

Cheap Labour Reserves & the Growth of Cities: Undocumented Migrant Workers in Macau

Amy Sim & Vivienne Wee

Abstract

This paper presents new research findings on undocumented Indonesian migrant workers in Macau, about whom no previous study exists. Critical analysis explicates the dovetailing arrangements between public and private sector interests that are systemically creating undocumented labour migration flows and shows how these arrangements are structurally inherent in the mutual competitiveness of globalising nodes of wealth creation. Undocumented migration cheapens production costs and results in a flexible black market of vulnerable, right-less and exploited workers. Contrary to illusions of an urbanizing Asia with expanding spaces for civil liberties, the development of globally competitive mega-cities, built and supported by low-skilled migrant workers, rests on a global underclass of transient workers, who bear the human costs of transience and labour flexibility, enabling mega-cities to externalise such costs and enhancing their global competitiveness.

In this paper we analyse the vulnerabilities of undocumented Indonesian workers in the context of Macau's rapid economic development as an aspiring mega-city. The Macau government's laissez-faire tolerance of such workers is grounded in the need for a particular type of human labour, that is abundant, cheap, marginal and disposable, fueling rapid growth. Furthermore, the outflow of Indonesian migrant workers to Macau is linked to Hong Kong's exclusionary Immigration policies, which aim at extricating surplus migrant labour. Meanwhile, the Indonesian government refuses responsibility for its migrant workers in Macau on the grounds that Macau is not recognised as an official destination, thereby denying its own role as a structural producer of such labour. The paper shows how public and private interests motivate increasing numbers of migrants to become undocumented overstayers in Macau, as they try to avoid oppressive practices in labour migration from Indonesia and the exclusionary policies of Hong Kong.
