996; Sun, 2002). Take, for example, the emerging curiosity in travel articulated by a Filipino doctoral student:

ever since I was young, I kept on imagining the bigger world … I really love to read. We all did. So we would think of places like [in] novels; very old school … England, the rolling hills, the grass, the winters; so through the readings, I could envision and imagine the different kinds of world. I kept thinking what it would be like in other places but at the same time, my family [didn’t] really travel. (Female, PhD Sociology, Philippines)

It is worth noting that for many students neither Singapore nor study itself was the initial generator of a desire to be mobile in the world. Rather, it was imaginative geographies generated through books, Hollywood films, or the Internet that foregrounded the potential of travel. In many cases, the value of mobility was also influenced by friends and family – in some cases students were in classes where most of their peers were planning to be abroad:

I think I was ignorant. I didn’t know and I didn’t care. I just thought I should get into the top university in Vietnam but after I got up to university, I see my friends going abroad and I should do the same thing. (Female, undergraduate, Real Estate, Vietnam)

International student mobility can also be a response to educational systems in home countries. Students spoke of the alternative trajectories offered by study abroad – either as a route to a better career, or an escape from competitive education systems.

Actually in China, only two kinds of people go abroad to study, either the very good, or the very bad, those who are good want to find a better place to study, they’ll take all the exams and go out. The other group are those who can’t make it to the local universities, so they try to find some agencies, family pays money and they go out. (Male, undergraduate dual major (Arts/Sc) China)

There are commonalities here with arguments developed by scholars influenced by a Bourdieusian emphasis on the accumulation of cultural capital. As Waters (2008, p. 3) notes, ‘an overseas education can, in fact, represent a way out of a highly competitive local education system and a more valuable form of cultural capital.’ We also note, however, the relatively tenuous character of student desires, that their articulation of motivations for studying abroad did not reflect clear-cut calculated decisions made in advance or in reference to a preexistent place of education. Rather, the desire to become in circulation was always emergent, narratives articulated past desires to present situations, and an ongoing reflection on the value of being abroad. It is in these reflections that we also observed Singapore emerge as a location in student trajectories – a place constituted not only through imaginative geographies but also in the practices of the Singapore state, NUS, and other actors. It is these narratives that we now turn to.
Global and regional: Singapore in the student imagination

How has it been possible to construct Singapore into a desirable place offering material, cultural, and intellectual resources to further the aspirations of regional students? The answer lies in attending to the complex relations between people and things – the ideas, inducements, images, and imaginaries – that shape the conduct of international student mobility.

Significantly, the students in our study were united in knowing little about Singapore and NUS as study destinations. Several conceded that they had not seriously thought about studying abroad, let alone in Singapore, until they were confronted by opportunities rolled out by the Singapore state. This was particularly the case for students outside the immediate region (South East Asia, India, and China) where Singapore and NUS are less familiar:

Previously no one knew, it was very difficult for us, when we talk about even Singapore they think, oh you went to Malaysia? Nowadays it’s much much better … because every time we go back to Iran, we talk about NUS, we tell them that it is a university with good ranking, good experimental facilities, equipment. (Female, PhD Chemical Engineering, Iran)

As this excerpt indicates, while NUS may initially be unfamiliar, students are also involved in generating and sustaining imaginaries of educational excellence. Having invested time, emotion, commitment, and intellectual effort, it is certainly in their interests to be associated with high(er) status institutions.

Even for those in the region, the Singapore option often materialised following visits by Ministry of Education officials and senior university academics to high schools or universities. In this context NUS was not a first choice, but rather something made possible by arrangements established by the Singapore state and NUS:

NUS was the first to give me an offer … I had already thought that I would be going overseas for study. To Chinese who do computer science, the first consideration will definitely be North America. We’d also consider Singapore and Hong Kong, such places, but the coincidence was when I was just about to apply [the Dean of Computer Science] came to Fudan to recruit, so there was this opportunity … I also thought, even if I applied to North America I might not be successful … and I was also lazy, writing those application documents will also take time, as a result of all these I thought about it and thought actually coming here is pretty good. (Male, PhD Computer Science, China)

Others spoke of being alerted to opportunities to study in Singapore through advertisements in local newspapers. Doctoral students were encouraged to study at NUS after short study visits on various state-sponsored schemes to foster closer links with Singapore’s neighbours.

The ready availability of tuition scholarships and institutional research infrastructure was flagged by postgraduates as shaping their decisions; although not their first choice, given its position, in the words of one doctoral student, in the ‘semi-periphery’ of the global university order. The university functioned as something of an East-West bridge – a stepping stone to another destination with the USA emerging as a key node in future imaginative geographies. In short, Singapore’s biopolitical investments in regional talent helped create ‘navigational capacities’ to aspire for another life – further study and/or permanent residency in the USA or Europe:
NUS has come up with something very good, [the] Student Exchange (programme) where you can spend six months for your PhD at some places if you want (and) if you can make that kind of arrangement. This also makes (NUS) unique because, on the one hand, you can have good coursework and publications; and at the same time, have exposure to some American university or UK universities or elsewhere in Europe … [You can] get the best of both worlds. (Male PhD Sociology, India)

If not imagined as a preeminent education destination, how then was Singapore viewed by students? Reflecting its history as a node in regional business and migration, Singapore was imagined as an icon of modern urbanism, a tourist destination, a place for urbanized consumption, recreation and leisure for the region’s emerging middle-classes. The imaginative geographies of Singapore articulated by students commonly reference levels of development and technological advancement, particularly in comparison to students’ home cities:

I knew that the infrastructure is really awesome here. That’s something that gets raised in India very often. You know, ‘we make our city like Singapore,’ that’s a very common thing politicians throw out … so when you come to Singapore, it’s just an indication of the fact that Singapore is really far ahead and we have a lot of catching up to do. (Male, PhD Sociology, India)

These discourses of Singapore as an urban and developmental model circulate widely in Asian contexts through knowledge experts, the promotional activities of various government bodies, and the aspirations of regional city leaders (Chua, 2011). They are also likely to reverberate in important ways through the mobilities of international students, generating similar imaginaries of the educational landscape of Singapore and the potential it holds.

Nonetheless, it is significant that most students in our sample saw Singapore and NUS as rising in global hierarchies – an imaginative construct generated through an assemblage including university rankings, Singapore-educated friends and family, strategic marketing through newspapers, promotional events, and school and university visits by bureaucrats and regionally networked academic staff. Singapore’s reputation making is also enabled by networks of entrepreneurs such as education agents and tuition centres in key urban centres which help to prepare students for admission:

I’ve heard of NUS since [I] was in primary or secondary school. Because I’ve a cousin here, [he] got into NUS […]. [So] NUS is good, that’s what I heard. NUS is also quite popular … in my hometown, the students who get into NUS, from the tuition centre [their] names will be published on newspaper, actually it’s for the publicity of the tuition centre. (Female, undergraduate in Statistics, Indonesian)

NUS has adopted an aggressive policy to position itself in university rankings, a move that is increasing the university’s visibility particularly among regional undergraduates: ‘It is well known in Asia, I think it is no. 3’; ‘it seems to be a very elite university.’ The university’s position-taking strategies which include building itself into a research-intensive university has seen Departments reach out to regional postgraduate students outside major urban centres including those who might be excluded from the rarefied circuits of selective feeder schools and national universities.
For Malaysian–Chinese and Indonesian–Chinese students, Singapore represents a space of stability, security, and opportunity where they are able to obtain an education of international standing in relative safety:

Indonesia has got political instability and security [issues]. These things are not very safe for [the Chinese].

Singapore also appeared to exist within a familiar and normative circuit of mobility. It was a site for family reunions; a warehouse of memories, nostalgia, and emotional entanglements that underpin transnational family life. For some, a family history of student mobility shaped the desire to choose Singapore (‘It’s all because of my sister because she was the one who first came here. I [continued] her legacy’). Regional Chinese heritage students also desired Singapore for its place as ‘cultural China,’ less alien, and more familiar than a ‘western’ country:

I think [Singapore] is a better place for Chinese people. If you cannot speak English you can speak Chinese, [you] can survive here. (Male, undergraduate Arts/Maths, China)

The desire and capacity to circulate then unfold in different ways. Much of this mobility is, however, created by the practices of the state in opening up a porous border for desirable migrants, offering scholarships and tuition subsidies to international students. This has been crucial both in the reconfiguration of Singapore from a tourist destination to a ‘Global Schoolhouse,’ and the rescaling of NUS from a nationally oriented institution into a dynamic, highly ranked university partnering with the world’s elite institutions. In this configuration, Singapore society is (re)imagined as a demographic fabric that sustains cultural familiarities and dialogues. The networks of relations binding these elements together may be imagined to be coherent in the eyes of policy-makers, but frictions and fissures are inevitable, limiting the conditions for the realizations of the policy imaginations. We now turn to the limits of desire, specifically the frictions that close in on the difference-engine reducing its transformative potential.

Remaking life and place

As we have noted, migration or mobility conceived in relation to desire is not an individual strategy, rather constituted through social relations, enabled by state practices and driven by imaginaries of place. Equally, international student mobility cannot be understood as ‘the evacuation of a place [home country] and occupation of a different one [Singapore],’ [rather] it is the making and remaking of one’s own life on the scenery of the world’ (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2007, p. 225). In travelling to Singapore for higher education and seeking out alternative opportunities for themselves and their families students can be understood as actively constituting their place in the world. They are not only becoming in circulation terms of their own selves, but shaping the futures of others – a desire to reshape themselves as relational beings.

If Singapore often emerged late in student imaginaries as a potential study destination, and was regularly referred to as the ‘semi-periphery,’ an ‘Asian’ rather than global destination, and a second rather than first choice, students in this research were almost completely united in praising the quality of infrastructure, teachers, technology, and pedagogical techniques, research facilities and global networks at NUS. These experiences
justify their decision to come to Singapore, but they also suggest that the extensive financial and human resources invested by, and in, NUS are beginning to situate Singapore and the university in the imaginations of regional students. Indeed, as noted earlier, students themselves invest in the idea that NUS is a place of excellence, one that will lead to successful futures:

It’s always good to have studied somewhere which is very well-known. [I’m] really hoping to cultivate a network of people (whom) I have worked with in this one year or so. [Because] that’s one of the things people come to good universities for is to tap into their Alumni network because they come in really really handy in ways you don’t expect it to be. (Male, Masters in Computer Science, India)

As this interviewee suggests, education at NUS is potentially transformative, not only of self but also of position in the world. Yet, transformation remains uncertain, tenuous and never fully achieved; it is something that students in this study ‘hoped’ for rather than had already realized. Higher education is not a destination in itself; it carries no guarantees of ‘successful’ transformation of the self but rather hinges on ongoing investments in knowledge acquisition, and social networks that can leverage opportunities in the future.

The value of education at NUS then also relies on the social relations that are cultivated by and for both domestic and international students. A key part of NUS’ aspirations to become a global knowledge enterprise is to ‘bring the world to NUS and NUS to the world,’ through measures including attracting talented foreign students and encouraging inward and outward exchange. Significant effort is invested in securing diversity in these flows and in encouraging interactions between students that might generate forms of network capital for graduates. Undergraduate students staying in halls of residence, for example, reported living with local and international students from different backgrounds and co-curricular activities that presented opportunities to socialize.

At the same time, participants also described relatively circumscribed lives that were tightly oriented around the university campus:

My life is super simple – get up in the morning, come to school, sit in the office, do whatever I need to do, and when it’s evening, I’d go back – very very simple. In China we have this saying called … a life connected by 2 dots and a line, home to work and then back home, it’s just like that. (Male, PhD Computer Science, China)

In such a context, the presence of students from different backgrounds rarely led to deeper friendships (see also Collins, 2010, 2014; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005; Sovic, 2009). More often, interviewees described fleeting encounters with Singaporeans characterised by civility but with little prospects for intimacy (‘when you talk to them they will reply politely [but] its not something you can call as friendship’). Interactions were generally oriented around class activities, raising questions about whether these relationships will influence students’ identifications and future affiliations. While some actively sought to make international friendships (particularly exchange students), in-group formations around nationality, ethnicity and educational background tended to dominate:

[P]eople are very ‘clique-ish’; people tend to group together based on JC and stuff like that. I feel that the attitude is people don’t even recognize who is an international student. They just all automatically assume that I’m Singaporean. But when they find out, they say ‘Oh, you are Malaysian but you speak English so well, you don’t look like a Malaysian.’ It’s very
insulting and irritating; their whole mentality that ‘we are much better than everyone else.’
(Female, B. Arts, Malaysian)

Similarly, many students reported a connection between the attachments they formed with other international students (co-nationals and those from third countries), their use of social media to sustain ties to home, and the difficulty of establishing friendships with local students. This experience of international studentship then also contradicts the desires of some for deeper immersion in Singaporean life and a desire to become other in circulation. Notably, in the few instances where personal relationships flourished, interviewees reported a profound effect on how they viewed themselves, generating new feelings about place or about their orientation to being in the world. More commonly, it was education at NUS and the opportunities presented that led to important changes in their perceptions of themselves:

This is something I’m grateful for because it has shaped my life into something that I’m very comfortable with. It has given me the ability to think in a way that I can never imagine I would be able to. And with an NUS background I believe that they’d be a bunch of opportunities for me to become a global citizen … Citizenship is like a transit for me. When I get a citizenship here, it’s easy for me to go anywhere, then I’ll go. (Female, B.A (Psychology) Vietnam)

Such reflections point to the manner in which student mobilities transform subject positions and orientations within the world. They also point to relatively fragile attachments to place – connections to Singapore that are generated through existing relationships and desires but always open to change. As students and as graduates, participants in this study may become increasingly incorporated into Singapore-based lives, but their trajectories are always already potentially elsewhere.

Crucially, then, it is important to note that few of the students reported residing outside the space of the campus or interacting with non-student Singaporeans. Rather, they lived a sheltered life with little substantive interactions outside of a comfortable and relatively privileged university life: ‘we are in a Hall bubble’; ‘a life connected by two dots and a line.’ The very small number of international students who reported socializing across cultures were keen to highlight their capacities to operate in fluent and appropriately accented English and their shared sensibilities and interests with cosmopolitan neighbours. The spatial constraints then arising from international education not only relate to the particularities of student life but are also influenced by the manner in which students are positioned in Singapore. Desired and portrayed by the Singapore state as development architects, and progenitors of network capital, they nonetheless also elicit competitive anxieties among Singaporeans (Koh, 2003).

Conclusion

Scholarly accounts of international education typically focus on either the experience of students or the strategic aspirations and practices of states and/or universities. Our account addresses both these domains. In this concluding section, we ask what bringing desire into relation with governmentality tells us about their co-constitutiveness in the Singaporean case, and whether this informs our opening question about the making of an Asian regionalism.
This paper has examined the experiences of international students at NUS, an institution that is seeking to re-make itself into a ‘global university,’ with the capabilities to translate Asia for the international order. The Singapore government has for nearly a decade tried to create a desire in, and for, the region in order to establish economic opportunities that bring together citizens and regional subjects to assemble new entrepreneurial and innovative geographies. In this calculus, generating and governing mobility is an important political task for the state, as is generating and governing the knowledge economy and its reputational capital. The Singapore state enrolls regional students into an aspirational space that articulates students’ hopes with the political-economic aspirations of the state, and the desire of NUS to brand itself as a distinctive Asian global university within the broader apparatus of the globalization of higher education.

The task of governing mobility is complex and incomplete. Mobilities can be moulded by states, families, and students, but their effects remain indeterminate, embodied in desires ‘to become in circulation’ and embedded in geopolitical and geo-economic relations and the strategies that seek to influence them. Student desires and the actions of NUS and the Singapore state are co-constitutive – students strategically mobilize investments and programmes such as the Global Schoolhouse in seeking to materialize their desires while NUS and government actors work to shape those desires. Both fashion emergent and lived globalising and regionalizing urban and educational spaces. Student desires are important objects to be governmentalised, while strategy must attend to recalcitrant, shifting, or as yet unformed desires. The idea of an open and emergent desire to become in circulation neatly conceptualizes the fluid space of contestation at stake. It points not only to the significance of international students as subjects of neoliberalising and globalising projects but also to the incompleteness of their governmentalisation. In these ways, bringing desire and governmentality into a theoretical dialogue helps us to see both the incompleteness of governmentalising projects and the strategic framings and contingencies that limit desires ‘to become in circulation.’

The students in this research narrate a dance between institutionalized governmental will and embodied desires that sometimes perform this will but at others resist, transcend, or escape it. We can read this dance at the level of individual student experience, and/or in terms of governmental programmes such as a will to regionalize. One set of unanticipated consequences of Singapore’s longstanding politico-economic history is an ambivalence and disconnection in its citizens towards regional neighbours, including students. Thus, when examined through international education, one of its objects of government, and contrary to political mediations, Singapore’s will to regionalize is an incomplete project. It is yet to be embraced fully by young Singaporeans. Long exposed to competing discursivities that have positioned the region in a different temporal space – one that Singapore no longer occupies, the past – we can speculate that host students are adopting behaviours and beliefs to distance themselves from this temporal past, embodied in the present international student.

Despite being desired by the state, the experiences of international students prompt them to imagine other social destinies and destinations. For some, a destination may be to return home to discharge civic and familial responsibilities and to mobilize opportunities; for others, a third destination such as the USA, Europe or Australia to ‘find’ and further themselves. While acknowledging Singapore’s benefaction, the city-state is experienced
as a space of restrictions, whether in relation to size, work–life balance, or securing their future, intensifying new desires to seek out and be part of other spatialities.

What might this case study indicate then about the role of states in shaping the imagination and its relation to social practice? The Singapore state’s adroit manipulation of images to construct Singapore as an exemplar of modernity and its invitations to regional students to become part of an imagined community of high achieving subjects in a rising Asia speaks to student desires, creating a field of opportunities. In terms of our wider questions about international education strategy, the cosmopolitan city, and the cultivation of a regional socio-economic space, our analysis leads us to make three concluding observations, which we offer as opportunities for further debate. First, having opened up possibilities for individual agents to translate their imaginations into social practices, the Singapore state must confront the possibility that the city-state will function as a ‘non-place’ (Auge, 1995), where students arrive in order to leave. This example of a fractured cosmopolitanism characterized by co-presence and splintered lives and aspirations represents a conceptual challenge to global city literatures and an applied challenge to the Singaporean state. Second, the future shape or stability of any regional educational or wider socio-economic space is unclear, given the absence of a definitive student desire to become Asian in circulation or clearly defined university strategy to be Asian as opposed to global. And third, if imagination and desire are shaped by emotions and embodiment, in addition to the material world of inducements and images, international universities like NUS may need to do more to enrich the student experience. Until then, international student lives experienced as ‘a line between two dots’ or through the lens of a fractured, floating, or tentative cosmopolitanism will continue to present challenges for states seeking to harness their mobility towards productive ends.

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