



‘This country, law very strong’: Securitization beyond the border in the everyday lives of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore

Shona Loong

Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, 1 Arts Link, Kent Ridge, Singapore 117570, Singapore



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Securitization
Migrant workers
Singapore
Biopolitics
The everyday

ABSTRACT

While work on the securitization of migration has often held borders to be the site at which state power is most keenly felt, this paper draws on static and walking interviews with Bangladeshi male migrant workers in Singapore to understand their everyday experiences of the securitization within state territory. These narratives demonstrate how the Little India district in Singapore has been scripted as an exceptionally problematic space associated with dangerous migrant bodies, within which Bangladeshi migrants encounter state power in a variety of guises, ranging from police patrols to video surveillance technologies. They also reveal how Bangladeshi migrants continually struggle against these state-led scripts of insecurity, even if their sojourn in Singaporean territory is circumscribed by a condition of permanent temporariness. Through this discussion, the securitization of migration is conceptualized as an unfinished project that is often exerted unevenly and paradoxically within state territory. The security-migration nexus should also not only be understood with recourse to bodies deemed “illegal” and “unwanted”—such as asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants—but should also account for temporary labour migrants who have been legally admitted into state territory, whose labour power is central to the host state’s economy but who are disallowed from ever belonging within the countries they work in.

1. Introduction: the “Little India Riot”

On 8 December 2013, 33-year-old Indian national Sakthivel Kumaravelu was run over by a bus in Singapore’s Little India district, a heritage area historically associated with Singapore’s ethnic Indian community, where tens of thousands of Bangladeshi and Indian male migrant workers congregate on Sunday evenings. Kumaravelu’s instantaneous death was reported to cause more than 400 of these South Asian men in the vicinity to react violently (COI, 2014). By the next morning, a complete alcohol ban was imposed on Little India. Investigations conducted by a committee convened by the state declared that effective responses to the “riot” must be directed towards “enhanc[ing] the security” of Little India as a “congregation location for foreign workers” (COI, 2014: 64).

These state responses bring together three different spaces. For one, the *precise spot* at which the riot occurred was discursively rescaled to subject the *whole of Little India* to emergency responses. These state-led responses, targeted at “maintain[ing] the safety and security of [Singaporean] society” (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2014) and territory *as a whole* were therefore directed only towards a select portion of state territory associated with South Asian migrant men. In addition, state narratives tend to portray Little India as a homogeneous area utilized by

Singapore’s South Asian migrant population. This is not the case. The “Little India Riot” occurred in the section of Little India frequented by Indian workers; the 160,000 Bangladeshi citizens working in Singapore (Aw, 2016) do not see themselves or their compatriots as implicated in the riot, but find themselves subject to state interventions following the incident as they frequent the area. State responses to the Little India Riot therefore brought into sharp relief the ways in which Little India has often been associated with the presence of a putatively monolithic group of disorderly South Asian male migrant bodies. Moreover, interventions into this area are not new, but build on a longer—and quieter—history. Local NGO Transient Workers Count Too has, for one, suggested that migrants have long been managed as threats to state security as they traverse the area through extraordinarily frequent police patrols and littering law enforcement (TWC2, 2012; 2015). While the policing of migrant bodies certainly occurs in other spaces associated with low-wage migrants in Singapore (see Kitiarsa, 2014 on Thai workmen; Yeoh and Huang, 1998 on female domestic workers), I have chosen to focus on Little India because of its recent associations with the “Little India Riot”.

Drawing on the narratives of ten Bangladeshi men, this paper traces the ways in which temporary Bangladeshi labour migrants encounter state power as they traverse Little India. It makes two main

E-mail address: shonalooong@u.nus.edu.

contributions to a body of literature about the securitization of migration that foregrounds how non-citizen bodies are governed as threats to national security (e.g. Bigo, 2008; Huysmans, 2006). Firstly, by focusing on the act of deportation, literature on the securitization of migration often presupposes a clear split between migrants who belong in state territory, and migrants who do not (usually undocumented migrants and asylum seekers). However, the experiences of Bangladeshi migrants show that securitization works through the bodies of “differentially excluded” migrants that are legally “incorporated into certain areas of society (above all the labour market) but denied access to others (such as welfare systems, citizenship and political participation)” (Castles, 1995, page 294). I argue that although these regular migrants are legally admitted into state territory on temporary work-permits, they continue to be managed as security threats. The securitization of migration must therefore be understood as a strategy imposed *within* the host state’s territory, and not just at its borders. Secondly, I contend that the securitization of migration is best understood as a practice woven into the everyday lives of migrant workers (see Mitchell, 1991; Mountz, 2003; Painter, 2006). A focus on the everyday also reveals how migrants do not remain passive in the face of state policies that script them as unruly security threats, but that they are able to skillfully navigate the restrictions imposed on the spaces they inhabit.

This paper begins by reviewing literature on the securitization of migration, noting a turn towards the embodied aspects of security. The following section discusses Foucault and de Certeau as key theorists that have grappled with how power is exercised and negotiated in everyday life. Foucault’s work on biopower provides insight into how state securitization strategies are targeted at both individual migrant bodies and a generalized population of migrant workers, while his work on the security *dispositif* allows for an understanding of how state power works through the regulation of migrant workers’ mobilities within state territory are regulated. Whereas Foucault allows me to come to grips with the exercise of state power, I draw on de Certeau to show how subjects maneuver within the constraints of state-led securitization strategies to further their own ends. After discussing the static and walking interviews utilized for this study and providing some background information on migrant workers in Singapore, I catalogue Bangladeshi migrants’ encounters with state power in Little India. By showing how state securitization strategies are targeted both at migrant workers as a whole (what Foucault terms *bio-politics*) and at individual migrant bodies (or *anatomo-politics*), I argue that the securitization of migration impinges on the mobilities of migrants within state territory, and not just their ability to traverse state borders. In Little India, a space deemed particularly “dangerous” and “disorderly” for its association with migrant bodies, the state works through various proxies (e.g. video cameras, state policemen, auxiliary policemen, and urban architecture) to make its presence felt in the everyday lives of work-permit holders. Thereafter, drawing on de Certeau, I turn to migrants’ negotiations of state power by way of spatial practices and spatial stories. Spatial practices refer to how migrants confound state power through their bodies, while spatial stories refer to how migrants construct their own identities as oppositional to the state’s construction of them as security threats and mere laboring bodies. The paper closes by highlighting some wider implications of these findings.

2. Securitizing migration

Security and migration are “interlinked and immutable” in two ways: “people move because of some threat to security or to improve their security. In doing so, they are often seen as a threat to the security of the receiving population” (Graham, 2000, page 186). A substantial body of work on the securitization of migration has shown how states invoke tropes of fear, unease and threat to legitimize the exclusion and/or management of migrant bodies (e.g. Guild, 2009). Two interrelated lines of inquiry can be detected here. Firstly, earlier work on the securitization of migration extends the basic premises of securitization

theory espoused by the Copenhagen School of security studies (see Buzan et al., 1998; Huysmans, 1998; Wæver, 1995) to reveal how speech-acts are deployed to position migrants as existential threats to the nation-state (e.g. Huysmans, 2006). Authors writing in this mode were keen to push critical security studies beyond its national-scale preoccupation with deconstructing military strategy, towards the consideration of various ‘non-traditional’ insecurities, including the movement of people across international borders. Didier Bigo (2008), for instance, shows how control of the EU’s external borders occurs through laws on terrorism and organized crime once considered the province of internal security, as well as sophisticated databases that compile profiles of people deemed likely to commit a crime (see also Huysmans, 2000). Together, these strategies allow migrants to be governed according to an overarching “governmentality of unease” by which migrant movements are regulated according to the degree of risk they pose to the security of host societies (Bigo, 2008, page 6).

While this set of works deals with security on a trans- or supranational scale, a second, more recent approach to the securitization of migration deals primarily with individual bodies. Securitization, here, is conceptualized as a “scattered process” enacted in accordance with calculations of risk and probability (Huysmans, 2011, page 377; Müller, 2011), through which migrant bodies are regulated as threats through the continuous unfolding of practices. For instance, Topak (2014) shows how the most extreme effects of the securitization of migration are materialized along the Greece-Turkey borderzone as practices of pushback leave migrants to drown in the Aegean sea (for similar perspective on the US-Mexico border, see Doty, 2011). Another securitization strategy that hinges on the bodies of migrants is biometric risk profiling that breaks the subject up into categories (e.g. ‘Arab’, ‘Muslim’, ‘woman’) associated with varying degrees of risk, in order to determine their admissibility into state territory (Amoore, 2006). This approach to the securitization of migration complements recent shifts in geographies of security. Whereas the concept of security was once the province of critical geopolitics scholars interested in the global geopolitical order (e.g. Dalby, 2003; Ingram and Dodds, 2009; Philo, 2012, page 2) has argued that geographers should attend how security plays into *both* the “seemingly more mundane matters of ‘small-s’ security” and the “geopolitical machinations” associated with ‘big-S’ security. Geographers have responded to this call by attending to security as an embodied feeling, rather than a state-led script (e.g. Bondi, 2014). They have also extended their methodological toolkit beyond analyses of official policy papers, to include analyses of popular and literary texts (e.g. Noxolo 2014; Fluri, 2014) and psychogeographic walks (e.g. Paasche and Sidaway, 2010). Still, despite a turn towards studying security as it is embodied, little has been written on how the ‘securitized’ speak back to state power. Hence, following Staeheli and Nagel (2008), I ask: how might our conception of the security-migration nexus be challenged by drawing insights from migrants’ experiences of security?

In addition, studies of the security-migration nexus have often centred on foreign bodies deemed “illegal” and “unwanted”; the “waste [s] of globalization” that must be disposed of by states keen to assert control over their own territory (Bauman, 2004: 58). As a result, borders have emerged as a primary site of analysis. Studies of the US often examine how discourses about 9/11 have been used to legitimize heightened border controls (e.g. Amoore, 2006; Müller, 2004), while similar themes explored in the European context argue that the EU’s enlargement and the formation of the Schengen Area have prompted the EU to harden its external boundaries (e.g. Huysmans, 2006; van Houtum, 2010). Conceptualizations of the border as devolved (Coleman, 2009), dispersed (Walters, 2006), and embodied (Amoore and Hall, 2009) continue to be wedded to a notion of security premised on the question of who is expelled from state territory and how. De Genova (2002, page 439) draws attention away from the act of deportation and toward the ways in which a ‘palpable sense of deportability’ is maintained by states to produce its undocumented migrant workforce as a vulnerable and tractable commodity (see also Walters,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7353676>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7353676>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)