

issue 2: brenda s. a. yeoh's

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# exclusionary cosmopolitanism



**BIG IDEAS  
EXPLAINED**



# Singapore: a 'cosmopolitan' city?

Singapore is often described as a global **cosmopolitan society**



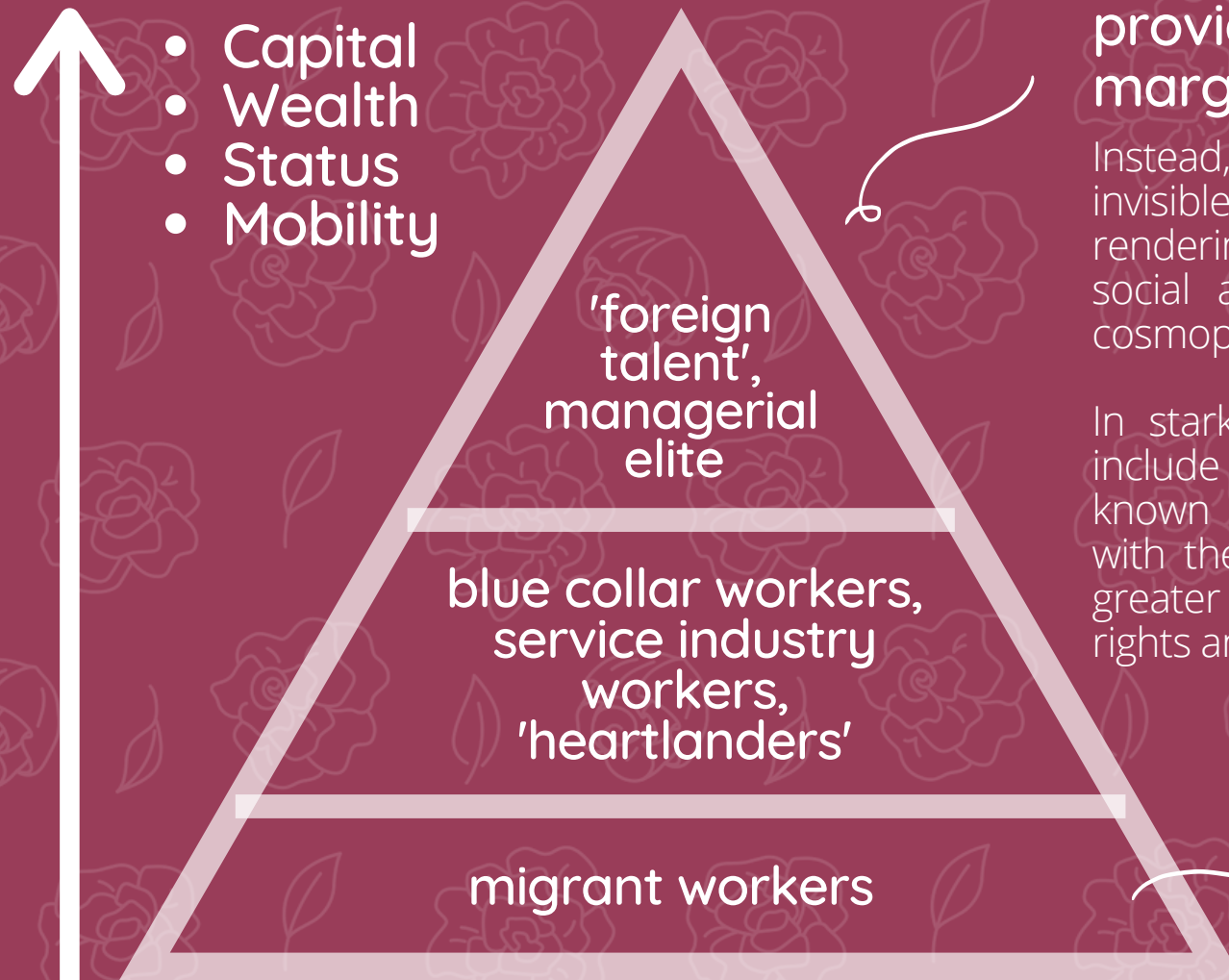
Cosmopolitanism usually alludes to a vision of a globalised multi-racial, multi-lingual, multicultural, equal and affluent society

However, in Brenda Yeoh's critical research, she asserts that this is an incomplete picture of Singapore's socio-political reality. Instead, cosmopolitanism is a political buzzword which **excludes & otherises.**

*This issue is based on research by: Dr Brenda Yeoh, Assoc. Professor at the National University of Singapore. Specialising in fields such as migration studies, gender and transnationalism, she has published critical work on foreign workers and their experiences in Singapore. Her papers on 'cosmopolitanism' scrutinise the government's vision of becoming a 'cosmopolis' and articulate who is really included and excluded in this goal. Yeoh provides a framework to conceptualise Singapore as a neoliberal city with myriads of social and economic inequalities among its residents underneath its shiny 'cosmopolitan' gloss.*



# Dr. Yeoh argues “cosmopolitanism merely articulates the ideology of the neoliberal managerial class”



This “cosmopolitanism” provides little room for our marginalised underclass

Instead, it works to make them invisible and transient – effectively rendering them not legitimate as social and political subjects of the cosmopolitan nation.

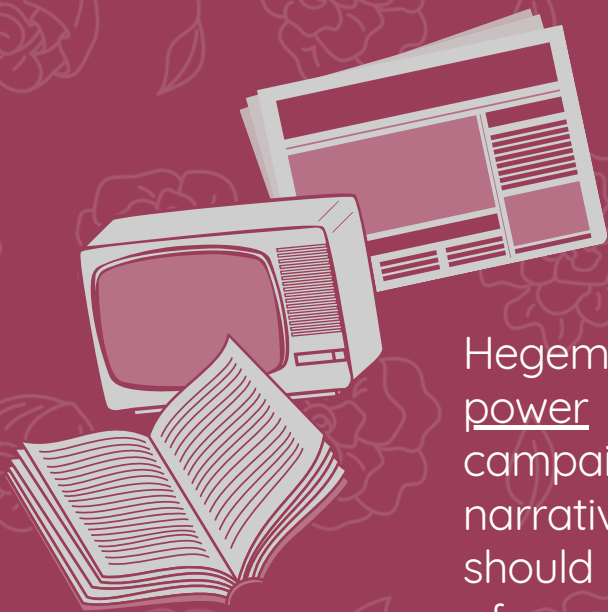
In stark contrast, Singapore vies to include the minority migrant elite known as 'foreign talent'. They along with the local elite enjoy significantly greater labour, economic, and political rights and power.

Limited political and labour rights\*

See Issue 1 on Migrant Deportability for more information

... and that this vision is exclusionary and elitist

... this vision of cosmopolitanism, according to Dr. Yeoh, functions as a form of hegemony that legitimises exclusion and otherisation



Hegemony is empowered by discursive power of the state (control of media, campaigns, education) to shape myths, narratives and redefine who should and should not be included in the state's vision of cosmopolitanism



### Hegemony:

*Social science term referring to the dominance of a set of ideas, ideology (of a ruling elite) within society such that it becomes "common sense" and the accepted cultural norm.*

*Often used as justification for the social, political, and economic status quo as inevitable for every social class, rather than as artificial social constructs that only/unfairly benefit the elite. Other examples of such commonly criticised ideas include 'meritocracy', 'progress', etc.*

According to Dr. Yeoh, this narrative-construction of elitism vs. working class and who is more deserving can be seen in PM Goh Chok Tong's 1999 National Day Rally Speech

'cosmopolitan' Singaporeans speak good English, are international in outlook, skilled in banking, IT and STEM, and able to navigate comfortably anywhere in the world,

**V.S.**

'heartlanders' speak 'Singlish', are parochial in interest and orientation, make their living within the country and play a major role in maintaining core values and social stability



## 'Foreign Talent'

Large incentives to work in Singapore in salary and benefits

May stay in SG for up to a year to look for employment

Able to marry Singaporeans or PRs, encouraged to lay down roots

Possibility for PR/citizenship

According to Dr. Yeoh, this can also be observed in the policies and constraints faced by migrant workers v.s. 'foreign talent'



## 'Migrant Worker'

Heavy recruitment fees and debts in order to secure work

Immigration status tied strictly to current employment

Can not marry Singaporeans or PRs, can not bring dependents

No path to PR/Citizenship



## With the recent COVID-19 crisis...

Debate has again been reignited over the sustainability and ethics of our existing political economic models and its unfair treatment of our low-wage, low-skilled migrant labour.

# not just a singaporean problem...



**Neoliberal globalisation** refers to the domination of economic logic in everyday life, relationships, business practice, and political decision-making. This often leads to an erosion of communal values and the exploitation of bodies and resources of disempowered peoples to benefit the global elite.

Such political-economic tensions are deeply felt across the world. From the Arab Spring to the Yellow Vest movement in France, people are increasingly unhappy over the perceived exclusionary character of the global political economy, and the sheer disparities between the global elite and the "99%".

Critics have also termed this "neocolonialism", where the modern global political economy resembles the colonial extraction of wealth from the global south under the the unfair dynamic and logic of economic power.

This elitist vision of cosmopolitanism is intrinsically built upon the exclusionary nature of neoliberal globalisation around the world



- 1 it prioritises the upward mobility and capital accumulation of the 1%
- 2 at the cost of exploiting the labour of migrant workers and 'heartlanders'



# what's the alternative?

Dr. Yeoh proposes a  
'sideways  
cosmopolitanism'

It is a reimagined system that moves away from discourses and projects that serve only society's elite. This system also includes a transformation of policies and social values that reinforces the disparity between the elite and the working class.



*For decades, groups such as HOME and TWC2 have advocated for improved labour rights of migrant workers. In recent years, more ground-up groups such as Migrants Workers Singapore and SG Migrant Stories have also emerged. The work of humanising migrant worker issues is an important step towards meaningful 'sideways cosmopolitanism'. However, these groups often face difficulties in civic advocacy under the prevailing political climate that inhibits such forms of active citizenry*

Such cosmopolitanism also involves a deep systemic change in our approaches towards governance, with a real focus towards equal, co-creation between the state, civil society, and citizens

# what can we learn from this?

1

## question the ideology behind policy

As Singaporeans, we like to pride ourselves as non-ideological and pragmatic. However, much of our public governance and political economy is precisely built upon narratives and ideological assumptions that may not hold up to empirical research and evidenced-based policymaking.

2

## unfairness is not 'inevitable'

They are the result of political-economic constructions by state policy based on and justified by ideology and assumptions. We can rethink our political economic models, and we should be open to ideas of reform, innovation, and greater equality.

3

## active citizenry and democratic participation needs to be supported

As Singapore society becomes more complex, we will require broad-based, horizontal collaborative governance, rather than elitist, top-down governance. in order to ensure that no one is left out.



# food for thought

Do you agree with Dr. Yeoh's assessment of Singapore's cosmopolitanism? Are there elements that apply to your own experiences?

Do you think such "exclusionary cosmopolitanism" is an inevitable reality of life in Singapore?

What policy changes would be meaningful in promoting an equitable cosmopolitanism?

What would it mean to be an active 'sideways cosmopolitan'?

# glossary of terms

**political economy** economic systems and their intertwined relationship with laws and governance

**neoliberalism** the domination and overreach of economic logic in everyday life and relationships, business practice, and political decision-making. This often leads to an erosion of ethical and communal values.

**otherisation** the process of designating individuals or groups of individuals as alien to and outside of the social centre, excluding them socially and politically.

**upwards cosmopolitanism** an elitist and exclusionary system that skews benefits and privileges towards the upper portion of society, while exploiting those at the lower portion, therefore reinforcing this social hierarchy.

# Recommended readings:

Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). "Migrant Wives in Distress: issues facing non-resident women married to Singaporean men," 1-19, 2020.

Huang, Shirlena, & Yeoh, Brenda S. A. "The difference gender makes: State policy and contract migrant workers in Singapore" in Asian and Pacific Migration Journal, Vol. 12, No. 1-2, 75-97, 2003.

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Thian, Wen Li. "How to be Singaporean: Becoming global national citizens and the national dimension in cosmopolitan openness" in Globalisation, Societies and Education, Vol. 17, No. 4, 500-515, 2019.

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2. <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/foreign-worker-levy/what-is-the-foreign-worker-levy>
3. [https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/docs/default-source/budget\\_2020/download/pdf/annexb2.pdf](https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/docs/default-source/budget_2020/download/pdf/annexb2.pdf)

### Academic sources:

1. Yeoh, Brenda S. A.. "Cosmopolitanism and its Exclusions in Singapore" in Urban Studies, Vol. 41, No. 12, 2431-2445, November 2004.
2. Yeoh, Brenda S. A. "'Upwards' or 'Sideways' cosmopolitanism? Talent/labour/marriage migrations in the globalising city-state of Singapore" in Migration Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1, 96-116, 2013.

Much of Singaporean academia remains inaccessible to the public due to jargon or paywalls, thus impacting citizen participation in policy conversations and civic engagement. This issue is part of an infographic project by CAPE to digest and repackage theories, knowledge, and research by our homegrown academics for the Singaporean public.



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