# *Traversing the Golden Mile:*
## *An ethnographic outline of Singapore's Thai Enclave*

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Described by locals as Singapore's 'Little Thailand', the Golden Mile Complex is known as an ethnic enclave for Thai persons. The environment of the Golden Mile Complex is described as a *liminoid* space, or a 'space out of place', where Thai cultural identity, language and religious beliefs appear to be dominant, while simultaneously suspending the everyday realities of the wider Singaporean society that surrounds it. Despite being viewed as a *cultural sanctuary* for many Thais, the building is also perceived as an *ethnic enclosure* that tends to isolate those working or living in it because of its association with 'low-end globalization'. The urban marginality of the Golden Mile Complex and its Thai community, therefore, reflects a broader ongoing and ambivalent social-cultural divide between Singaporeans and large numbers of foreign workers, who form part of a transnational 'precariat' and face substantial challenges to their economic and social security[1].
**Keywords:** Singapore, Thailand, ethnic enclave, liminoid space, transnationalism, globalization

## Singapore's 'Little Thailand'

The Golden Mile Complex is an ageing 16-storey commercial and residential building in Singapore's city centre. It houses a three-level shopping complex, a car park in the basement, as well as office spaces for rent and residential apartments on its upper floors. Situated along Beach Road, the building and its immediate neighbourhood are commonly referred to by locals as Singapore's 'Little Thailand', where significant numbers of Thai nationals or ethnic Thais of other nationalities seek employment and often reside. While many Thais are there primarily for employment, the Golden Mile Complex has also served as a source of communal support for Thai foreign labour based in Singapore. Businesses or services currently operating there include tour and transport agencies, remittance companies, late-night restaurants and eateries, sundry stores, a Thai supermarket, massage parlours, karaoke bars and even four discotheques that operate into the early hours of the morning (National Library Board, n.d.). As a result, it has gained, over the years, a reputation as an ethnic enclave for Thai culture, and a site for various forms of nightlife and accompanying social vices often associated with urban working-class communities. All this has, inevitably, coloured the overall public perception of the building, causing it to be perceived by some as a 'seedy' or 'sleazy' place (Yusof 2017).

Interestingly, the historical origins of the Golden Mile Complex's emergence as a predominantly Thai ethnic enclave are a result of the initial surge of low-wage Thai construction workers who came to Singapore from the 1970s to 1990s. This occurred as part of the nation's modernization drive during its first 30 years of independence (Piper 2005; Porntipa 2001). The present name of the building was derived from an urban development project in the late 1960s, which sought to promote the Beach Road area as the next location for commercial and urban renewal (Campbell 1969: 9). Originally, it referred to a stretch of land along the island's southern shoreline, once earmarked as a prime location for ambitious urban developments along

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present-day Nicoll Highway, behind Beach Road. The project was ultimately far from successful, as the Golden Mile did not emerge as planned, although buildings such as the Golden Mile Complex adopted the moniker as part of its name. Initially known as the Woh Hup Complex upon completion in 1974 (DP Architects 2017), and despite acclaim for its revolutionary design during its time, it now remains a sobering reminder and namesake of a largely forgotten urban revitalization project.

**The Golden Mile Complex as a Liminoid Space**

Drawing from Victor Turner's (1969, 1974) seminal classic, 'The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure', the concepts *liminal* and *liminoid* are useful analytical tools to understand the spaces within the Golden Mile Complex. First conceived by van Gennep (1960), *liminality* is a term used to describe the transitional phase of various cultural rites of passage, characterized by a sense of indeterminacy and ambiguity (Downey et al. 2016). This phase is transcended once persons successfully undergo various rituals or performances, eventually emerging as an accepted member of one's community, often accompanied with a newly achieved status. The term *liminoid*, on the other hand, not only includes the earlier mentioned sense of indeterminacy and ambiguity found in *liminality*, but also implies disjuncture from the accepted views and cultural expectations of society. In other words, what is considered *liminoid* is often associated with practices or performances of culture that are not only transitional in nature, but also 'out of place' and deviant from the norms of mainstream society. Applied to the Golden Mile Complex, it is suggested that the cultural logic embodied within the spaces of the building suspends or, at least, diminishes and confounds the wider norms and realities of larger Singaporean everyday life, by virtue its 'un-Singaporean-ness'. Hence, the social spaces within and around the building tend to exhibit a character of being 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1964), revealing a latent tension between two or more cultural worlds. Such *liminoid* forms of experience overlap greatly with the marginal character of what mainstream society tends to call pejoratively urban 'slums' or 'ghettos', terms that have been examined at great depth by Wacquant (1997, 2004, 2008), where such urban spaces have emerged because of economic exploitation and ostracization. I would, however, hesitate to apply such terms to the Golden Mile Complex, largely because it does not reflect a similar severity of segregation from mainstream society. Nonetheless, it is precisely its urban ambiguity that makes the site worth examining.
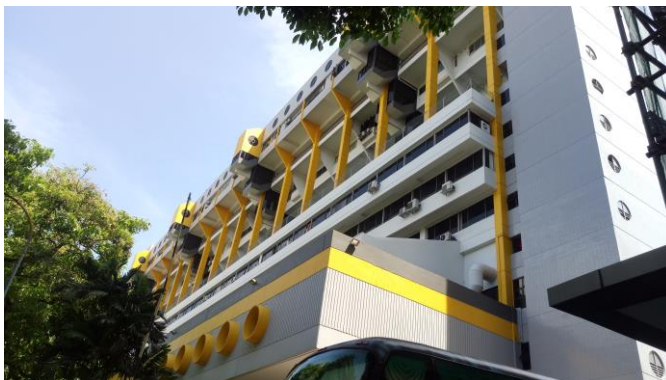


Fig.1 – *The Golden Mile Complex on a sunny day* – by Kevin Tan

This ethnographic outline, therefore, should be understood as a continuation of ongoing contributions by anthropologists and sociologists in the study of urban subcultures, social marginality, ethnic enclaves and transnational communities that have emerged due to the effects of globalization and migration (Low 2015; Lu and He 2013). Such close examination of the impact of the urban experience and the social production of its spaces is, of course, not a new endeavour among scholars, as observed in classical and well-known works by Weber (1960) and Simmel (1950). In the field of urban anthropology, the modern city and its spaces is now the site of an intense and irreversible conjunction of cultural, religious, economic and political spheres of life (Hubbard 2006). This is particularly so when they are inhabited, shared and contested by social forces that drive actions and behaviours along with the meanings attached to them. To a significant extent, then, the enterprise of urban anthropology in present times is an integral part of what anthropology stands for (Pardo and Prato 2012), due to the ubiquitous presence of cities and their mutually intersecting relationships with innumerable spaces and places on a global scale. For the distinction between the rural and the urban has increasingly become unclear due to the highly interwoven cultural fabric that many persons in various societies live in.

Prato and Pardo (2013) have convincingly and comprehensively discussed the importance and increasing relevance of urban anthropology in their excellent review of its intellectual origins and development. As they rightly point out, with more than half the world's population living in cities and partaking in highly urban lived experiences, it would be impossible to ignore the importance of an anthropology of such socio-culturally rich and diverse spaces. This is obviously reflected in the case of the Golden Mile Complex and its Thai community, which is situated within a small urbanized and multicultural island-nation with one of the highest population densities on the planet. It follows, then, that an urban anthropological perspective should not only recognize how urban spaces are socially and culturally produced (Gottdiener 1985, Krase 2012, Lefebvre 1992), but also examine the relationships between such spaces on a local and global scale. This is best achieved by critically examining the struggles, inequalities, meanings, emotions, ambiguities and memories that are constantly negotiated in the urban spaces that envelope us.

In recent years, one of the better known urban ethnographies of a building that has evolved into an ethnic enclave has been Mathews's (2011) 'Ghetto at the Centre of the World', which examined the social, cultural and economic lives of the inhabitants within Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions. It closely details the mutually influential relationship between the residents of Chungking Mansions, both transient and long-term, and the socio-cultural spaces that are constructed within the building. Based on extensive fieldwork over a period of several years, Mathews's description of life at the iconic structure located in the heart of Hong Kong's Tsim Sha Tsui district provides penetrating insights into the urban sub-cultural community that is the nexus of what he calls 'low-end globalization' (Mathews 2011: 19). Such forms of globalization are a reality for persons who exist as part of a transnational underclass, who are often drawn to developed economies in search of employment in occupations that are no longer undertaken by locals.

Equally deserving mention is Kitiarsa's (2014) urban ethnographic study of Thai workmen in Singapore. It examines what he describes as the 'bare life' of these men, who often engage in menial and hard labour within a workforce that increasingly includes foreigners from less developed nations. Kitiarsa provides a highly insightful, personal and poignant account of the challenges that many Thai workmen undergo to make a living and hopefully forge a better future. It also offers a detailed discussion of how the Golden Mile Complex has evolved into an urban subcultural space for many Thai workmen seeking familiarity and comfort in aspects of a culture they had left behind. In Kitiarsa's view, the Golden Mile Complex had become part of what he calls 'village transnationalism', echoing Mathews's observations of 'low-end globalization', where Thai workers engage in the Three-D (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) forms of work often associated with low-wage migrant labour in developed countries (Kitiarsa 2014: 53).



Fig. 2 – *Thai men relaxing and socializing outside the building* – by Kevin Tan

The work of Kitiarsa and Mathews, therefore, reveal that urban spaces within buildings often serve as cultural and social conjunctions of intersecting identities, practices and histories. At the same time, the existence of the Thai community within Singapore's social landscape at the Golden Mile Complex appears to align with Friedman's (1985) hypotheses of a 'world city'. This is where global transnational flows are closely linked to economic interests that inevitably impact the nature of urban development within a specific society. In other words, capitalist relations between different nations within the world economy and transfers of global capital are closely related to the overall growth or decline of certain urban spaces. Consequently, because of its economic growth, Singapore has emerged as a hub for global capital that attracts inward flows of migrants seeking employment, which often consists of Three-D workers. The liminoid character of the Golden Mile Complex can subsequently be understood as a reflection of its fringe status within the larger cultural ethos of Singaporean daily life. Inevitably, the relatively lower socio-economic positions of the building's residents, employees and patrons play a key role in constructing the character of the social spaces within it.

In terms of appearance, those familiar with local urban landscapes will notice the retro look of the building, which evokes a sense of nostalgia among older Singaporeans, as the building's facade reflects the design and architecture of a bygone era, and is reminiscent of

Singapore in the 1970s. On the other hand, the building has been relatively neglected and poorly maintained, leading to a certain tiredness in its physical surroundings, both outside and inside. With paint peeling and discolouration on the walls alongside uneven lighting, the tiles that line the floors or the railings along the floor edges and staircases are often worn, stained and grimy. The building was even referred to as a 'vertical slum' by a member of parliament (Koh 2016; Teo 2006). In recent years, discussions and debates on its continued existence have been raised, as attempts to demolish and redevelop the site have been prevented due to legal complications surrounding its sale (Koh 2016).

These observations parallel Krase's (2012) argument regarding the primacy of the visual in the study of society, particularly in urban spaces and landscapes that are constructed by their inhabitants. The present physical and visual state of the Golden Mile Complex, existing as a form of 'migrant' or 'ethnic' architecture (Krase 2012: 12), is suggestive of the unequal relationship of its community with mainstream Singaporean society. At the same time, one also cannot help but notice the spontaneity and colour of human activity at the Golden Mile Complex, in spite of the building's less-than-spectacular physical environment. During its peak hours, at mealtimes on Friday nights or weekends, one can often hear Thai pop or *luk thung*[2] music echoing throughout, added to the buzzing excitement of human chatter, which unavoidably recalls an evening on a busy market street in downtown Bangkok. It may be said that the Golden Mile Complex has been 'countrified' (Krase 2012: 14) over time by its transnational occupants, becoming part of their vernacular landscape.



Figure 3 – *Patrons enjoying Thai food at the Golden Mile Complex* – by Kevin Tan

According to Kitiarsa (2005: 195), in 2004-2005 there were almost 45,000 Thai migrant workers in Singapore. Most were, and many still are, from Isaan in Thailand's northeast, which is considered its poorest region. Although seldom discussed publicly, prostitution is another significant sector for Thai migrant labour in Singapore.[3] Nevertheless, in recent years, the influx of Thai persons into Singapore to seek employment has fallen. This was partly due to the overall economic success of Thailand by the turn of the new millennium, which reduced the

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[2] *Luk Thung* literally means 'child of the field', a genre of folk music that is particularly popular among rural persons from Thailand's Northeast, where a significant proportion of the Golden Mile Complex community comes from.

[3] They work in a state-regulated red-light district along Geylang Road, relatively near Beach Road. There are also significant numbers of undocumented Thai women and transgender persons who engage in illegal prostitution.

attractiveness of Singapore as a destination for economic migration. Despite these developments, the cultural presence of the Thai community at the Golden Mile Complex and other parts of Singapore has continued to thrive for varied reasons, at least for now. The building's greatest significance for many Singaporeans rests on the stereotype that it is a place where one can obtain 'authentic' Thai food and 'experience Thailand' due to its strong association to aspects of Thai cultural practices.

Further reflections of the liminoid character of the spaces inhabited by the building's community are the major Thai holidays and festivals that are celebrated within and around the Golden Mile Complex. Although never officially recognized by Singaporean society, most significant are celebrations of the *Songkran* and *Loy Krathong* festivals. The former, which takes place in mid-April, is loosely described as the Thai 'New Year,' and is celebrated with water dousing rituals in public. Similarly, the latter is another water-related festival that typically takes place on a full moon night in November, where *krathong*, hand-made containers decorated with pandan leaves and fragrant flowers are floated (or '*loy*' in Thai) on a river to symbolize the act of 'letting go' (Kislenko 2004: 141-142). Remarkably, as Singapore's Kallang River is only a short walk from the Golden Mile Complex, the *Loy Krathong* festival has become an annual affair that sees the participation of Thais, Singaporeans and other interested persons. Derived from syncretized regional beliefs in the goddess of water, dozens of *krathong* are floated by the shores of the Kallang River and reflect how culture, identity and belief can often transcend and intersect with the new spaces they inhabit.

Another example of such cultural intersections is that of organized religion, particularly as culture and belief systems are closely related for Thai people. This alludes to what Levitt (1998) has described as 'social remittances', where traditions, ideas and practices tend to flow from the source of transnational migrants to their recipient societies. Located at the front of the Golden Mile Complex is the Phra Phrom Shrine, a replica of the Erawan Shrine[4] in Bangkok, a religious shrine popular among Thais, Singaporeans and Chinese travellers that again reflects a form of religious syncretism that is Thai, Chinese, Buddhist, Hindu and Confucian all at once. After several years, it has become both a religious and cultural icon of the Golden Mile Complex, symbolizing the presence of aspects of Thai culture diffusing into the spaces around.



Fig. 4 – *The Golden Mile 'Four-faced Buddha'* – by Kevin Tan

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[4] The 'four-faced Buddha' is a Sino-Thai interpretation of the Hindu deity Brahma. 'Erawan' refers to a similar shrine located in the Ratchaprasong district of Bangkok. It is at the site of the former Erawan Hotel, which has been replaced by the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel.

**The Golden Mile Complex as Cultural Sanctuary and Ethnic Enclosure**

To complement the arguments of this article, I discuss the personal narratives of three individuals who gave their informed consent to share their reasons for coming to the Golden Mile Complex. For reasons of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in place of their real names. All three participants are women and were selected partly because they complement Kitiarsa's (2014) research with Thai workmen. Their personal narratives suggest that the decision to come to Singapore was not solely due to economic reasons, although this may have served as a necessary and initial basis for doing so. Seeking employment at the Golden Mile Complex was also very much an attempt to construct a new identity that provided further options for their lives and significant others. Each of their choices reflects a keen sense of agency within a broader structure of possibilities and obstacles. From the theoretical perspective of Practice Theory (Bourdieu 1990; O'Reilly 2012), the ongoing construction of each of their *habitus* is also contingent on their respective access to forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic and bodily). This, in turn, influences their personal *dispositions* and *strategies* as they seek to negotiate their practices within a broader field of the global economy.

*Fern, dancer from Khorat turned office worker*

Coming from the province of Nakhon Ratchasima, or better known by its shortened form Khorat among Thais, Fern grew up in relative poverty with her parents in a rural area. Becoming a single mum from an early age, she decided to leave her daughter in the care of her parents, hoping to seek better fortunes outside Thailand. She eventually came to Singapore and found work as a dancer in one of the discotheques at the Golden Mile Complex. A half year later, she became acquainted with a Singaporean man who was a regular patron at the discotheque, and their relationship ended in marriage. She subsequently gave up dancing as it did not fit her new status as a wife and mother, ultimately seeking employment at a remittance company in the same building. Now a mother of four children at the age of 35, she lives with her Singaporean in-laws who run a successful family business together with her husband.

> 'Am I happy? I guess one can say that I am happy being here…Being here, now working at ABC remittance company for around six years… Do I like Golden Mile? Well…I am not exactly sure as it certainly is still not the same as being back in Thailand, but at least I can access Thai food easily here...As for the future, I can clearly say that I don't see my future here and would never try to become a Singapore citizen. This is also partly because my husband and I have decided that we intend to return to Thailand and live out the rest of our lives there when we grow old…and with our children done with their studies…At the same time frankly, I don't try to think too much either…we want to take it easy or just get by…I have many good friends here…that's all to my life, really nothing special (chuckle)…just this…all I have.' (Fern, translated from Thai)

Although many things in her life have improved since her marriage, Fern still misses Thailand and eventually intends to return for good. But new challenges face her in Singapore, as her in-laws have never entirely accepted nor trust her as part of their family. Being a foreigner

and having worked in a discotheque appears to have some negative bearing on her reputation among her Singaporean in-laws. This is most evident from the fact that she has never been entrusted with any substantial responsibility in the family business. At the time of our conversation, she highlighted that she needed to keep her job to ensure a steady income for herself, as her in-laws do not give her a monthly allowance[5]. Fern's husband also maintains tight control over his monthly earnings, which he only partially shares with her in the form of irregular hand-outs, which she feels are never enough for herself and her children. This has led to growing tensions in her marriage and with her in-laws.



Fig. 5 – *One of the discos in the Golden Mile Complex* – by Kevin Tan

### *Shifting identities: Jo, the lawyer who wanted to come 'see see'*

It would be a false assumption that the community at the Golden Mile Complex only consists of either Thais or Singaporeans. Such is the case of 31-year-old Jo, who is an ethnic Chinese person from Myanmar, and has lived and worked in Singapore for nearly eight years. Possessing a law degree, she grew up speaking Mandarin Chinese at home and taught herself Thai over the years working at the Golden Mile Complex. Her decision to come to Singapore was largely motivated by the potential of a better income coupled with a personal wish to leave Myanmar to, in her own words, 'see see' (看看 in Mandarin Chinese) the world. Coming from a family with five elder brothers, and originally intending to only spend a year in Singapore, Jo fell in love and married a Singaporean engineer she met through an online dating website. They have a son and have been together for six years.

Despite this change to her initial plans, Jo never regretted her extended stay, partly because incomes in Myanmar are far inferior to what she receives in Singapore. She also feels that her quality of life in Singapore is much better. Since her marriage and the subsequent birth of her son, Jo feels relatively settled with the life she leads. Although she plans to apply for Singaporean citizenship soon, Jo prefers her son to grow up acknowledging his Myanmese background. When asked if she had any qualms about being a clerk instead of pursuing a career

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[5] Clerks at Fern's remittance company typically earn $1,000 to $1,800 Singaporean dollars a month. This is also subject to an approximate 20% deduction that is deposited into a retirement savings plan that is mandatory for citizens or permanent residents.

in law, Jo had no misgivings. This is partly because she feels that Singapore has given her a stable and comfortable life, not to mention a family of her own. She has adapted well to life and the community at the Golden Mile Complex has provided her a source of support and many close friends. Work arrangements are also ideal as her company allows her to avoid working weekends because of her childcare commitments at home.

Ironically, even though her parents want her to become Singaporean, Jo's own parents have no intention of joining her in Singapore. This is because they find life in Singapore too crowded, too impersonal and too urbanized. Even so, Jo regards local approaches to doing things 'step-by-step' in a more orderly manner to be more appealing compared to the rampant corruption she experienced in Myanmar. She highlighted that there are 'laws' in place for Singaporeans and this is preferable for her, so she is willing to exchange a more carefree and easy-going environment for this, although she still misses Myanmar. Nonetheless, she has mixed views about the future:

> I know my husband wants me to become one of the people here…I understand why…I had to give all this a lot of thought as I was quite torn at the start…One bad thing about this place (Singapore) is that it is not a good place to grow old in. I don't want to be here, especially when you grow old. I do think about going back but it's not back to Myanmar. I am thinking about Mae Sai in Northern Thailand…we can actually still buy a home there. Just thinking you know? Maybe up there is still a better place to grow old. When we get to the age of 60 and above I guess…over here in Golden Mile, I don't really like this place as it can get too complicated at night with all the discos and pubs… (Jo, Translated from Mandarin Chinese)

At this point, although it is evident that the Golden Mile Complex is often associated with 'Thai-ness,' it would be misleading to assume that Thai identity is simply restricted to nationality. As in the case of Jo, who is technically *Lisu* in terms of heritage but has Myanmese nationality, I have come across several self-identified Thai persons who are Malaysian citizens. Many are from northern Malaysian states such as Perlis, Kedah and Kelantan, bordering southern Thailand. Distinct Thai communities have existed on the Malaysian side of the border for decades and many there identify themselves as Thai and not Malay in terms of cultural identity (Johnson 2012; Samrong 2014), not to mention being Buddhists. In fact, Thai-Malaysians at the Golden Mile Complex account for a sizable portion of people employed there. This implies that many within the Golden Mile community often hold complex, intersecting and transcultural identities. It is apparent, therefore, that nationality, in many cases, does not give a clear indication of the multiple alternate or sub-identities one can hold on to. One such Thai-Malaysian, is Mai, who works in the same remittance company as Fern.

### *Mai, who does not want to 'kid maak'*

Mai hails from Perlis, Malaysia, and has worked at a remittance company at the Golden Mile Complex for the last six years. She moved to Singapore at the age of 22 at the encouragement of her husband, who had arrived four years earlier to obtain similar employment as a remittance clerk. While initially hesitant, as this meant leaving her children behind, the prospect of a better

income compared to what she earned working in paddy fields with her ageing parents motivated her to '*long du*' (Thai for try and see). Her husband subsequently found employment as a cook in a Thai restaurant away from The Golden Mile Complex. Mai lodges in a rented apartment in the upper levels of the building while her husband stays elsewhere, as the Golden Mile Complex is too far from his workplace.

As her children (a two-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter) are still young and are looked after by their grandparents, Mai returns to Perlis to visit them whenever she can afford to. When asked about her cultural identity, Mai readily identifies as a Thai person, although she is also fluent in Malay. The fourth child among five sisters, Mai grew up along the somewhat culturally porous Thailand-Malaysian border, where she was educated in local Thai schools in a community with overlapping national and cultural identities. Her daily life now centres on the Golden Mile Complex, largely because of her limited command of English or Mandarin Chinese, which are still a challenge for her in daily conversation. There is a sense of ambiguity when it comes to her views of her adopted home at the Golden Mile Complex, because although it has provided her familiarity and security in terms of language and food, she has never felt entirely comfortable with the seedier side of its nightlife and its poorly maintained amenities.

> 'I am Thai but I live and was born in Malaysia…I can speak Malay and Thai. I learnt Thai before but I am not very good at reading and writing. Anyway, if I can find a better paying job here I will also consider changing work, but it is not easy. It is even harder to find work in Malaysia …I don't like this place and don't have strong feelings about being here, things here are at most, ordinary…But it is still convenient for me when it comes to language and communication. I usually get up at 7 am on the days when I need to work but will sleep in a little later if I have an off day. I don't go around very often. At most with colleagues or meet my husband. I don't have many friends beyond those at Golden Mile…no Singaporean friends…When I first came here I never liked it very much, but it's the best I can find. It's like a little Thailand here but you get all kinds of people here although Thai persons here are the most… Anyway, we (with husband) have no intentions to remain here long term. Our home is really in Perlis, in Malaysia…' Mai (translated from Thai)

Mai's greatest reason for being at the Golden Mile Complex is to make as much money as possible before returning to her family and children in Malaysia. In another two years, her elder child will be entering primary school and she hopes to be home by then. This is because she still views Perlis as her home and eventually wants to return there. It naturally follows that she would never consider becoming a Singapore citizen, being both Thai and Malaysian. Life in Singapore is, at best, a necessary but transitional phase for her. However, it is not clear if she will truly have enough in terms of income and savings, as even the purchase a mobile phone is considered a major expense. But until then, Mai and her husband are hoping for the best and are trying not to '*kid maak*' (Thai for 'think much') about the future.

Mai's story reveals that not all Thai persons who come to the Golden Mile Complex necessarily achieve their hopes and dreams of a better life. On the surface, the stories of Fern

and Jo suggest that they are the more fortunate ones, as they married Singaporean men who appear to have a greater capacity to provide for them. On the other hand, Mai's situation is filled with more immediate uncertainty. While her young children remain in Perlis, she and her husband need to remain in Singapore for an indefinite period as their combined salaries are modest at best. Mai's account likely mirrors the ambiguous future that many transient workers at the Golden Mile Complex often face. There are no clear indications of when she and her husband can be permanently reunited with their children in the future.



Figure 6 – *Loy Krathong celebrations. Handmade krathong on sale* – by Kevin Tan

**Traversing the Golden Mile: Recognizing Singapore's transnational precariat**
The personal stories of Fern, Jo and Mai provide a humanizing voice to the many whose lives revolve around the community at the Golden Mile Complex. Their narratives evoke a better understanding of how the building, at least partly, serves as a *cultural sanctuary* for transnational migrants like them, who have come to Singapore in the hope of building a better life for themselves. Although they have lived several years in Singapore, it was apparent that their sense of identity, belonging and emotional ties remain with Thailand, Myanmar or Malaysia. For Fern and Jo, this is despite having married a Singaporean and bearing children; with Mai's situation appearing more fragile. This suggests that the spaces of the Golden Mile Complex, although providing valuable income, cultural familiarity and social support, is simultaneously rejected as a long-term goal or an enduring solution to personal challenges. A part of the reason is that life at the Golden Mile Complex is, paradoxically, also a constant reminder of what each of them had hoped to transcend or escape from in their previous lives before arriving in Singapore.

There is obviously a sense of ambivalence among all three women despite their respective attempts at taking charge of their lives by reconstructing them with new meanings. This is because the *cultural sanctuary* of the building's spaces for these women is closely entwined with their recognition of its alternate character as an *ethnic enclosure* with a 'ghetto-like' quality, which inadvertently highlights and reinforces the cultural boundaries between their respective *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990) and those of local-born Singaporeans. Regardless of the efforts they have invested to build their lives in Singapore, each of them still only has the Golden Mile Complex as a source of meaningful employment. Although two of them are

married to Singaporeans, their daily lives and concerns still revolve around sustaining meaningful ties with the societies they originated from, and this is often achieved by maintaining a *habitus* that relies heavily on practices and relationships found at the very same site of their employment.

It may also be argued, then, that the spaces at the Golden Mile Complex are both *home* and *hostel* for Fern, Jo and Mai, in their daily struggle as part of a global *precariat* (Standing 2014),[6] where occupational insecurity and social-cultural marginality are often experienced. At the same time, the liminoid character of these spaces serves to heighten a certain vagueness regarding their present and future. Similarly, as argued by Pardo (1996; 2012: 30-45) in his ethnographic study of ordinary citizens in Naples, the management of their existence in Singapore is, therefore, a constant attempt at negotiating and re-negotiating the possibilities and limits of the liminoid space they occupy. This is further complicated by structural forces such as the state and its social policies that often pose challenges to a *strong continuous interaction* between the tangible and non-tangible dimensions of their daily lives (Pardo 1996: 11; 2012: 33).

While a sense of agency in each of their lives is certainly evident, the challenges remain. Although life in Singapore offers some measure of comfort and security, Mai is still underemployed, notwithstanding her relatively low salary, and separated from her children indefinitely. Not too far from such realities is Fern's own marginal and occasionally strained status as an outsider within her husband's family business, precipitating the need for her to return to the Golden Mile Complex to enable greater economic security. Even for Jo, with a law degree, the promise of eventual Singaporean citizenship does not diminish her concerns or worries about Singapore not being the ideal place to grow old comfortably. While life at the Golden Mile Complex has allowed each of them to transcend the limits and hardships of their former lives, it has not enabled them to go much further without feeling any apprehension.

The Golden Mile Complex's dual function as *sanctuary* and *enclosure* for those who work and live there further suggests an unmistakable aura of *cultural otherness* that shrouds the building and its immediate vicinity. This view echoes Wacquant's (2004, 2012) arguments about the 'Janus-faced' nature of 'ethnoracial enclosures' in his writings on ghettos. The Golden Mile Complex protects but also ironically constrains the lives of its inhabitants. Its status as an ethnic enclave is, therefore, largely due to deeply embedded structures of self-conscious and essentializing narratives that marginalize the everyday experiences of how Singaporeans perceive cultural diversity among themselves and in relation to 'outsiders' (Saad 2013; Tan 2013).

This is again revealing of how Thai cultural identity and its accompanying practices and beliefs, although having existed in Singapore for decades, have never been recognized as part of its societal consciousness or national narratives. Attempts at integration have, at best, been minimal, due to the limited resources of non-state agencies (Mohamad Salleh 2014) that often struggle against rigid views of citizenship that privilege presumed commonalities, allowing less tolerance for diversity and difference (Thompson 2014). And while it has been suggested

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[6] Coined by Standing (2014), 'precariat' is a portmanteau of the words 'precarious' and 'proletariat'.

elsewhere that migrant communities may potentially negotiate with some degree of success between alternating identities (Aguilar-San Juan 2005), this may prove to be difficult in the face of the racialized and culturally determinist discourses maintained by the state.

In other words, the continued existence of the Thai community at the Golden Mile Complex suggests that the simplistic 'multiracial' categories of 'Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other' practiced by the state (Ackerman 1997; Benjamin 1976) may have inadvertently reinforced reductionist perceptions of cultural identity, where 'unclassifiable' persons or communities are conveniently defined as 'others' or labelled culturally alien to the nationalist rhetoric of Singaporean-ism. As a result, the spaces of the Golden Mile Complex have evolved into a site of urban and cultural marginality, where associated identities and practices considered non-Singaporean are drawn to and concurrently bound by it. Such sites are also often stigmatized as sources of 'social problems' due to their liminoid status. And while Singaporeans can enter its confines and even regard its transnational community as a temporary spectacle, it is conversely harder for its long-term inhabitants to venture beyond it.

As Singapore's 'Little Thailand', the Golden Mile Complex exists as a '*space out of place*', reflecting ongoing economic, political and cultural discourses that construct and reify its urban marginality. Too often, recurring discussions or debates about social integration in Singapore (Liu 2014; Rahman and Tong 2013) have a selective tendency only to consider the lives of its citizens, either 'native' or naturalized, while ignoring the lives of disempowered 'foreign bodies' who co-exist with Singaporeans within the same cultural spaces (Poo 2009). It is often conveniently forgotten that such persons, nevertheless, are just as crucial in terms of playing a role in Singapore's sustainability and 'success' as a nation. As observed by Kitiarsa (2005, 2009 and 2014), many Thai workers and other migrant labour are often the ones who engage in forms of employment that many Singaporeans would shun. Such persons are part of an *invisible* transnational precariat of 'low-end globalization', who form the urban 'underbelly' (Yeoh and Chang 2001) of the city-state's existence, as they silently prop up key sectors of Singapore's social and economic infrastructures.

However, perhaps the final question that remains is that of the future of the Golden Mile Complex. Partly the result of Singapore's own attempts at employing sizable foreign labour from Thailand from over 30 years ago, there are signs that the building's community and its liminoid spaces may be in danger of dissipating. Over the last 10 years, the numbers of Thai persons or those with close links to the community at the Golden Mile Complex have fallen. While Thai persons, particularly those involved in low-wage manual labour, are no longer arriving in vast numbers as they used to in the distant past, recent changes in the Singapore government's approach to immigrant labour may have also heightened ambivalent attitudes towards them.

Since the 2011 general elections, when growing dissatisfaction with the state's neoliberal employment and migration policies led to a significant loss of votes for the ruling party, more stringent criteria have been applied to the hiring of foreign labour and inward immigration (Chang 2015). Because of these changes and the rapid redevelopment and gentrification of the area along Beach Road, the Golden Mile Complex and the lesser known Golden Mile Tower are increasingly at risk of becoming urban anachronisms. At the time of writing, new office

complexes and a new hotel have been built along Beach Road, and stand in an incongruous, uncertain relationship with their older neighbours. Perhaps in time, Singapore's 'Little Thailand' will be enveloped by the very forces that first gave birth to it, and along with it, the stories and lives of the silent voices who once traversed the Golden Mile.

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