Banalities of Evil

Vanessa Koh
Unviersity of Pennsylvania
Banalities of Evil
**Banalities of Evil**

Vanessa Koh

During Singapore’s initial years of independence that followed a period of British colonization and a contentious split from Malaysia, the country suffered from high unemployment rates, severe housing shortages, and great political instability (Chua 1995: 17-18). In those early, trying years, Singapore’s political leaders emphasized the pressing need for the nation to integrate itself with the global economy. In a 1972 speech to the Singapore Press Club, Foreign Minister Rajaratnam declared that the nation-state’s survival would hinge on its ability to transform itself into a ‘global city’, with the world as its hinterland (Rajaratnam 1987: 225). In Rajaratnam’s eyes, Singapore had to be DUHOHYDQWDQGLQGLVSHQVDEOH¿QDQFLDOFHQWUHZLWKLQWKHLQWHUQDWLRQDO¿QDQFLDOQHWZRUN+HQJ. Thus, in an effort to integrate its economy with the larger, global economy, Singapore embarked on an export-oriented, foreign direct investment-heavy strategy. To attract foreign investors required WREXLOGXSPDQXIDFWXULQJDQG¿QDQFLDOVHFWRUV in Singapore, the government formed the Economic Development Board (EDB: Our History). The EDB has since created ‘free-trade zones’, ‘export processing zones’, in addition to tax incentives to attract foreign investment (ibid).

Singapore has since transformed into what one would call a global city—an attractive home to lucrative industries such as financial services, technology, big pharma, etc (Brash 2011: 127). Foreign direct investment now accounts for approximately 22% of Singapore’s GDP. It is thereby unsurprising that there is an estimated 7000 multi-national corporations in Singapore, and 59% of Fortune 500 companies have chosen to locate their regional headquarters in Singapore (Tan 2014).

However, as Chad Haines’ work on Dubai indicates, the creation of a highly desired, cosmopolitan city often depends on the exploitation of the vulnerable. Like Dubai, Singapore’s frenzied construction of glitzy buildings is “dependent on migrants of all classes, [who are] not all equally welcome” (Haines 2011: 176). It is the “corralling of cheap, migrant labour that makes possible the construction of the city” (Roy 2011: 321). In Singapore alone, there are approximately 993, 900 foreign workers (excluding domestic workers) on temporary work permits who make up a fifth of the city’s population (Ministry of Manpower 2015). These are the men who are tasked to do the grunt work of constructing offices for banks and other corporations, apartment complexes for locals and expats, and the endless parade of shopping malls for the consumption of residents and tourists alike.

Utilizing 3 months of ethnographic fieldwork at a local Singaporean NGO, called Healthserve, this paper examines the experiences of injured migrant workers as they go through the Singaporean government’s injury compensation process. In this paper, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the Singaporean government’s compensation policies. Instead of viewing these policies as acts of deliberate evil that are aimed at making workers’ lives more difficult, I am taking Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil” seriously in order to demonstrate that “evil” can in fact come in many forms. The government’s complicity should be more accurately characterized as mundane forms of “evil” that end up having profoundly grim consequences for migrant workers.

**Bureaucratic Banality**

Xu ZhenBing is a Chinese steel welder for a Singaporean construction company. After experiencing severe pain in his wrist, ZhenBing told his boss that he may not be able to finish his work (cutting, grinding, and welding together steel), and requested for another worker to help him. His boss, however, told him that all the other workers had their own work to do, and if ZhenBing did not want to do his job, he ought to quit. Afraid of losing his job, ZhenBing continued putting in long hours. He was finally able to convince his boss to take him to a private clinic1 when the pain became unbearable.
four days later. The doctor would refer him to a specialist center that subsequently recommended that ZhenBing undergo an operation for the fracture in his wrist as soon as possible in order to maximize odds of a full recovery.

Unfortunately, the doctor refused to operate on ZhenBing without authorization from his employer. The fear was that ZhenBing would not be able to pay for the operation, and the hospital would therefore have to bear the cost. As such, the doctor requested that ZhenBing return with a letter of authorization from his boss, stipulating that the company would bear all medical costs. Lastly, ZhenBing was warned that his injury was a time-sensitive one. “If I didn’t go for it [surgery] soon,” he tells me, “the doctor said I may not be able to recover.” Alas, ZhenBing’s boss refused to pay for the operation, even though he was technically mandated by Singapore’s Employment Act to do so (Singapore Statutes Online 2015). His boss’ excuse was that the procedure was unnecessary. “He [boss] told me to just take pain-killers. I was supposed to hope that my wrist would heal over time.” After a few weeks of back and forth, ZhenBing was told that his work permit, which was going to expire in two months’ time, would not be renewed. As ZhenBing’s wrist prevented him from working for the remaining time left on his existing contract, he was without a job. Shaking his head, he tells me, “I don’t know if he’s firing me because I wasn’t helping him make money [due to the wrist injury] or because he just didn’t want to deal with me [asking him to pay for surgery] anymore. Probably both.”

Instead of authorizing ZhenBing’s surgery, his boss requested that ZhenBing sign an agreement that would absolve the company from all responsibility. The agreement (written in Mandarin) reads:

---

I, Xu ZhenBing have requested to be treated for my wrist injury in Singapore. Because the injury was not work related, I undertake to bear all medical expenses (including doctors’ consultation fees, surgical fees, cost of medication, hospitalization fees, physical therapy as well as any treatment thereafter etc), not covered by the company’s medical insurance. These expenses have nothing to do with the company. As I am unable to work like a normal worker, the company will arrange for paid leave and nothing more, as per Singapore’s Labour Law. Once my work permit expires, I will return to my home country.

Appalled by his boss’ dishonesty, gall, and lack of appreciation, ZhenBing refused to sign the agreement. “Where else could the injury have occurred? I spend 14 hours a day working for him. I go home to eat and sleep. I wake up the next day and [the cycle] repeats.” I asked ZhenBing if the company’s medical insurance would cover the operation, and he told me that it wouldn’t. The surgery would be far too costly. It was precisely this reason that his employer refused to sign off on the operation, as he would have to pay out of pocket. Desperate for a remedy of some sort, ZhenBing decided to file a work injury claim with MOM. He hoped that the government would force his boss to pay for the operation.

The bureaucratic process, unfortunately, is not a kind one for those with time-sensitive predicaments. During the weeks following his report, ZhenBing met with an MOM officer twice. “The first time was to explain my situation. She [the officer] looked very harassed... I can relate. She told me that I should come back in a week. I waited for 2 weeks, but there was still no news. After I chased her, she set up another meeting just to tell me that she needed more time. She said, ‘There are so many workers. What can I do?’ I started to get really nervous because I couldn’t wait.” And yet,
ZhenBing had no choice but to wait. As Javier Auyero has argued, the frustration that the vulnerable experience while they wait for remedies through the bureaucratic process “embod[ies] the everyday reconstruction of political domination” (2012: 157). The mundane bureaucracy that we have normalized to be “in the order of things” has wildly different consequences for different people (Auyero 2012: 157).

In ZhenBing’s case, the waiting period of a month’s time had profound implications. After looking at new X-Ray scans a month later, his doctor informed him that there would be no point in operating—the window of possibility for a full recovery had passed. ZhenBing could only try to manage and alleviate the pain with medication. But he would not be able to work as a welder anymore. The most he could hope for was a generous compensation package from the government. And even that would take time.

My initial reaction to ZhenBing’s account was that of rage and disgust; I cursed both his employer and the Ministry of Manpower for being so (vile; disgusting; evil). And yet, as I continued speaking to ZhenBing, he surprised me with an immense amount of grace and profundity in the face of a terrible situation: “Look, they [MOM officers] aren’t out to get me. The process is slow and I’m sadly its collateral damage.” ZhenBing was not wrong. Such is the “banality of evil” in the bureaucratic process that Hannah Arendt once described in her account of Eichmann’s horrific crimes (Arendt 1964). To Arendt, Eichmann indeed played an instrumental part in carrying out unspeakable crimes against Jews, but he did this neither out of anti-Semitism nor wilful malice, but out of a more prosaic reason: bureaucratic obedience. I thus take up this concept to demonstrate how it would be inaccurate to characterize the bureaucrats in question as diabolical masterminds who were vindictively trying to destroy ZhenBing’s life. In truth, they were overworked government servants who followed the paperwork-heavy process and failed to provide ZhenBing with a timely remedy. As Akhil Gupta has argued, “writing itself needs to be seen as the central activity of bureaucracies [because] writing... does not merely record what happened but is the main activity that takes place in bureaucratic work... When a bureaucrat says that he will take care of something, it means he will make the appropriate notations on a file and pass it forward” (Gupta 2012: 149-150). This was indeed true of ZhenBing’s case, as the final assessment report he received 2.5 months later contained a copy of the MOM officer’s communications with other bureaucrats. There were instructions for one officer to go to ZhenBing’s (former) workplace to interview his boss, and for another to visit ZhenBing’s doctor to verify the facts of his medical condition. One can already imagine how much coordination it would take for these meetings to materialize, let alone the time it would take for the case to be processed and approved by a supervisor overseeing the process. It is thus important that we “attend carefully to the precise circumstances under which [bureaucratic] writing collaborates with structural violence” (Gupta 2012: 188). In ZhenBing’s case, MOM officers’ adherence to the tedious banality of bureaucratic customs ended up costing him his wrist.

This is not to say that the state (with its bureaucrats) is free from responsibility. On the contrary, it is in fact very much part of the process that ended up punishing ZhenBing—albeit inadvertently. I will thus extend the Arendtian concept of the ‘banality of evil’ (from that of obedience) to include banal acts of inaction that stem from indifference/wilful ignorance. As Akhil Gupta tells us, it is important for us to pay attention to examples of state indifference in order to understand structural violence that is at work (2012). The next section will thereby use the Work Injury Compensation handbook to demonstrate how its existence actually bolsters the Singaporean government’s inaction towards addressing the larger, structural problem of workers being exploited by employers, and inevitably ends up contributing to these imbalances in power.
Interlude

On a typically hot afternoon, I took the MRT (Singapore’s subway system) to the Ministry of Manpower’s (MOM) Services Centre on Bendemeer Road. I had previously called several different numbers on MOM’s website, but was greeted with a combination of confusion and hesitation. In the end, the result was the same: every single officer I called told me that “all the information” I could possibly need was already published on their website. One officer in the Communications department—Jamie Tan—even replied to my email to say that I “may wish to refer to the speech made by Minister Tan Chuan-Jin at the International Migrants Day celebration event in December 2014. In particular, paragraphs two and seventeen where Minister Tan elaborated at length on appreciating the contributions of foreign workers.” Frustrated but still not completely deterred, I made the last-ditch effort of going to MOM directly. There was a large outdoor (but still roofed) hall where approximately 30 male, migrant workers sat, as they waited for their respective appointments with MOM officers. Past that hall was an air-conditioned space where a line had formed, as everyone—from migrant workers to locals—waited to speak to the lone officer standing at the head of the line. The officer was there to answer “general questions.” When it was finally my turn, the officer sighed at my question, and handed me a ‘Work Injury Compensation Act: A Guide’ pamphlet. “Look, the media likes to sensationalize everything,” she tells me in Mandarin, “They only focus on workers with accidents—what about the happy workers? Read this. You’ll see that we have a comprehensive system that covers all bases [my emphasis]. There’s also a handbook on other problems like salary claims. Do you want that one too?” Seeing the long line that had formed behind me, I decided not to argue with her and took both the pamphlets before leaving.

Government of InAction

About one month into my fieldwork, I met Kashem, an employee of Hiap Yick

Construction, a subcontractor that supplied workers to Ssangyong Engineering, the main contractor for Singapore’s (in)famously lavish Marina Bay Sands casino. Kashem came to Healthserve fairly regularly and every time he left, I noticed Healthserve’s social workers speaking about the details of his case in rather hushed tones. I eventually found out that he had filed a Work Injury Compensation claim for two separate injuries: a growth in his throat and multiple toe fractures. He was also seeking reimbursement for his medical expenses, as he had used up his own savings to pay for treatment after his boss had refused to pay up. On November 18th, 2014, Kashem and a few other workers accompanied their boss to a construction worksite. As they were leaving, his boss started driving without looking to see if all the workers had actually climbed into the back of the truck. Kashem had only gotten one foot into the truck, before he fell backwards, as the truck started moving. In what followed to be a fairly gruesome turn out of events, his boss ended up running over Kashem’s right foot by accident. “[There was] blood everywhere. He took me [to] see [the] company doctor. Doctor gave painkiller[s],” Kashem tells me. One day after the accident, Kashem decided to go to the hospital, as he was still in pain. The doctor at Tan Tock Seng hospital took him in for an X-Ray and gave him a walking cast. Whilst at the hospital, Kashem decided to ask the doctor to take a look at his throat, as he had been experiencing a persistent discomfort for quite a few months now. The doctor then identified the lump in his throat, and conjectured that it was “probably due to poisonous welding fumes” that Kashem had been exposed to for years now. Kashem had to make 5 trips to the hospital over a period of 3 months.

2 The MOM officer used the phrase “...” . This translates directly to accidents in English, but a more accurate way of putting it would be ‘to meet with a mishap’.
Like ZhenBing, he was subsequently fired due to his lack of ‘productivity’, and was waiting for his injury compensation claim with MOM to be processed.

As a Healthserve employee once told me, “No one likes injured workers.”

I ended up accompanying Kashem to one of his mediation meetings with an MOM officer after Healthserve had officially filed the claim with the government. Kashem hoped that my proficiency in Mandarin and English, along with my Chinese countenance, would make the officer more sympathetic to his plight. I, in turn, leaped at the opportunity in hopes that I would be able to speak to a bureaucrat at length. However, the case officer, a Singaporean Chinese man, was far from impressed, and refused to let me sit in on the mediation. As Kashem and the officer emerged from the room half an hour later—both looking frustrated—I hurriedly explained the situation in fear that there may have been some form of a communication breakdown. The case officer stared at me in surprise: “Who are you?” After brief introductions were made, he proceeded to lecture me about the state of the economy. “You study in America, right? You should know that China is having a slow down. Of course our economy is also affected. Employers are also suffering—they have to live too.” While I stood in silence, unsure or what to do or say, he continued, “Look, this man [Kashem] will get back his money (the hospital fees). We’ll also give him some compensation for his injuries. That’s why we have a system! Yes, there are some bad companies out there, but what can we do? You [points to the notebook and pen in my hand] shouldn’t forget that our economy needs them. Who else is going to help us build these buildings? Those ang mohs (white people) respect my Singaporean passport because we are modern. We can’t go back.” The “system,” as I have been told, does exist, and will provide the worker will some sort of relief eventually. But at the same time, it is clear that the Ministry has no intention to pursue the case past the point of furnishing Kashem with a sum of money in order to get him to go away. There is no indication of an attempt to sanction dishonest bosses in order to prevent such an occurrence from happening again. Instead, the priority is clearly to maintain Singapore’s brand and reputation as a successful, global, worlding city that, like Dubai, “attracts an array of investors” due to its promise of wealth and upward mobility (Haines 2011:171). The MOM officer’s words also reflect the “powerful story of modernity,” that Timothy Mitchell argued has everything to do with “temporality” (Mitchell in Roy 2011: 328). To the officer, his Singaporean passport that grants him visa-free access to most countries in the world and respect from ang mohs is a representation of achieving modernity, and he cannot “go back.” Singapore, with its revered reputation as a global city and its attendant skyscrapers, cannot possibly regress. It is for this very reason that the government is not terribly invested in protecting migrant workers, at least not when it comes at the risk of damaging relations with foreign companies that have come to set up shop in Singapore. Ananya Roy has written about “worlding” as a form of “speculative urbanism,” that involves not just “information technology, finance capital and real-estate development, but also

3 Using Marx, David Harvey has argued that “the capitalist form of accumulation rests upon a certain violence which the capitalist class inflicts upon labour” (1989: 103). Labourers have to “trade the commodity they have [their labour]” in order to accumulate capital, and a labourer is only seen as productive if s/he is a source of additional wealth to the capitalist to the extent that s/he is capable of performing what Marx has titled ‘surplus-labour’. But these labourers are also “in competition with each other for employment while the work process is under the command of the capitalist” (Harvey 1989: 103). It is clear, then, that the ball is in the court of the “capitalist.” This is especially salient in the context of Singapore as there is no shortage of migrant workers who are in need of a construction job.

4 The NGO employee in question was referring not just to bosses, but also to the Healthserve employees. I discovered that Healthserve’s social workers often treated migrant workers with a degree of wariness and distrust.
the anticipatory politics of residents and transients, citizens and migrants” (2011: 313). In this case, the government anticipates the necessity (and practicality) of “developing a reflexive attitude toward confronting a society in flux”: It is far more beneficial to the state to somewhat placate wronged workers with meager sums of money than it is to blacklist and punish exploitative companies (Ong and Zhang 2008: 16). The action of inaction towards fixing a structural problem is not one that maliciously plans to destroy workers’ lives, but is instead a mundane, self-interested policy of non-policy that conveniently masks the continuous, systemic exploitation of poor migrant workers. The banality of the state’s inaction serves as a grim reminder that harm does not always occur in overtly condemnable forms. They can in fact exist in the quietest of ways that often elide our attention.

Annex B: Table of Age Multiplying Factor (Cont’d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of employee at next birthday after the accident</th>
<th>Permanent Incapacity</th>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Age of employee at next birthday after the accident</th>
<th>Permanent Incapacity</th>
<th>Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>66+</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(De)Humanization through Mundane Scientific Formulas

True to the MOM officer’s word, Kashem did receive a notice of assessment of compensation. However, it took 4 months for MOM to process the claim. His “claim [was] found valid,” and he was subsequently compensated with SGD 5607.72. This amount was calculated according to the following formula: % of Permanent Incapacity x Average Monthly Earnings x Multiplying Factor (Ministry of Manpower WICA Handbook). Kashem was found to have a ‘permanent incapacity’ of 3%, his average monthly salary was $1,416.09, and his multiplying factor was 132. I will first tackle the ‘science’ behind the ‘multiplying factor’ before proceeding to the technical details of one’s “permanent incapacity.” The multiplying factor is decided by one’s age; the older a worker, the lower his ‘multiplying factor’ will be. The idea is that an older worker will have lost less than a younger counterpart, as the younger person is assumed to have more years of productivity left in him. Below is a chart from Page 26 of the Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA) handbook that demonstrates how multiplying factors are decided.

While one can perhaps understand the slightly disturbing, but unfortunately normalized, utilitarian logic of productivity, the compensation act does not tell one how the government has decided upon those numbers. For example, why is 140 assigned to someone who is 42 years old? Such a “production of arbitrariness,” Gupta has argued, allows the state to maintain its façade as “rational” (2012: 14). Indeed, the handbook, armed with its charts, tables, and lists, provides the appearance of total rationalism, but further inspection reveals the unexplained gaps in logic. And yet, such arbitrariness is not arbitrary in its consequences; rather, it constitutes the very mechanisms required to decide who gets what, and when (Gupta 2012: 24).

I flipped to the last page of Kashem’s assessment in an attempt to understand why Kashem was found to be “3% permanently incapacitated.” In accordance to the WICA, one’s percentage of permanent incapacity is “based on [the patient’s] doctor’s assessment after the employee’s medical condition stabilizes. The doctor makes the assessment based on a set of guidelines in the ‘Guide to the Assessment of Traumatic Injuries and Occupational Diseases for Workmen’s Compensation’” (WICA 2011: 7). Kashem’s doctor had decided that he was 4% permanently incapacitated in total, 2% for the fracture on his big toe, and 1% for his second toe.

The Ministry followed up with the hospital on April 4th, 2015, and inquired on the following: “i) If there is a possible duplication of award for right big toe fracture 2% and restriction of movement right big toe 1%; ii) If yes, please advise if you are agreeable to the final Permanent Incapacity (PI) Award of 2% for right big toe; iii) If assessment for right second toe injury (1% PI) Award of 2% for right big toe; iv) Confirm the final award solely for injury resulting from the accident on November 18th, 2014.” The questions above reveal the level of precision and caution that the government takes to ensure the worker is compensated with the ‘correct’ amount—no more, and no less. As such, the worker is defined solely through his specific anatomy—from his “right big toe” to his “right second toe.” In this instance, Kashem’s two toes are somehow worth “4%” of his body.

The hospital responded 2 months later to say that the 3% PI assessment was not in fact a “duplicate” award. The breakdown was as follows: “2% (Note: phalangeal fracture with angulation= 2% page 52 subsection Big toe); 1% (Note: Active extension at MTPJ of right second toe 0-30 degree= 1% page 47 subsection (1a)).” The assessment of the second toe on the right foot was deemed as “related to [the] accident on November 18th, 2014.” Seth Holmes, following Anspach (1988) and Good (1994), has written about how physicians have been “trained to focus on biological and behavioral inputs into health,” instead of seeing...
patients as whole, human beings with social, economic, and political backgrounds (Holmes 2012: 6).

Kashem, in this instance, is not viewed contextually as a worker who had suffered physical and psychological harm by his boss, nor someone who had lost his job because of his accident, nor a person with a family to feed. While this policy is not one with the malicious intent to dehumanize workers, its scientific language and scope does end up doing so. There is thus no consideration whatsoever of how those two toes have affected the rest of his being—he is not compensated for anything else but that physical injury.

While I peered at Kashem’s assessment papers, he voiced his concerns: “I don’t know if I should appeal. 3% (% of Permanent Incapacity) is so low. They didn’t even give me anything for my throat.” The appeals process is a pricey one that offers no guarantees or assurances. The objecting party will have to “pay the Medical Board fee of $357 and the costs of any medical tests required by the Work Injury Compensation Medical Board” that comprises of “two senior from restructured hospitals” (WICA 2011: 16). Lastly, the Board has the ability to increase, deduct, or maintain the compensation awarded, depending on their “final assessment” (ibid).

There is no timeline provided as to how long the appeals process will take. However, I can attest that Kashem’s appeal took approximately 1 month to resolve. Fortunately, the Board bumped up his permanent incapacity percentage from 3% to 5%. This time, they took notice of the growth in Kashem’s throat and awarded him an extra 2 points. The notice of assessment that Kashem received stipulates that “any party who wishes to dispute this assessment must give notice of his objection using the attached prescribed form, stating PRECISELY all grounds of objection WITHIN 14 DAYS from the date of service of this Notice. The Ministry will inform all parties if an objection is received. Any ground of objection received outside this 14-day period shall be disregarded.” It is striking that the Ministry of Manpower demands an immediate reply from any party who wishes to object to the assessment, but places no such strict timelines on the functioning of its bureaucracy or on the doctors who are to make these important permanent incapacity assessments. As noted above, Kashem’s doctor only responded to MOM’s query 2 months after the letter was mailed, even though the letter specifically requested a response “within 14 days from the date of this letter.” Due to this delay, Kashem was forced to sit idly by, without a job and an attendant salary, while he awaited his uncertain fate. He had to “borrow [money] from relatives” to keep himself afloat. Once again, we witness banal, ‘normal’, bureaucratic practices that do not specifically have the intention to harm anyone, but inevitably force the powerless to pay the price.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Singaporean government’s policies toward the precariousness that migrant workers face, exemplify what Hannah Arendt has called the “banality of evil.” The government does not act in an overly deterministic manner of crafting deliberate, diabolical plans for the specific purpose of hurting the vulnerable, but instead, often acts by not acting, wilfully ignoring the inequalities before their very eyes, and consequently contributing to an untenably oppressive system that often strips the migrant worker of his (already limited) options. However, I extend Arendt’s concept to demonstrate that such “banality” can in fact take multiple forms.

First, I take up the traditional Arendtian use of the concept to demonstrate that the Ministry of Manpower’s bureaucrats do not intentionally plot to sabotage the lives of workers. Rather, they, too, are cogs in the bureaucratic machine that follow the state’s paperwork-heavy rules, inadvertently delaying the claims process. Secondly, I demonstrate another form of “banality of evil” in the government’s lack of action towards solving structural problems of exploitation, and argue that this indifference lies in the state’s substantial interest in maintaining high levels of foreign investment. Thirdly, I contend that the Work Injury Compensation Act, in all its scientific
splendour, is yet another form of “banal evil” insofar as it ends up dehumanizing the worker in question, and fails to compensate him for anything other than his physical injury.

It is here, within the confines of these banal, bureaucratic practices, that we can examine the ways in which power is exerted through more than just intentionally explicit means, but is in fact interwoven with representations and practices that have been normalized as routine. By elucidating the consequences of how such unexceptional practices of routine administration, I hope to challenge the way we understand demonstrations of power. ‘Evil’ can be found in more than the obscene and grotesque moments of performances, but also in obscure nooks and crannies of the most banal, quotidian practices. It is such that we ought not to forget that evil comes in a variety of shapes and sizes: It is not simply ISIL beheading journalists, or Boko Haram kidnapping girls in Nigeria; it occurs in both the familiar and unfamiliar, at home and abroad.

**Epilogue**

As we consider the “banality of evil” that constitutes the Singaporean government’s policies towards migrant workers, it would be wise to recognize that the state acts in relation to other actors. The government, as I have argued above, turns a blind eye to unscrupulous employers due to concerns surrounding economic growth. Employers themselves are trying to maintain their levels of profit in order to impress investors and stay competitive. There are also agents who offer employers large sums of money in order to persuade them to hire workers. This fee is then passed on to workers in Bangladesh and China who end up accruing a massive pile of debt just to get a job in Singapore. Such is the network of actors whose dreams and desires—ironically similar in many ways—bump up against each other, as we all attempt to survive the world today. Blame, therefore, cannot be apportioned quite so neatly, as the lack of a centralized actor actually makes the assemblages of precarity even harder to diagnose and destroy. Like Hydra the mythical Greek snake that possessed “more heads than the vase-painters could paint,” the system of precarity that migrant workers have to endure is a complex, multi-faceted one that cannot be easily dismantled (Hygnius 30).

**Works Referenced**


Tan, Shin Bin. 2014. “A Global City on Singaporean Soil: Growing the Economy, not the Gap?” Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.


