Ye Li, a twenty-five-year-old woman in northeast China, paid a labor recruitment company $8,000 as an agent’s fee in August 2008 to find work for her as an office clerk in Singapore. After three months of anguished waiting, she was suddenly told that she was to fly out in two days. A ticket had already been bought for her, and all her documents, including her passport, education certificates, and copies of her ID card, were in the hands of the company. She and seven other workers, who did not know each other and who would work for different employers in Singapore, were escorted to the airport. The staff from the recruitment company checked them in and asked them to sign two contracts on the spot, one in Chinese and the other in English. This was the first time that Ye saw the name of her employer in Singapore. When I talked to the workers at the boarding gate, they were still debating what the contracts were for: were they for the Chinese recruiter, its Singaporean counterpart, or the Singaporean employers?

Immediately before the plane’s departure, the company staff appointed Ye Li as the team leader and gave her the workers’ documents and eight uniforms of the Singaporean recruitment company. The workers were instructed to change
into the uniforms, with the Singaporean company’s logo and name on both the front and back, just before landing (otherwise the T-shirts might be creased if they changed too early). The bright purple uniforms were immediately recognizable to airport staff in Singapore. A staff person approached them before they reached the immigration desk, took the documents from Ye Li, and ushered them to a separate room, which I was not allowed to enter. As I learned later, the workers and all the documents were handed over to the driver of the Singaporean recruitment company. In Singapore the recruiter or the employer must inform the airport about the arrival of groups of foreign workers and meet them on arrival. From the airport the workers were taken straight to a clinic for medical examinations (they had passed tests for HIV and other contagious diseases in China), which was followed by a lengthy briefing by the recruitment company, and they were finally sent to their dormitories in different locations. They started work the next day.

This peculiar traveling experience was repeated when the workers returned home at the end of their job contracts. Returning workers are given air tickets and their passports once they are at the immigration departure checkpoint. At that time they also collect the unpaid salary they had earned over the past year or two, for it is standard practice for employers to pay migrant workers a monthly living allowance of between 10 and 50 percent of their wages, and then remit the balance owed immediately before their actual departure. These methods are intended to prevent workers from running away or overstaying their visas. Ye’s job contract explicitly prohibited her from traveling to any country during the contract period and from arranging her own flight back to China.

Ye Li is one of an increasing number of Chinese who have sought overseas employment since the 1980s. At the end of 2011, approximately 800,000 Chinese were working overseas on contracts longer than a year, a tenfold increase since 1990, when there were 58,000.\(^1\) Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are the three top destinations, collectively accounting for nearly 40 percent of Chinese migrant workers worldwide. In November 2004, there were about 100,000 registered Chinese workers in Japan, 80,000 in Singapore, and 47,000 in South Korea.\(^2\) Ye Li’s migration experience, which I call “labor transplant,” is common to unskilled workers who migrate in the region through legal means. Japan, South Korea, and Singapore seek not only “just-in-time migration” but also “to-the-point allocation”; that is, migrants must be sent to the exact place where they will start working immediately once arriving on the border.\(^3\) No visa is issued before it is confirmed exactly when and where the migrant is going. Migrants are
extracted from their hometowns and inserted in a foreign workplace; the journey between and the space beyond the two points are minimized in the migrants’ experience. Migration in this case is not about how migrants move and explore but how they are moved with great precision. Yet unlike transplanting plants or organs, which ultimately aims at integration, labor transplantation encapsulates the migrants in tightly guarded spaces to ensure that they can be transplanted back anytime. This system of migration management can be aptly summarized by the Chinese expression “one carrot, one hole.” This phrase refers to the situation in state socialism when people could not change jobs, and work units could not create or remove positions unless instructed by the state. While the Chinese Communist government has put “carrots” on the move as part of its market-oriented reform since the early 1980s, the migrants find themselves trapped in “free” countries by policies that are more restrictive than those in pre-reform China.

Labor transplant as a form of migration is not new; what is new is that transplant is radically individualized. The transplants are not collectively organized but are facilitated by private recruitment agents; migrants take their own initiative to migrate and work in dispersed places for different employers. Labor transplant combines three rather distinct types of individualization: the subjective, the universal administrative, and the particular. First, there is postsocialist subjective individualization in life strategies and outlook. Migration is seen as a self-realizing, life-changing, entrepreneurial project that involves high investment—the agent fees for jobs in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore were between $5,000 and $8,000 (RMB 40,000 and 60,000) in the late 2000s—but may also yield high returns. This trend of subjective individualization is particularly evident in my main research site, northeast China. Formerly the nation’s center of heavy and military industries, the region experienced massive labor layoffs as a result of factory closures and privatization of state-owned enterprises in the late 1990s. The formerly well-protected and privileged socialist workers with lifelong jobs and cradle-to-grave welfare benefits now have to sell their labor on the market. People borrow tens of thousands (RMB) to go overseas not only because they have lost jobs but more importantly because they want to be one step ahead in a wild competition for wealth accumulation. Migration is often portrayed as a step to accumulate one’s “first barrel of gold,” a phrase that has been widely used in China in both public media and daily conversation since the mid-1990s and that typically refers to one’s first profitable business deal. The desire for this has been compounded by a widespread fear of missing out. In a society that is enveloped by “a sense of running out
of time, of urgency, and of great risk taking,”4 everyone fears that missing out on wealth now also means missing out on all possible future opportunities. At the end of the day, migrants finance the entire system by paying high agent fees. That the northeast suddenly emerged as a major source of outmigration in the 1990s despite the lack of any emigration tradition is to a great extent attributable to the postsocialistic individualization.

For migrants to pursue migration as individual projects and for the state to move migrants individually, the migrants have to become legally definable individuals. In this sense, administrative individualization forms a basis of labor transplant. The ID card introduced nationwide in 1986 made it possible for any adult Chinese citizen to establish his or her individual identity independently. The urban housing reforms that started in the 1990s encouraged citizens to buy previously state-owned housing, and a housing property certificate is now widely used by migrants as security in dealing with agents or creditors. Notarization offices that were first set up in 1982 have been indispensable in producing legal documents for individuals.

Exit control from China is also individualized. International labor out-migration (officially called “international labor cooperation”) was originally presented as a mission for building world socialist solidarity from the 1950s through the end of the 1970s. In the 1980s it was then defined as a means of earning foreign currencies for the state but is now promoted as a means of poverty alleviation, employment generation, and a way to transform individual migrants and raise their “quality” (tigao suzhi). A 1986 law allowed ordinary Chinese citizens to apply for private passports for the first time, and by 2005 most Chinese citizens could get passports with an ID card and criminal clearance. The 2007 Passport Law claims passport possession as a right of all citizens. The development of these new infrastructures for individualization was indispensable for making new “mobile subjects”—individuals whose relationships with larger institutions render migration taken on one’s own initiative thinkable, feasible, and even profitable—and subsequently enabled the rapid increase in general mobility.

Administrative individualization treats each and every migrant as an undifferentiated individual who is subject to the same rules, instead of as members of qualitatively different communities. This enables the control of every individual on an aggregate level from afar through the creation of the typical, “average” individual as the subject of governance.5 As such, individualization is the flip side of totalization. The classification of individuals does not seek to highlight individual differences but aims at devising a complete, exhaustive “totalizing classificatory grid” in which every migrant is located.6
While universal administrative individualization provides an operational basis for labor transplant, the central task of labor transplant is a third mode of individualization, the particular. Labor transplant seeks to follow, monitor, and control particular individuals’ specific journeys as they unfold. Instead of imagining individuals as interchangeable and abstract statistical entries, labor transplant focuses on migrants’ bodies and the ability to track the movement of those bodies. Instead of aggregating and homogenizing, it differentiates and specifies. It does not lead to totalization. You either transplant the right person to the right place at the right time, or you do not. The “point” in “point-to-point” migration is not a particular place or locality but is, rather, reduced to an individual, a dormitory room, or a spot on an assembly line. Yet, the points are always real people and real positions instead of merely numbers, symbols, or documents.

How is particular individualization achieved practically? Instead of relying on the general legibility that enables social manipulation from the center, as James Scott describes, particular individualization is based on measures that are complex and complicating, dispersed and case specific. It combines mechanisms of the free market with tight state control, and entrepreneurial individual sentiment with old-fashioned bureaucratic practices.

In the next section I will first trace how particular individualization results from the decoupling of capital and labor in a number of sectors where migrant workers are concentrated. The disassociation, as manifest in subcontracting, outsourcing, and flexible hiring, leads to the fragmentation of employment relations, which contradicts the centralization of migration regulation. This structural tension gives rise to particular individualization and to labor transplant as solutions. I then describe how state policies and, more important, various types of intermediaries actually transplant labor. State policies pigeonhole migrants into finely differentiated classificatory grids, tie them to employers, enforce the migrants’ compulsory return, and delegate regulatory power to a third party, the intermediaries. The intermediaries are transnationally linked and coordinated but are first and foremost locally rooted. The intermediaries transplant the workers by planting them in various institutions; for instance, they pressure migrants’ family members in China to prevent migrants overseas from going underground or overstaying. The state reaches individual migrants by delegating power to intermediaries, who in turn monitor the individuals by embedding them in complex social webs.

Since this context-specific institutional matrix is central to the process of labor transplant, it makes sense to juxtapose and compare the three
labor-receiving countries, which represent three types of migration management. Japan admits unskilled workers from China through an “industrial trainee” scheme, ostensibly an international aid program to train workers from Third World countries based on bilateral government agreements. The program is directly managed by the Japan International Training Cooperation Organization (JITCO), which was set up by the Japanese government in 1991. In contrast, Singaporean policies are market driven and economically liberal. Singapore imports foreign labor according to employers’ demands and relies almost entirely on commercial entities for placement. South Korea fit in between these models. South Korea copied the Japanese trainee system from 1993 to 2004, when that system was replaced by the employment permit program, but the recruitment procedure for Chinese workers remains largely unchanged, at least until 2008. The central figure was the Korea Federation of Small and Medium Businesses (KFSB), particularly its agency the Korea International Training Cooperation Corps (set up in 1994), which represented employers’ interests. South Korea, at least before 2008, represented a corporatist governance pattern in which policies are based on consensus between business and government. Despite these differences, however, labor transplant is a common practice in all three countries.

This essay is part of a larger project on labor migration from China to the three destination countries. My fieldwork in China was primarily carried out across Liaoning province, in northeast China. During the fieldwork I was appointed as a member of the “expert advisory team for overseas employment” by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. This enabled me to attend government working meetings and to interview senior officials. In addition I visited the three destination countries to interview recruiters, employers, government officials, and nongovernmental organization activists. In total I interviewed more than two hundred informants in the four countries between July 2004 and November 2007, and my research in Singapore continues.

**Labor-Capital Decoupling**

The emergence of individualized labor transplant can be attributed first to the dissociation between labor and capital in a number of economic sectors. A typical example is the construction industry, which hired nearly 30 percent of Chinese migrant workers overseas in 2004. The decoupling was first driven by capital intensification. In the 1970s, when labor migration in Asia was primarily tied to specific projects, few projects exceeded $100 million in
total contract value. By the 1980s, a single contract could easily exceed $1 billion. At the same time, the average profit rate of construction projects dropped from 20 percent in the 1970s to below 10 percent in the 1980s, and then down to 7 percent in the 1990s and 2000s. As such, enterprises had to engage with ever-larger projects in order to earn profits, and smaller companies were gradually wiped out. Capital intensification has been pushed by the integrated-development model, whereby construction, investment, and long-term management are packed together, especially in such projects as building ports and industrial zones. Contractors are expected to raise funds to invest, design, build, manage, and finally recoup their investment by running the infrastructure on a commercial basis before transferring it back to the host government. Specific contractual practices include the build-operate-transfer (BOT), build-operate-own-transfer, and engineering-procurement-construction models. A Chinese industrial analyst estimated that BOT was responsible for about 60 percent of all contract projects worldwide in the mid-2000s. Eager to follow this global market trend, the Chinese government promulgated special policies in 1999 to encourage Chinese companies to adopt the BOT model.

As projects became more capital intensive, labor management was increasingly subcontracted or “handed down.” Large companies subcontract labor-intensive tasks to smaller building companies, which then outsource labor recruitment to agents, who recruit labor from ever more remote places in countries that supply labor. As a result, increasing numbers of companies are involved in the chain of labor management. For example, China Construction, the largest construction company in China, entered the international market as a labor supplier in the late 1970s. It used to deploy its own employees to clients’ projects, but it is now completely reliant on labor provided by numerous external building companies. In fact, China Construction engages so many labor suppliers that it has had to classify them into four levels in order to manage the process. Thus capital management and labor management have become ever more distanced. This is part of the general trend of increasing outsourcing, subcontracting, vertical (dis)integration, and the proliferation and sophistication of supply chains. But it is important to note that the disassociation between capital and labor in China is compelled not only by the global market but also by the socialist state. The central government, for example, issued two documents in a single year, 1984, to urge state-owned construction companies to reduce permanent staff and outsource building tasks to smaller companies in order to increase profits.
At the same time that capital and labor were decoupled in the construction industry, employers of migrant labor in Japan, Singapore, and South Korea have changed from large corporations to small, low-end businesses. As low-end businesses are almost exclusively national or local in ownership and operation, this shift implies a decoupling between foreign labor and foreign capital and subsequently a blurring of the demarcation between the international and domestic economies. Chinese officials reported that it was increasingly difficult in the 1990s for Chinese construction companies to obtain projects in Japan and consequently project-affiliated migration to Japan declined significantly. In 2003, only 12 percent of the 14,700 laborers from one province in northeast China who went abroad were tied to designated projects. Instead, increasing demand for Chinese workers comes from small enterprises. Chinese migrants in Japan and South Korea now typically work in agriculture and husbandry, food processing, and low-end manufacturing in household enterprises. In Singapore, Chinese transplants are commonly found in logistics, manufacturing, trading companies, and low-end service industry (such as small restaurants and retail shops). Companies that need foreign workers the most are no longer international investors or exporters, as originally envisaged by the Japanese and South Korean governments, but are small firms often located in remote areas.

This change was obvious enough that Japan and South Korea modified their industrial trainee system to prioritize small and medium businesses as the primary beneficiaries. The South Korean government allowed only companies with fewer than three hundred employees to hire foreign trainees. The 1990 revision of the Japanese Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act defines the trainee system as a means of alleviating labor shortages in small businesses. Instead of mobile capital racing to the bottom to exploit immobile people, labor transplant moves labor to meet immobile capital. It is important to note the political clout of the immobile capital at the low end of the economy. In a time of rapid socioeconomic transformation, a significant percentage of the population in the destination countries relies on low-end sectors for survival. It is a political necessity to import cheap, unskilled labor to keep these sectors afloat.

Both the decoupling between capital and labor and the demand of small businesses for foreign workers mean that migrants are hired in a highly dispersed manner in scattered places. They can no longer be collectively encamped. The distinction between internal and external economies
is blurred, as is the line between the economic and the social. As foreign workers penetrate different parts of national space and are present in the daily life of remote towns, migration is no longer a simple employment issue and business concern for policy makers and employers but has become a social concern of the public. Migrants are no longer simply a labor force but appear as human bodies and social agents.

Though the governments of all three countries are willing to make their migration policies as responsive as possible to smaller employers’ needs, they maintain that migration is a matter of central sovereignty not to be dictated by employers’ demands, especially when migration becomes more socially sensitive. As economically liberal as it is, the Singapore state controls the number and composition of migrants by setting strict “dependency ceilings,” which limits the proportion of foreign workers to local workers hired by a particular employer. The ratio varies according to the migrants’ nationality. By doing so the government hopes to keep a delicate balance between migrants of different ethnicities, which is a highly sensitive issue in the multiethnic city-state.

On the sending side, regulation related to outmigration in China was also centralized at the same time it was liberalized. For example, the dramatic simplification of passport application procedures, which cut out nearly twenty steps and reduced the processing time from months to fifteen working days, was partly designed to centralize and unify regulations. Previously, applicants needed political approvals from their work unit and local government, which put everyone under strict scrutiny but in a scattered manner. Some individuals, usually officials, had acquired multiple passports by manipulating the different systems of passport application, and this had enabled a number of corrupt officials to flee China when they were under investigation. The complex, decentralized system was also conducive to illegal outmigration. Although fighting illegal outmigration is not necessarily a national policy priority, the central state sees the lax control of borders at the local level, particularly in coastal provinces in southeast China, as a sign of disobedience and disloyalty within local government. The streamlined procedure enhanced universal individualization by subjecting every applicant to the same regulatory authority, the Ministry of Public Security. The central government thus fully monopolizes citizens’ “legitimate means of mobility.” The centralization of migration control is at odds with the fragmentation of labor employment. This tension, I argue, gave rise to the practice of individualized transplant.
“Free Labor Equals Black Labor”

In order to manage the increasingly fragmented employment of foreign labor in a centralized manner, the three labor-receiving countries have adopted a number of policy initiatives. First, they have devised detailed, sector-specific policies to categorize migrants. Occupations are first divided into those that are open to foreign labor and those that are not. Each occupation is then given a “quota” for the number of migrant workers it may have. Different occupations are subject to different regulations. JITCO, which is in charge of foreign trainees, produces a list every year of the jobs that are open to foreign trainees. The jobs are specified in great detail, such as “male garment making,” “canvas-made products manufacturing,” and “tailoring in cotton material.”

Singapore limits unskilled foreign workers from particular countries to specific sectors. For the service industry, for example, only Malaysia, Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea, and Taiwan are “approved source countries.” Chinese workers are allowed to work in construction, manufacturing, marine industries, and some service establishments. The result is that migrants are slotted into numerous “boxes,” where they are subject to different rules.

Second, states in all three countries tie migrants’ legal status to their employers. Migrants are automatically illegal if they are dismissed by their employers or change jobs without permission. Some NGOs in South Korea have thus criticized the trainee program as a “contemporary form of slavery.” The supposedly progressive employment permit program system remains largely the same in this regard: migrants must work at the workplace indicated in their original labor contract, and only in exceptional circumstances such as factory closedown can they appeal to transfer to other employers through a government agency.

Employers do not always like the idea that workers are completely immobile in the destination country. In the late 1990s some small construction companies in Singapore brought in workers from China and farmed them out to other companies that needed short-term labor. This was called “free labor” (ziyou gong) migration as opposed to the official employer-affiliated programs. Both the Singaporean and Chinese governments regarded this as deeply problematic. “Free labor equals black labor (heigong),” the Chinese government declared in an urgent circular issued in 2001 to call for a crackdown on this practice. The Chinese embassy in Singapore reiterated that “free labor is illegal,” a line that was conspicuously printed in the certificate that authorizes Singapore labor agencies to recruit workers from China, which I’ll explore in detail later in this essay.
Tying workers to employers severely impedes migrants’ bargaining power. An incident in 2004 involving nine young women from Liaoning province who were working in Japan provides a clear example. The workers found a hidden camera in their changing room in the factory. This triggered a huge outcry in China, and the Liaoning provincial government sent a special delegation to Japan to intervene. Despite the high level of political attention and support for the workers—which is extremely rare in other circumstances—they decided not to bring the case to the court because if the employer were to be found guilty, the factory would be closed down and all the workers would be deported back to China.

Third, policies have been established to enforce the disposability of the migrants. It is not enough to plant every carrot into the right hole. The carrot must not grow roots. Singaporean employers are obliged to ensure that their workers will leave the country within seven days after the termination of their work permit. Otherwise the employer will lose the $3,000 that it deposited as a “security bond” that is a precondition for applying for visas for foreign workers, and more important, the employer will be banned from recruiting foreign workers in the future. The Japanese trainee system has a prerequisite that any organization that sends migrants (supposedly the migrant’s employer in the sending country) must guarantee jobs to trainees when they return in order to enforce their departure. The South Korean government determines the number of foreign workers to be admitted according to the number of exiting workers. Employers who ensure their workers exit Korea on time are given “replacement quotas” to bring in new ones, which is regarded as a reward. Japan also bans anyone who has been in either country, even if the person had simply visited, from entering again as an unskilled worker. It is feared that the migrants’ previous connections with or knowledge about the local society may impede repatriation.

Transplanting migrants back also serves as a convenient means for employers and the receiving states to avoid responsibility in case of labor disputes and other social conflicts. Under pressure from civil society and from the migrants themselves, the three countries do crack down on abusive employers and recruitment agents, but the most common punishment measure is to deport the migrants. The Sino-Japan International Training Cooperation Organization, set up by the Chinese government in 1992 as the counterpart of JITCO, identified the large-scale deportation of Chinese trainees due to employer irregularities as a major feature of Chinese labor migration to Japan from 2003 to 2006. This was so common that the
Chinese government had to negotiate with its Japanese counterparts to slow down deportation. These policies, although indispensable, are definitely not sufficient for labor transplant to function. States have to rely on third parties, namely, recruitment agencies, for implementation.

**Intermediaries as “Transplanters”**

As the opening vignette shows, intermediaries play a crucial role as the actual “transplanters.” Intermediaries take different forms in the three countries. In Japan, the leading intermediary is JITCO; KFSB is a business association in South Korea; and in Singapore, the key players are private recruitment companies instead of public institutions. The activities and functions of these intermediaries, however, are similar. They are all responsible for transplanting individual migrants. For example, KFSB’s 2001 guidelines stipulate that whenever foreign trainees arrive, the president of KFSB should receive them at the port, double-check their identities, and instruct them on their next movement. When migrants’ job contracts terminate, the representative of the recruitment company in the sending country should come to South Korea to “receive the trainees from the hand of the employer, send them back, fill the Report on Return and submit it to KFSB.” KFSB should confirm the report on return and submit it to the government. 29

These intermediaries act as physical transplanters not only by buying tickets or driving cars, but most important by developing sophisticated social webs that directly condition migrants’ behavior. First of all, it must be stressed that, instead of having emerged spontaneously as a bridge between labor demand and supply, the intermediaries are institutionally designed as gatekeepers. In Singapore, for instance, it is technically illegal for employers to hire workers from China directly, and they must recruit through designated agencies. Among the more than sixteen hundred licensed agencies islandwide, only fifty were designated by the Singapore Ministry of Manpower and authorized by the Chinese embassy there. 30 In South Korea almost all small businesses had to rely on KFSB for recruiting foreign workers, who in turn worked exclusively with a limited number of recruitment companies in the sending countries. Neither workers nor the Chinese recruiters had a chance to meet or even learn about the prospective employer until the workers were allocated by KFSB. Similarly, in Japan all workers are admitted through JITCO. Liu Yi, the manager of a large labor-sending company in central China, attributed this exclusive gatekeeper status to the “Japanese habit”: “Japanese have the habit of looking for guarantors. Employers
can’t hire workers directly from overseas, they need to find a guarantor organization. This guarantor shoulders social responsibilities and answers to the government. In most cases we can’t contact companies [employers] in Japan directly. This is the rule.”

All the intermediaries, regardless of whether they are public institutions, business associations, or private firms, work closely with numerous other institutions in China as well as the destination countries. By doing so they embed both migrants and employers in larger established institutional arrangements. This provides the agents with effective leverage through which they can affect migrants’ and employers’ behavior. In Japan, for example, employers first submit their hiring plans to their local industry associations. The industry association then applies for quotas on their behalf from the national association, which in turn applies to JITCO. After collecting applications from various industry associations, JITCO coordinates with the ministries in charge of these industries to produce an aggregate quota, and then applies for approval from the Ministry of Justice. JITCO defines the industry associations as the “primary-tier recipient units” of trainees and employers as the “secondary-tier recipient units.” The primary recipients supervise the secondary. The migrant worker does not sign a contract with the employer for the first year; instead the employer or the industry association signs agreements with the labor sending company—the JITCO-designated recruitment company in China. Labor migration is thus deemed as a collaboration between the two organizations. The primary recipients must report to the local immigration bureau about their trainees at least once every three months or every month for the first six months if the association is a first timer. The association should keep a diary to record their daily activities of managing the trainees, which must be copied to the bureau. The association should also report to JITCO. When the job contracts expire or are terminated, the local industry association is required to ensure that the workers leave Japan on time.

Both the primary and secondary recipient units will be banned from recruiting foreign workers for three years if they fail to report to the Border Entry Bureau about a trainee absconding, if a trainee commits criminal activities that may damage the reputation of the trainee system, or if more than 20 percent of the workers abscond or fail to return due to the recipient units’ inadequate discipline. The Japanese government calls such negligence “illegitimate activity.” The primary and secondary recipients are mutually liable to each other. If one conducts illegitimate activities, the other will be punished for “equivalent illegitimate behavior.”
The recruitment process in the sending context is equally complex. Recruitment companies in China cannot directly contact either the primary or the secondary-tier recipient in Japan. Based on government-approved quotas, JITCO places orders for workers with its Chinese counterpart, the Sino-Japan International Training Cooperation Organization. The Sino-Japan Organization in turn distributes the recruitment quotas to a number of state-owned corporations. These corporations sign contracts with Japanese industry associations and process legal and administrative paperwork. They are called “window” companies because, as holders of a special license for labor export, they are the only legitimate “window” through which Chinese workers can migrate overseas. Located in major cities and staffed by urbane professionals, including children of senior Communist cadres, the staff of these “windows” are not going to mingle with unskilled manual laborers in villages. Instead they outsource the task of recruitment to agents in prefectures, who in turn subcontract to subagents in local districts or rural townships, who are referred to colloquially as “the legs.” The legs are normally connected to public authority in one way or another. The legs can be institutions such as vocational schools, or they can be individuals such as party cadres or teachers. The multiple actors thus form long recruitment chains.

The structure of recruitment chains is crucial for the enforcement of point-to-point transplanting. Golden Stage, a middle-level company specializing in labor recruitment for Japan, pays its legs—village heads—$100 for detailed information on each candidate it recruits. In one instance, a woman chosen for a job in Japan was immediately dumped after the village head reported that she was in the midst of a divorce. The general manager of Golden Stage declared with some satisfaction, “The woman may be mentally and psychologically unstable when divorcing, and may create problems overseas!” It is a common practice that legs conduct detailed interviews with would-be migrants and reject anyone who has relatives or friends overseas, who betrays some knowledge of the destination country, or gives any other indication that he or she might step out of the cage of legality and be hard to transplant back.

Some legs also assist companies at higher levels to discipline workers through a method called lianzuo, or “linked seats.” An invention of the Qin emperor (ca. 200 BC), lianzuo put a group of migrants—who may not have known each other—into a team to share liability; if one misbehaves, all are punished. Thus fellow migrants are turned into police. I was told that this method works particularly well if the migrants are from the same community. As a recruiter recalled, after a worker he recruited to South Korea
absconded, her family was immediately inundated by visits and telephone calls from the families of other lianzuo migrants. The worker swiftly and voluntarily returned to the factory.

Transplant is thus in essence “transnational planting.” Migrants are embedded in local social milieu and tied to institutions at various points along the transnational journey. What appears to be a point-to-point transnational flight is in fact constituted by numerous connections within national space in both the sending and receiving countries. Connections become transnational only at the point where local connections reach the national center, which coordinates with its counterparts internationally. Since the migrants are strictly subjugated to the established national order, their transnational networks, though wide and dense, do not form a quasi-autonomous, potentially transgressive space. In contrast to “transnationalism from below” and the image of globalization as “pluri-territorial, polycentric and multiscalar” processes where all scales “collapse,” we witness a “distributive” model of transnationalism.

Conclusion

Individualized labor transplant, although particularly well developed in East Asia, is not unique to the region. Countries in the Persian Gulf have practiced similar policies for decades. The factors in East Asia that gave rise to individualized labor transplant are common across the world. Capital-labor decoupling and the increasing demand for cheap labor by low-end small businesses mean that employment relations become ever more fragmented both institutionally and spatially. A small company in a remote place may need one or two foreign workers for one or two years. The regulation of migration, however, remains a jealously guarded prerogative of state sovereignties, and its operation has become even more centralized, precisely because of increasing public concerns about migration and perceived national vulnerability in the face of globalization. Moving each migrant worker to each workplace seems to be a solution.

Labor transplant also reflects a broader, “point-to-point” pattern of globalization. James Ferguson has called our attention to the fact that “highly selective and spatially encapsulated forms of global connections are combined with widespread disconnection and exclusion.” As such, globalization takes the form of “global-hopping” instead of “global-covering.” Labor transplant also reminds us of the “spaghetti bowl” model of international trade as described by Jagdish Bhagwati. International trade does not take
place in an open, flat, boundless market where goods flow freely but consists of definite lines whereby selected items are traded between particular countries under specific terms.39

Ferguson characterizes point-to-point globalization as “socially thin.” He argues that this social thinness, that is, minimum engagement with the local society and separation from any nonproductive factors, allows capital to move around smoothly. My study indicates a different situation. States in East Asia devise complex policies of classification and differentiation, and intermediaries develop widespread webs consisting of heterogeneous social actors that emplace migrants both institutionally and spatially. The intermediaries form parallel recruitment chains in the sending and receiving countries, simultaneously planting the migrants in the home community (for instance through “linked seats”) and overseas (through surveillance by local employers’ associations). The recruiters are connected to each other transnationally only through state-designated windows. Such social embeddedness provides a basis for transnational transplant.

Underlying the highly restrictive transplant process is not a denial of individuality; on the contrary, it is predicated on radical individualization. Postsocialist subjective individualization produces not only free laborers—no longer tied to state institutions—to be transplanted, but more important, keen investors and risk takers (the migrants) who ultimately finance the system. Universal administrative individualization, as epitomized by the introduction of ID cards, private passports, and other legal documents, enables people to seek migration as an individual project. While universal individualization creates bureaucratically governable mobile subjects, particular individualization goes one step further and re-embeds the document-bearing individuals into specific social milieu. The combination of the three types of individualization explains how labor transplant works.

This does not mean that individualized labor transplant has become a closed system where no changes can be made. In the short term, intermediaries provide an effective entry point for intervention. During my fieldwork, few migrants questioned the legitimacy of the state policies of point-to-point transplant. They are instead gravely concerned about intermediaries. Commercial recruitment agencies often overcharge, fail to fulfill promises, or deliberately mislead migrants. Better regulation, especially that which will streamline the structure of recruitment chains, may improve the specific conditions of labor transplanting. NGOs in destination countries, driven by ideals that place migrants’ rights above national state sovereignty, may also effectively disrupt the nation-based social webs of transnational planting.
and transplanting. For example, they may urge the governments of destination countries to grant migrants special permission to stay on or to change jobs. But this most likely happens in exceptional circumstances, such as when serious labor abuses are exposed, and as such may not lead to systemic changes. In the long term, it seems that national policies and institutions remain the central arena for struggle. The strong influence of states across East Asia, especially in China, and the well-entrenched social arrangements around labor transplant have rendered state sovereignty unquestionable and the idea of “postnational citizenship” almost unthinkable. But these conditions also create a sense among the migrants that they are entitled to be protected by their own nations and that states have unlimited moral and practical responsibilities for assisting citizens in distress. It has been the migrants’ common strategy to pressure the Chinese embassy at their destination or to appeal to the government back home to address their problems. The strategies have made some progress. Working with nation-states still seems more productive than working against them.

Notes


3 David Karjanen used the term “just-in-time migration” to refer to the phenomenon that migrants move “rapidly between different employers and families, providing quick labor force both for employers and kin.” David Karjanen, “Just-in-Time Migration,” Anthropology News, December 2006, 64.


8 The employment permit program was not implemented in China until 2008 due to a disagreement between China’s Ministries of Labor and Commerce.

9 In 2004, 40 percent of all Chinese migrant workers overseas were working in manufacturing industries, 26 percent in construction, and 14 percent in agriculture and the forestry and fishing industries. China’s International Contractors’ Association, “Zhongguo Duwai Laowu Hezuo Niandu Baogao 2004,” 10–11.


17 Long Guqiang, Zhongguo Fuwu Maoyi (China’s Trade in Service) (Beijing: Zhongxin, 1999), 167.


19 Cited in Zha, “Chinese Migrant Workers in Japan,” 141.


22 The latest list of April 2012 included 66 occupations and 121 work types that were open to foreign workers. See JITCO, www.jitco.or.jp/chinese/overview/pdf/shokushu_Chi.pdf (accessed April 3, 2012).


25 Ibid., 103.

26 Ministry of Foreign Technology and Economic Cooperation, “Guanyu Zhengdun he Guifan dui Xinjiapo Laowu Hezuo Shichang Zhixu de Jinxing Tongzhi” (“Urgent Circu-
lar Regarding Rectifying and Standardizing the Market Order of the Labor Cooperation with Singapore”) document code Moftec No. (2001) 268, February 22, 2001. This circular was issued by the ministry to the Economic and Trade Commission departments and bureaus in all provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities; it was also distributed to state-owned enterprises that are directly managed by the central government.


29 KFSB, “Korea’s Guide to the Management of Foreign Industrial Trainees and Apprentices,” Seoul, 2001, Article 5, items 1–3. In Singapore, the recurrent need for the physical transplant workers back home has given rise to a new business since the 1980s: repatriation services. There were probably six such companies in Singapore specializing in repatriating migrant workers in 2007 who are readily for hire by employers of migrant workers.


31 Interview with author, Lanzhou, March 15–16, 2005.

32 A president of an association told me that, just to send off two workers, he would enlist five association members (fellow factory owners). At the airport the Japanese team holds hands to form a human cordon around the women and, step-by-step, move them across the departure hall, through the throng, and toward the immigration checkpoint.


34 Ibid.

35 Interview with general manager of Golden Stage, Qingdao, July 11, 2005.


38 Ibid., 38.


40 For the notion of “postnational citizenship” as explored in the European context, see Yasemin Soysal, Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).