

Migration narratives in Singapore: from economic imperatives to counter-perspectives on ethnicity and age

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Conceptual framework

Managed migration (skills-focused)

- Kofman (2005)
- Yeoh (2006)

Urban diversity (multiculturalism vs. politics of co-ethnicity)

- Vertovec (2007)
- Kymlicka (1995)
- Tsuda (2003; Ho (2019)

Social reproduction (ageing migrants & global care chains)

- Hochschild (2000)
- Mitchell, Marston & Katz (2004)
- Kofman (2012)

Migration in Singapore (SG)

- MM to recruit young migrants to compensate for twin demographic challenges: fertility & ageing
- Research has largely focused on the 'bifurcation' of skilled and low-skilled labour (Yeoh, 2006)
 - Privilege vs. precarity (various references)
 - Politics of urban diversity, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in SG
- Other research on SG has looked at marriage migration, 'study' mothers & international students (various references)
- Paucity of research on the new entrepreneurs and investor migrants despite their visibility in mass media and social media news
- Economistic narratives of migration (and source countries) circulate alongside another set of pre-independence migration histories ('pioneer migrants' tying SG to China and India (Ho, 2019))

Presentation focus

- State-led migration narratives in SG emphasise the economic benefits allegedly to be reaped from migration (proposed 'truths')
- But underlying such narratives are Singaporeans' counter-narratives of economic competition and co-ethnic tensions with migrants → compels government responses
- Also surfaces yet-to-be tackled questions over how some groups of migrants are ageing in Singapore alongside its own greying local population
- Informs academic understanding of multiculturalism/politics of co-ethnicity and the role of social reproduction in circuits of (economic) migration

SG government narratives of migration

- Managed migration to fill low-skilled '3D' jobs and domestic work, alongside addressing skills shortages in other industries, especially in high growth sectors ('talent migration')
- Low-skilled migrants hold limited work visas and have restricted working rights; employers pay levies and hiring quotas for non-domestic work sectors
- Purportedly skilled migrants faced growing restrictions (e.g. salary levels) to qualify for 'S' passes, employment passes (EP) and permanent residency (PR), especially since 2011 general elections (voter dissatisfaction)
- Yet concurrently creation of new visa categories for entrepreneur and investor migrants (for the latter, a fast-track towards PR)

Modified points-based system since 2023

COMPASS POINTS SYSTEM FOR EMPLOYMENT PASS APPLICATIONS

All applications are scored on four foundational criteria

	Individual attributes	Firm-related attributes
Points for each criterion 20 Exceeds expectations 10 Meets expectations 0 Does not meet expectations	C1. Salary Relative to local PMET salary norms for sector C2. Qualifications For recognised qualifications	C3. Diversity Whether candidate improves nationality diversity in firm C4. Support for local employment Local PMET share relative to industry peers
Additional points awarded on bonus criteria Bonus points for each criterion Awarded to application that meets respective qualifying conditions	Skills bonus (Shortage occupation list) For candidates in jobs where skills shortages exist	Strategic economic priorities bonus For partnership with Government on ambitious innovation and internationalisation activities
Application will pass COMPASS with a minimum of 40 points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application that meets expectations (earns 10 points) on all four foundational criteria will pass Application that does not meet expectations on a foundational criterion can make up the required points by exceeding expectations on another criterion or by scoring bonus points 	

Applies to new EP applications from Sep 1, 2023 and to renewal applications from Sep 1, 2024

Infographic: Rafa Estrada Source: Ministry of Manpower, Mar 4, 2022

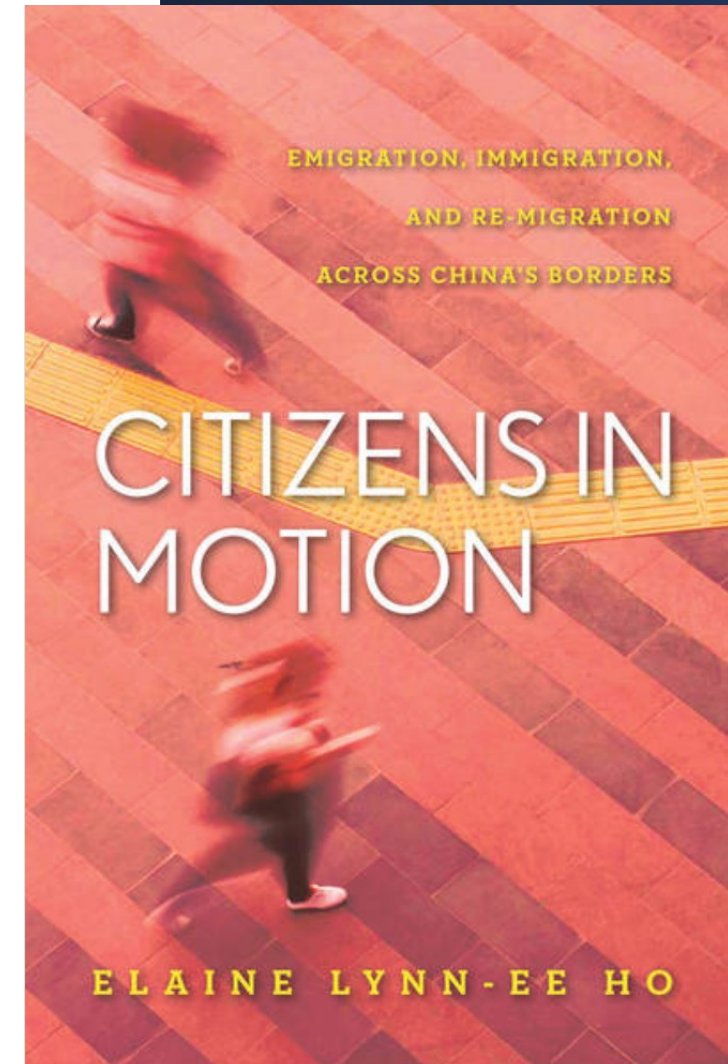


Restrictive policy changes reflect...

- SG government's response to concerns expressed by Singaporeans
 - Career and social mobility competition from foreigners
 - Employers are choosing to hire lower-cost skilled foreigners
 - Particularly those from the same source countries as the recruitment manager(s) who are themselves migrants
- Such counter-narratives of migration are emblematic of wider tensions to do with:
 - Co-ethnic identity and nationality distinctions
 - Arising from the SG's past and present migration trends.

Politics of co-ethnicity and migration

- SG government does not release migration statistics on the ethnic or nationality background of migrants (only by visa and work sector type)
- Perceptible that largest cohorts of migrants are from India and China
- Ease of recruitment and to achieve 'racial balance' of multiculturalism in SG
- Racialised governance of migration (Frost, 2017) intersects with integration expectations towards migrants (Ho and Foo, 2017)



Politics of co-ethnicity and migration

- Other than low-skilled work, migrants from these two countries are visibly present in certain sectors/visa types:
 - Indian migrants in the financial and banking, and technology sectors
 - Increasing numbers of entrepreneur and investor migrants from China (and flight from Hong Kong)

30/04/2023, 07:34

Why is Singapore a magnet for Chinese billionaires? | The Straits Times

THE STRAITS TIMES

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Why is Singapore a magnet for Chinese billionaires?

Strong bilateral ties, connectivity to Asean and global networks make the city state a strong contender for wealthy Chinese family offices looking to set up shop outside China.



The growing popularity of Singapore as a family office hub has been partly driven by the influx of Chinese family money moving into the Republic. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHING

Yu Hong

Politics of co-ethnicity and migration

- Resentment of Singaporeans towards co-ethnics from India and Chinese for:
 - Conspicuous consumption (i.e. perceived socio-economic differences)
 - Accentuated sense of difference from accent to, in some cases, dressing and comportment
- Growing anxiety about integration intentions of Mainland Chinese and China's growing geopolitical clout

30/04/2023, 08:06

PMO | PM Lee Hsien Loong at the Official Opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre

A Singapore Government Agency Website



PM Lee Hsien Loong at the Official Opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre

PM Lee Hsien Loong | 19 May 2017

PM Lee Hsien Loong spoke about Singaporean Chinese culture and the Singaporean identity at the official opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre on 19 May 2017.

Migrants 'speak back'

- Mainland Chinese migrants question the stereotypes of them and mock Singaporean Chinese for their poor 'mother tongue'/Chinese language skills (Ho and Foo, 2017)
- Highly educated Indian immigrants or those from better socio-economic backgrounds mock the class status of the locally born Indians (descendants of 'coolies') (Ho and Kathiravelu, 2022)
- 'S' pass category of middle-income earners do not lead privileged lives in Singapore (Baas, 2017; Yang, 2022)
- Intersectional differences between co-ethnics are not easily captured in conventional multicultural discourses and policies
- Yet in real life these differences characterise the everyday encounters between migrants and Singaporeans

Ageing immigrants and social reproduction

- Ageing and migration normally approached as separate narratives about population management in SG
- SG political leaders' reminders that SG will become a super-aged society by 2026
- Managed migration meant to mitigate effects of ageing on the local economy

Initiatives in place to tackle ageing issues as S'pore hits 'super-aged' status in 2026: Health Minister



Ageing immigrants and social reproduction

Greater
thought to
how ageing
intersects
with migration
in 3 ways:

- Ageing foreign domestic workers who support SG's families in their economic pursuits
- Grandparenting migrants providing childcare for adult migrant children's young families
- Care for migrants-turned-PRs and citizens who now have ageing needs themselves

Ageing foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in SG

- Ability of Singaporean women to join the labour force enabled by the feminisation of care work and migration from the region (Huang et al, 2012)
- Increasingly called on for eldercare work (Ho and Huang, 2018)
- 268,000 FDWS in Singapore in 2022 (Ministry of Manpower, 2003)
 - 2-year visa renewable up till age 60 → some have remained as temporary workers for decades
 - Long-term dedication to their employers and their ageing concerns (Amrith, 2022)
 - Healthcare costs of ageing while working in SG
 - Cost to emotional bonds in home country to work abroad for decades



MENU

Eligibility and require...

Insurance requirements for MDWs

You need to buy medical and personal accident insurance for your migrant domestic worker (MDW). Find out the coverage required.

Before your helper arrives in Singapore, you must buy **medical insurance** and **personal accident insurance** as part of your medical obligations to her.

You cannot pass on the cost of purchasing the insurance to your helper.

Medical insurance

You need to buy medical insurance with a coverage of **at least \$15,000 per year** for inpatient care and day surgery during your helper's stay in Singapore.

Note

On 4 Mar 2022, MOM announced that the **medical insurance requirements for all Work Permit and S Pass holders will be enhanced with effect from end-2022.**

You should engage your insurers early to ensure that they will be able to offer products that will meet MOM's new requirements. Otherwise, you may need to look for another insurer.

More details will be shared in due course.

Personal accident insurance

Grandparenting migrants in SG

- A visible presence in some of SG's housing estates and mass market private condominiums, especially those from China
- Support their migrant adult children with childcare needs (costs of hiring FDWs and cultural preference)
- Temporary social visit (up to 3 months) or long-term dependents' visas (2-5 years at most) with limited social protection for healthcare (Ho and Chiu, 2020)
- Ageing alongside Singaporean older adults and providing unpaid reproductive labour for SG's economy (Ho et al, 2020; Chiu and Ho, 2020)



Shared spaces and “throwtogetherness” in later life: A qualitative GIS study of non-migrant and migrant older adults in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

While there has been considerable academic interest in the topics of encounters and conviviality, including within the migration literature, little is known about how non-migrant and migrant older adults interact with one another in shared spaces, forming micro-publics that reflect the experiences of ageing for both groups. Using Qualitative Geographic Information Science (qualitative GIS), this paper identifies three types of spaces shared by non-migrant and migrant older adults from Singapore and the People's Republic of China respectively. The first type of shared space is characterised by asynchronicity in that, despite co-located activities, intercultural interactions are less likely to be fostered between non-migrants and migrants. The second type of shared space features informal, spontaneous encounters that develop into more regular forms of interaction with 'otherness', but active negotiation of social difference could be limited. The third type of shared space is marked by formal, organised activities where non-migrants and migrants work towards a common goal, prompting productive negotiations with difference. Through juxtaposing these three types of shared spaces, we argue for the importance of drawing out how spatial attributes can deter or foster varying degrees of negotiations with difference, while acknowledging that the fluidity of such processes depend on the users and social contexts too. We also suggest that notions of ageing-in-place need to be analysed alongside ageing-across-borders, giving attention to how migration impacts ageing in later life—both for migrants who are adapting to life abroad temporarily as well as non-migrants who may experience “transnationalism by proxy”. (247 words; max 250 words)

Ageing migrants-turned-PRs and citizens (writing-in-progress by Ho and Yeoh)

- Recruited during the 1990s as skilled, young labour for SG's economy
- Qualified for PR and citizenship status in the past when it was less restrictive
- Now in their late fifties or older
- Negotiate integration expectations across the life-course while retaining ties with their homelands (and other countries)
- Experience shifting episodes of vulnerability and agency as they transition into later life
 - Adult children may have re-migrated
 - Social support networks in SG are weaker than locally born Singaporeans
- How the concept of social reproduction enables analytical connections to be made between circuits of migration that are normally considered separately (Kofman, 2012)

Conclusion

- Prevailing migration narratives promoted by the SG government emphasizes economic imperatives and benefits (fertility and ageing concerns)
- Control migration with a 'fine-tooth' comb
- Unexpected outlash towards pro-immigration policies up till 2011
- Revealing of co-ethnic tensions and the uneasy relationship with SG's multiculturalism
- Thereafter increasingly restrictive migration policies yet remains open towards targeted areas (i.e. selective valves)
- Oblivious to how ageing intersects with migration concerns in SG
- Narratives of 'societal steering' (Boswell, 2011) collides with the lived realities of migration for ordinary people → recalibration and adjustments
- Simplistic and snapshot depictions of the benefits of migration need to be examined critically and with a longitudinal view in mind.