A City of the Global North and South: The Appeal of Dubai for Non-Western Expatriates
Anju Mary Paul, Mustafa Yavaş, and Sejin Park
New York University Abu Dhabi

Introduction

> *Dubai is the perfect blend of the East and West. It's homey enough … You have [Indian] services, groceries, people, food, as close to India as you want to be. But you have the infrastructure of the West. That's what makes Dubai very unique.*

This quote comes from Ayesha, a 30-year-old Indian Muslim woman who emigrated from India to the US at the age of 18 to pursue a bachelor's degree in business. She worked there for several years before being headhunted to join a start-up in Dubai. During her interview, Ayesha spoke of her desire to continue living in Dubai as it offered her the best parts of India *and* the West. Such multinational, East-West-East migrations of high-skilled migrants like Ayesha are typically missed in the high-skilled migration literature that, broadly speaking, either focuses on Westward migrations from the Global South for career and training opportunities (Paul 2021; Yavaş *forthcoming*) or Western migrants' temporary movements as intra-company transfers (Beaverstock 2005; Walsh 2012; Kunz 2023) or digital nomads (Mancinelli 2020; Korpela 2020; Benson and O'Reilly 2009).

We suspect that this scholarly blindspot is, at least partly, a result of an unquestioned assumption about the gravitational pull of Western destinations for non-Western migrants. We test this assumption by assessing Dubai's appeal amongst skilled migrants from the Global South. In the last two decades, Dubai, the largest city of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has rapidly developed into the preferred regional headquarters location for multinational corporations operating in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It has also quickly risen through global city rankings compiled by consultancies and academics (Lohmeyer, Buckstaff, and Longhi 2023).

Drawing on a survey of 1,000 high-skilled migrants in the UAE from South Asia, MENA, and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as 48 in-depth interviews with white-collar professionals from these regions who were working in Dubai, we find that Dubai holds a unique appeal to them, representing *both* a "city of the Global North" and a "city of the Global South." As a city of the Global North, Dubai offers (1) increased economic benefits, (2) enriched lifestyle, and (3) greater safety and security that migrants associate with the constructed category of the Global North. These benefits are universally applicable to all skilled migrants working as expatriates in the UAE, regardless of their origin country. But Dubai also offers benefits that apply *only* to skilled migrants from South Asia, MENA, and Sub-Saharan Africa: (1) geographic proximity to these migrants' origin countries, (2) cultural familiarity given the long-standing populations of migrants from these regions living in the UAE and the various cultural and social institutions that have developed alongside these communities, and finally, (3) greater tolerance for the specific religious and racial identities of these Global South migrants. In these latter ways, Dubai retains a sense of being part of and connected to the Global South for Southern migrants like Ayesha, which broadens its appeal.

Theoretical Framework

Defining the Global North and South

Attempts at classifying countries into broad categories are always fraught with the risk of oversimplification. However, the binary-based classification system of North vs South countries continues to be a popular way of dividing up the world. This system – depicted through the Brandt line in 1980 – divided the world into an industrialized (and rich) set of Northern countries and a set of poorer and under-developed Southern countries (Brandt 1980). While scholars debate this binary's continuing value, it is often used as a shorthand to differentiate between rich and poor countries (Khan et al. 2022; Lees 2020). Often, the category of Northern countries is conflated with that of Western countries, another constructed category. However, the group of Global South countries has undergone significant differentiation. High-income countries like Singapore and the oil-producing countries of the Arabian Gulf continue to be listed as Global South countries though their high per capita incomes and human development index scores indicate that they can no longer wear that label comfortably. Our paper's interrogation of Dubai as a city of the Global North *and* South also aims to reveal this nomenclature's inadequacies, especially in the world of high-skilled migration.

High-Skilled Migration

High-skilled migrants are typically defined as possessing a college degree or higher (Skeldon 2020) and such migrants are often viewed as seeking a greater return on their human capital, attempting to move to countries where their education and skills will be better rewarded. High-income countries extend more favorable immigration policies to high-skilled migrants, often extending the possibility of permanent residence and citizenship to these migrants. High-skilled migrants are also often allowed to sponsor their dependents to move with them, allowing them to migrate as a family unit. As predicted by human capital theory, a significant chunk of high-skilled migration is directed toward the West (Kerr et al. 2016). Western countries are often mentioned as "dream destinations" by aspiring migrants from developing countries (Pugliese and Ray 2023). There is significantly less research on the appeal of non-Western high-income countries.

Despite offering a chance of permanent residency and citizenship, high-skilled migrants from Global South countries may experience racial, religious, or gender-based discrimination in the West (Banerjee 2022; Bhatt 2018; Al Ariss 2010). While Western skilled migrants are often portrayed as comfortably moving in and out of transnational circles, studies of non-Western skilled migrants in the West emphasize the many ways in which they have to negotiate their "otherness" in their host society (Nagel 2005). These challenges sometimes lead to return migration to origin countries (Paul 2021), or what Anju Paul (2023) calls "halfway-return" to countries that offer geographical and cultural proximity to their home country, and better career and lifestyle prospects than they can enjoy at home (e.g., Chinese- and Indian-born scientists who were trained in the West but chose to relocate to Singapore).

The Rise of Global Cities in the Global South

Since Sassen's (2001 [1991]) classic work describing New York, London, and Tokyo as global cities, other global cities have been identified using economic metrics. For example, the Globalization and World Cities (GaWC) research network at Loughborough University publishes a decadal list of "Alpha++," "Alpha+," "Alpha," "Alpha-," "Beta+," etc. cities based upon the concentration of advanced producer services (from accounting to strategic consulting) in each city. There have been only two Alpha++ cities: New York City and London. Singapore is listed as an Alpha+ city in the GaWC 2020 report, but it has had that classification since 2000, the first time the report was published. Interestingly, Dubai was listed as a "Beta" city in 2000, but by 2020, it had moved up to Alpha+ status alongside Singapore and other global cities such as Paris, Tokyo, and Beijing. (It is worth noting the presence of several Global South cities in this Alpha+ list: Beijing in China, Dubai in the UAE and the city-state of Singapore.)

Some have argued for a broadening of the classification systems of global cities to include not only economic criteria so as to not impose a single (Western) developmental and governance model onto our analyses of cities in the South (Dawson and Edwards 2004; Robinson 2002; Shatkin 2007). Dawson and Edwards (2004) also point out that global cities of the South were often key nodes in "the old imperial maps" before this latest round of economic globalization. The legacy of those colonial flows and the mixing of peoples and cultures lives on in these cities in ways that could create a different experience for migrants in these locations.

Nevertheless, studies of global cities of the South tend not to mention Dubai but rather list cities like Mexico City, Johannesburg, São Paulo, Delhi, Istanbul, etc. We suspect that this omission has to do with the rapid development of the UAE into a high-income country in the last few decades. Meanwhile, these other cities are situated in low-to-middle-income and upper-middle-income countries that are still firmly identified with the Global South. How should one classify Dubai in this case? Is it a Northern global city, as it tries to project? Or is it a Southern global city, given the UAE's classification as a Global South country? To tackle these questions, we analyze the migration journeys and stories of non-Western high-skilled migrants in Dubai and the UAE.

Background to the United Arab Emirates

The UAE has transformed itself from a poor Bedouin community to a high-income country in less than 50 years. Its vast oil and gas deposits have spurred the country's rapid development, including significant and sustained (though temporary) migration from neighboring countries. According to UN data, migrants accounted for 87.9 percent of the UAE's total population in 2019. The recognition that the UAE's oil and gas reserves will eventually run out has incentivized the country to diversify its economy and begin a shift to a knowledge-based one. The UAE increasingly gears its migration policies towards attracting high-skilled and high-net-worth migrants, in addition to the unskilled and mid-skilled migration streams that are more long-standing (Malecki and Ewers 2007). The UAE now also allows foreigners full ownership of businesses in certain industries. In 2019, the UAE introduced the Golden Visa scheme, which allows certain high-skilled individuals to stay in the UAE for up to 10 years

(rather than the typical two- or three-year renewable work permits) without the need for an employer to sponsor their residency. Meanwhile, migrants on dependent visas are eligible to work in the UAE as long as they have a "No Objection Certificate" from their spouse. Overall, the UAE prides itself on being a business-friendly hub with consistently high scores on issues such as public safety, trust in government, and livability. However, it still does not offer a viable pathway to citizenship for most migrants, leaving them in a state of permanent transience.

Data and Methods

Data collection for this project followed a two-pronged strategy. We first conducted an online survey (through a survey research firm) to capture the migration trajectories of at least 1,000 high-skilled migrants in the UAE while also unearthing much-needed socioeconomic and demographic data on high-skilled migrants in the UAE. To be eligible, participants needed to have lived in the UAE for at least one year, be aged between 21-65 years, have at least a college degree, and originate from a country in South Asia, the Middle East (except the UAE), or Africa.

We also interviewed 48 skilled migrants who fulfilled the above criteria but who had also worked in at least one other country other than their birth country before moving to the UAE. For this, we primarily relied on a premium service of LinkedIn to identify account holders based in the UAE who were working at a 2022 Global Fortune 500 company and who appeared to fit our nationality criteria based on their education. We complemented this approach with snowball recruitment. We interviewed willing participants about how and why they ended up in the UAE, their migration experience, motivations, and future plans.

Dubai as the Best of Both Worlds

Discussion of Survey Data

After dropping 49 respondents who were born in the UAE or gave incomplete answers, our final survey sample contained exactly 1,000 respondents. Our "average" survey respondent was a 37-year-old Muslim man from South Asia, married with one child, holding a bachelor's degree, and working in Dubai (see Table 1). Roughly two-thirds of our sample came from South Asia, but a quarter of respondents hail from MENA, and just under 10 percent are from Sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile, 40 percent of respondents were female, allowing us to make comparisons across gender, region, and nationality. The top 11 nationalities together accounted for just over 90 percent of the survey sample, with India, Pakistan, Egypt, Syria, and Sudan being the top five nationalities (see Table 2). While no official population breakdown exists for the UAE along nationality and skill lines, these countries are some of the most common sources of non-Western migrants in the UAE. Amongst respondents who were employed full-time or part-time, their average monthly salary was just under AED21,000 (equivalent to an annual salary of USD110,000 PPP of 2023 in the US).

When asked how much they had wanted to leave their previous country and move to the UAE, respondents expressed significant desire with an average interest of 3.69 out of 5 (see Table 3). Respondents from the MENA region had the strongest desire to move to the UAE, followed by respondents from Sub-Saharan Africa and, finally, South Asian respondents. Better

work opportunities and standard of living were the two most important reasons behind each group's move. The widest divergence across the three groups was the desire to be in a familiar culture, which was least relevant for Sub-Saharan migrants but most for MENA migrants. Regarding their likelihood of staying put in the UAE over the next five years, the average response was 4.3/5 (see Table 4), significantly higher than the likelihood of either moving onward to another country (3/5) or returning to their home country (3.01/5).

Discussion of Interview Findings

While our survey data revealed respondents' high levels of satisfaction with their lives in the UAE, our interviews helped us unpack the specific appeal of the UAE, and Dubai in particular. Our interviewees repeatedly highlighted that Dubai represented *both* a "city of the Global North" and a "city of the Global South" to them. As the migration scholarship suggests, the greater socioeconomic returns these migrants enjoyed in Dubai was a key factor. Dubai provides expatriate workers with various benefits, sometimes even surpassing the financial returns from comparable positions in Western countries, partly thanks to its lack of personal income tax. Interviewees also reported that Dubai offers lifestyle benefits, including a well-maintained public infrastructure, affordable access to household help due to the cheap cost of manual labor, and a sense of greater public safety. In contrast, our interviewees repeatedly mentioned their fear of increasing crime in iconic Western metropoles such as New York and Paris.

While these factors would make Dubai attractive to *any* expatriate, interviewees also described characteristics of the city that were uniquely appealing to them. Geographic proximity to their countries of origin in South Asia, MENA, and Africa enabled them to enjoy frequent (and affordable) visits to family back home. Interviewees, particularly South Asian and MENA expatriates, often highlighted Dubai's cultural familiarity given its long-standing migrant populations from these regions and the various amenities (from mosques, to supermarkets and restaurants offering halal and other ethnic food options, to schools teaching their national curriculum) that have developed alongside these communities, making Dubai feel "like home." They also reported greater acceptance of their religious and ethnic identities, something they either experienced as lacking in the global cities of the North or imagined would be absent there.

While there were cross-regional differences within our sample, with Sub-Saharan African interviewees encountering more racism relative to the other two groups, our findings still point to the specific attractions of Dubai that make it uniquely appealing to non-Western expatriates from South Asia, MENA, and Sub-Saharan Africa. These factors can discourage them from seeking onward migration to the West or returning to their origin countries. In this manner, our analysis highlights the shifting destination hierarchies for skilled, non-Western migrants with significant mobility capital, offering a glimpse into a potential "post-West" world of skilled migration geographies.

References

Banerjee, P. 2022. *The Opportunity Trap: High-skilled Workers, Indian Families, and the Failures of the Dependent Visa Program*. New York: NYU Press.

Beaverstock, J.V. 2005. "Transnational Elites in the City: British Highly-Skilled Inter-Company Transferees in New York City's Financial District." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(2):245-268.

Bhatt, A. 2018. *High-Tech Housewives: Indian IT Workers, Gendered Labor, and Transmigration*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Czaika, M. (Ed). 2018. *High-Skilled Migration: Drivers and Policies*. Oxford University Press.

Dawson, A. and Edwards, B.H. 2004. "Introduction: Global Cities of the South." *Social Text* 22(4):1-7.

Kapur, D., and McHale, J. (2005). *Give Us Your Best and Brightest: The Global Hunt for Talent and its Impact on the Developing World*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

Lohmeyer, R., Buckstaff, B. and Longhi, M. 2023. *The Distributed Geography of Opportunity: The 2023 Global Cities Report.* Chicago, IL: Kearney.

Kerr, S.P., Kerr, W., Özden, C. and Parsons, C. 2016. "Global Talent Flows." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30(4): 83-106.

Kunz, S. 2023. *Expatriate: Following a Migration Category.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Mancinelli, F. 2020. "Digital Nomads: Freedom, Responsibility and the Neoliberal Order." *Information Technology and Tourism* 22:417–437.

Nagel, C. 2005. "Skilled Migration in Global Cities from 'Other' Perspectives: British Arabs, Identity Politics, and Local Embeddedness." *Geoforum* 36(2): 197-210.

Paul, A.M. 2021. *Asian Scientists on the Move: Changing Science in a Changing Asia.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Paul, A.M. 2023. "A Home Away from One's Home: The Halfway-Return of Western-Trained Asian Scientists." *Global Perspectives* 4(1).

Pugliese, A. and Ray, J. 2023. "Nearly 900 Million Worldwide Wanted to Migrate in 2021." Gallup. January 24, 2023.

Robinson, J. 2002. "Global and World Cities: A View from Off the Map." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26(3):531–554.

Ruhs, M. 2013. The Price of Rights: Regulating International Labor Migration. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Shatkin, G. 2007. "Global Cities of the South: Emerging Perspectives on Growth and Inequality." *Cities* 24(1):1-15.

Skeldon, R. 2018. "High-Skilled Migration and the Limits of Migration Policies." Pp.48-64 in Mathias Czaika (ed.), High-Skilled Migration: Drivers and Policies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yavaş, M. *Forthcoming. White Collar Blues: The Making of the Transnational Turkish Middle Class*. Columbia University Press.

Walsh, K. 2012. "Emotion and Migration: British Transnationals in Dubai." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30:43-59.

Table 1 **Descriptive Statistics from Survey (N = 1,000)**

Variable	%	Variable	%
Gender		Religion[1]	
Male	60%	Muslim	67%
Female	40%	Hindu	16%
		Christian	15%
		Others	2%
Age Range (years)		Marital Status	
21-30	18%	Married	82%
31-40	54%	Single	13%
41-50	20%	Living with partner	5%
51-60	7%	Divorced/Separated	0.8%
61+	1%	Widowed	0.2%
Highest Degree		Origin Region	
Bachelor's	67%	South Asia	66%
Master's	27%	MENA (except UAE)	25%
Professional	4%	Sub-Saharan Africa	10%
Doctoral	2%		
Number of Children		Emirate of Residence	
0	24%	Dubai	50%
1	32%	Abu Dhabi	25%
2	32%	Sharjah	18%
3	10%	Other Emirates	7%
4+	3%		
Employment Status		Number of Migrations	
Employed Full-time	78%	1	86%
Employed Part-time	6%	2	6%
Homemaker	11%	3	6%
Others	3%	4+	2%
Job Type (for employed respondents)_		Solo Migration to the UAE	71%
Professional/Managerial	84%		
Skilled Worker	11%		
Self-Employed	5%		

Notes

[1]Only 973 participants indicated their religion and so percentages were calculated using 978 as the denominator.

Table 2   **Top Primary Nationalities in the Survey (N = 1,000)**

Nationality	Total (% of N)	Male (% of N)	Female (% of N)
India	443 (44%)	242 (24%)	201 (20%)
Pakistan	185 (18%)	126 (13%)	59 (6%)
Egypt	97 (10%)	62 (6%)	35 (3%)
Syria	61 (6%)	47 (5%)	14 (1%)
Sudan	26 (3%)	16 (2%)	10 (1%)
Nigeria	18 (2%)	13 (6%)	5 (<1%)
Sri Lanka	18 (2%)	7 (6%)	11 (1%)
Jordan	17 (2%)	8 (6%)	9 (1%)
Morocco	16 (2%)	8 (6%)	8 (1%)
Algeria	16 (2%)	9 (6%)	7 (1%)
Lebanon	12 (1%)	5 (0%)	7 (1%)
Sub-Total	**909 (91%)**	**543 (54%)**	**366 (36%)**

Notes: All nationalities with at least 10 respondents are listed.

Table 3   **Desire and Reasons for UAE Migration, Averages by Region**

	Average for All	Average for South Asians	Average for MENA	Average for Sub-Saharan Africans
Desire to Move to the UAE[1]	3.67	3.59	3.91	3.69
Importance of Reasons for Move[2]				
Work/Career Opportunities	4.30	4.23	4.50	4.28
Better Standard of Living	4.23	4.20	4.40	4.06
Low Taxes	3.86	3.95	3.81	3.36
Closer to Family	3.56	3.68	3.49	2.85
Closer to Friends	3.21	3.35	3.15	2.42
Similar/Familiar Culture	3.71	3.70	4.06	2.74
Religious Acceptance	3.86	3.80	4.18	3.39
Other Reasons	3.17	3.22	3.09	3.03

Notes:

[1]Respondents responded using a 5-point scale, with 1 being "Not at all" and 5 being "A lot."

[2]Respondents responded using a 5-point scale, with 1 being "Not important" and 5 being "Very Important."

Table 4   **Likelihood of Possible Futures in Next Five Years, Averages by Region**

	Average for All	South Asians	MENA	Sub-Saharan Africans
Staying put in the UAE[1]	4.30	4.34	4.40	3.76
Moving on to another Country	3.00	3.02	2.73	3.54
Returning to Home Country[2]	3.01	3.05	2.82	3.16

Notes:

[1]Respondents responded using a 5-point scale, with 1 being "Not at all" and 5 being "A lot."

[2]Respondents responded using a 5-point scale, with 1 being "Not important" and 5 being "Very Important."