

The evolution of 'foreign talent' in Singapore's lexicon

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In this article, we explore a popular label found in Singapore's lexicon: "foreign talent". How did the label "foreign talent" come about? When was it coined, who did it first refer to, and how have the meanings attached to this label changed in Singapore's history?

On 28 June 1988, Minister for Home Affairs S. Jayakumar first made public the government's intentions to bring in "foreign talents" to supplement the local workforce.¹ Speaking in Parliament, Jayakumar elaborated on the power of these "foreign talents" with explanations we are probably familiar with today: to boost the local economy with the "skills, enterprise and drive" of "high calibre and trained people", help resolve the nation's ailing fertility rates, and to replenish the numbers of skilled Singaporeans who had emigrated.²

Immigration policies are rarely without controversy. Likewise, in Singapore, the "foreign talent" label was met with scepticism. Then MP for Toa Payoh, Eric Cheong, presented the general concern that similarly qualified locals would meet with diminished job prospects when the floodgates opened to a larger supply of labour.³ This, however, was relatively easy for the incumbent to address. The "foreign talents" that Jayakumar was referring to would be limited to professionals from Hong Kong. The Eminent Entrepreneurs/Professionals Scheme, which was the name for the policy at the time, granted a mere 81 of these Hong Kong professionals with permanent residence, making it convincing that these "foreign talents" would not threaten the employment of local professionals. Also, larger and more developed countries, such as Canada and Australia, were already gunning for "foreign talents" "from the same sources"⁴, so why not emulate their best practices?

Not long after this however, the authorities decided that a cautious stance on immigration policy would not suffice. It had to expand the boundaries of the label, and it had to do it urgently. In July 1989, it was announced in *The Straits Times* that immigration controls would be relaxed to attract "talented people" from "all countries".⁵ The liberalisation of the policy extended beyond just the nationality of the immigrants desired, but also to the scope of their work. Whereas the immigrants targeted the year before were highly trained and technically specialised, such as doctors, lawyers, accountants and computer scientists, the bracket was broadened to include more rungs of the job hierarchy, such as technicians,

¹ 1988. "Singapore Offers Permanent Residence to Hong Kong Experts" *The Straits Times*, June 28

² Singapore Parliamentary Report (1988, June 28), Vol. 51, col 363

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 1989. "S'pore Widens Door for Talent" *The Straits Times*, July 11

craftsmen, skilled workers, white-collar workers, self-employed persons and professionals. These broad definitions of talent were accompanied by loosened criteria for permanent residency; all you needed to qualify was for the immigrant's family to "settle ahead of him", and the whole household would "immediately become permanent residents" (The Straits Times 1989).⁶

Why the sudden urgency? The reasons cited remained the same as before. Singapore's economy was expanding and globalisation was intensifying. The country had to depend on the power of "foreign talents" to bring in more investments, generate more jobs, and increase prosperity for Singaporeans, amidst fierce worldwide competition for such talents in the first place. In spite of this, Jayakumar continued to assure the citizenry that there would be careful moderation to ensure that each individual carrying the "foreign talent" label would still remain "an asset, not a liability" to the local economy (Singapore Parliamentary Report 1989). Most notably, the Minister also highlighted in Parliament on 4 August 1989 that the "foreign talent" would fit the multi-racial composition of Singapore, and that while immigrants of all backgrounds were welcome, he expressed commitment that the government would "admit more Malay and Indian immigrants" should the current racial composition be brought out of balance.

However, despite this commitment to be sensitive to Singapore's officially demarcated ethnic categories (of Chinese, Malays, Indians and a smaller percentage of "Other" races), the government continued to glorify and expand the "foreign talent" label. Believing that this group of persons would bring more good to the economy than disservice, they remained fixated on prioritising the expansion of the "foreign talent" label above retaining the country's normative demographic composition. Tactics to attract more foreigners became more aggressive, alleging the necessity of these efforts against the backdrop of a global competition for these talents. It set up a high-level ministerial committee in August 1989 to look into measures and incentives to woo the typical high-flying global citizen. It persuaded home-grown companies to look overseas for skilled workers, such as then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's call for them to tap Indian talent when he spoke at a fund-raising dinner by the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in October 1992. It even set up global drives to rein them in, with one programme, Contact Singapore, set up in July 1997 that ran centres in six cities (Sydney, Perth, Boston, London, Los Angeles and Vancouver) to promote the nation. All this while, the language used by mass media became increasingly impassioned; headlines in *The Straits Times*, such as "30, 000 a year not enough",⁷ "foreign talent can make all the difference in quality",⁸ and "need to top up with foreigners",⁹ were among the many signals of the authorities' increasing desperation for the miracle-working "foreign talent". Singaporean undergraduates who were studying overseas were also urged to return home to fill the voids in the local economy, but this was framed against the initial issue need for skilled foreigners to boost the economy in the first place. Jayakumar, by then the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law, said, "If the talent that is represented by you does

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 1997. "30,000 a Year Not Enough" *The Straits Times*, 25 August

⁸ 1997. "Foreign Talent Can Make All the Difference in Quality" *The Straits Times*, August 25

⁹ Fernandez, Walter. 2001. "Need to Top Up With Foreigners" *The Straits Times*, August 20

not come back, then the problem of attracting talent to Singapore is made that much more acute.”¹⁰

In the meantime, Singaporeans sensed that the boundaries of the “foreign talent” category were in flux, and backlash from immigration policies became more severe. The same concern that was highlighted in 1988 would haunt Parliamentary discussions for years; locals often lamented about biases towards foreigners, and subsequently began to question the characteristics of those connected to this “foreign talent” category. Many felt that the authorities were overly eager to ascribe foreigners with the title of “talent” simply because of their non-local origin. Some felt permanent resident status was granted too readily, and many others questioned the ability of these “foreign talents” to add spice to the economy. Locals began to attribute negative characteristics to members of this category, with some even pointing out how foreigners often job-hopped, or became “less committed after receiving their PR status”. For instance, as reported in *The Straits Times* on 17 July 1998, a teacher of a cultural group who hired Chinese nationals commented that these individuals leave “the moment they get their PR.”¹¹ These negative attributions worsened in the years of economic downturn around the turn of the millennium as people continued to blame the liberal immigration policy for high rates of structural unemployment. In 2003, for example, then MP for Hougang, Low Thia Kiang, pointed out how Singaporeans were feeling short-changed by “cheap replacements” for the educated local workforce. Such attribution was hardly surprising given that structural unemployment was at a high of 17.7% at the time, compared to South Korea’s 2.5% and the United States’ 8.7%.¹²

With so many controversies, it was also unsurprising that there were explicit demands for the label “foreign talent” to be better defined. This was brought up in the budget debates in 1998 by K. Shanmugam, then MP for Sembawang, who noted that many Singaporeans were “puzzled” by the definition of “foreign talent” since many of these coveted talents happened to live in the same heartlands and work in the same offices as them.¹³ It was also brought up in the 1999 Singapore 21 motion in Parliament by then MP for Sembawang, Hawazi Daipi, who questioned the categories of people who fell into the scope of “talents”,¹⁴ if remunerations between foreigners and locals of the same qualifications should differ, if controls for quality were truly in place, and so on.

These doubts were not entirely unfounded, since it was indeed during the turn of the millennium that the scope of the label began to expand greatly. The boundaries of the label spilled beyond the marketplace as early as in 1993, when the Foreign Sports Talent Scheme was introduced to import foreign sports expertise. China-born table tennis players Li Jiawei, Feng Tianwei and Wang Yuegu, who notably won a silver medal in the 2012 Olympics, are beneficiaries of this scheme. Students were included in the category as foreigners were brought into local educational institutes. Scholarships were granted to deserving “foreign talents” to be developed and nurtured. On 28 February 2005, it was revealed that leading local research institute A*STAR established the overseas National Science Scholarships

¹⁰ Koh, Buck Song. 1997. “Come On Home, There are Ample Jobs, Students Told” *The Straits Times*, October 28

¹¹ 1998. “Foreign Talent is Welcome, but...” *The Straits Times*, July 17

¹² Singapore Parliamentary Report (2003, March 17) Vol.76, col 1100

¹³ Singapore Parliamentary Report (1998, March 16), Vol. 68, col 1370-1371

¹⁴ Singapore Parliamentary Report (1999, May 04), Vol. 70, col 1360

programme in 2001 as part of a pro-foreign talent strategy to develop human capital.¹⁵ This has carried on till today, following another revelation in Parliament in February 2012 that at least 2,000 scholarships, worth up to S\$3.6 million, were awarded to overseas students every year.¹⁶ On 13 March 2001, *The Straits Times* reported that the public sector was adopting an open attitude towards hiring foreigners, with “foreign talents” occupying positions in statutory boards like the Housing and Development Board, the Economic Development Board, the Monetary Authority of Singapore, the National Science and Technology Board, among others.¹⁷ Many started working as teachers, police officers, prison officers, and even in the civil defence.¹⁸ Last but not least, the S Pass was introduced in 2004 as an employment pass for foreigners with mid-level skills, in addition to previously introduced employment pass schemes for high and low skill levels (the ‘P’, ‘Q’, and ‘R’ employment passes, respectively). With this, the “foreign talent” label was no longer limited to the highest echelons of the workforce. Instead, with the increasing numbers of foreigners labelled as such, it had seeped into the farthest reaches of society, establishing for itself a pervasive presence in local socio-political discourse, and triggering emotive reactions on all varieties of media platforms.

Where does this leave us? Do the aforementioned series of events necessarily discredit our immigration policies? Unfortunately, that remains to be ascertained. The only point we have established thus far with our quick summary of key junctures in Singapore's history is the mutability of the label “foreign talents”, and how the various groups attribute different characteristics to these labels in defence of their interests. This is unavoidable to a certain extent, since we need some quick handles in order to simplify and thus understand our complex social milieu. However, labelling becomes dangerous when we become over-reliant on such labels for cognitive framing, resulting in the over-generalisation of the attributes of those being labelled. As such, we lose our ability to calibrate the various nuances and variances between all kinds of individuals and groups in society. More simply, we no longer try to discover for ourselves the uniqueness of each individual and allow these labels to characterise them for us. We may even begin to impose value judgments on individuals prematurely without getting to know them, resulting in, for example, the government over-glorifying the foreigner and the local figuratively burning the “foreign talent” at the stake. Given the furore generated by these judgments, it would be wiser to refrain from such stark labelling and instead give more measured descriptions of policy interventions in the future.

The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.

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¹⁵ Singapore Parliamentary Report (2005, February 28) Vol. 79, col 762

¹⁶ Seah, Chiang Nee. 2012. “Singapore a Scholarship Haven for Foreign Students?” Yahoo News Singapore, March 27, 2012. Retrieved July 4, 2013 (<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/singapore-scholarship-haven-foreign-students-080347815.html>)

¹⁷ 2001. “Govt Adopts Open Attitude to Employing Foreign Talent” *The Straits Times*, March 13

¹⁸ Ibid.

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