

Singapore's Immigrant Associations – Inclusive or Exclusive?

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“First Wave” Immigrant Associations

WHEN people immigrate, they tend to seek out those who are similar to themselves in the new country. This is to be expected. As human beings, we are generally more comfortable with those of similar backgrounds given a shared appreciation for traditions, cuisine, art forms, festivals and sensibilities. The Shared experiences of growing up in a particular country creates a feeling of solidarity.

Therefore, it is not uncommon for immigrant associations to form when sufficient numbers of immigrants from a particular locality end up residing in a new country.

According to migration scholar, Joao Sardinha, who examined immigrant associations in Portugal, the main functions of these organisations include helping members overcome social isolation and hardship issues, and representing their members' voices in the new country's democratic processes. These immigrant associations also help members preserve their cultural identity, and provide a familiar space for members while they begin their new lives in an unfamiliar territory.

Some scholars, however, criticise these associations for preventing immigrants from integrating into society. They claim these organisations form exclusive and concentric social spaces that dis-incentivises immigrants from interacting with the local community.

The first immigrant associations in Singapore date back to the middle of the 19th century when Chinese immigrants from the Guangdong and Fukien provinces set up Chinese clan associations. These associations were established to safeguard their interests and provide a space for cultural activities, such as ancestral worship and the celebration of traditional festivals. Without a well-developed legal system, clan associations arbitrated employment disputes and inter- and intra-clan conflicts. Furthermore, these immigrant associations served as a social safety net providing less fortunate members with shelter and repatriating their remains back to China after they passed away.

A New Era of Immigrant Associations?

IN THE last two decades, however, the inflow of foreign migrants in Singapore caused a proliferation of new immigrant associations and the revival of former ones. Based on our count, there are close to 80 organisations that function as immigrant associations – a third of which represent immigrants of Indian and Chinese descent. Like the 'first wave' Chinese clan associations, these new organisations provide immigrants with the opportunity to recreate their cultural space and find others of similar background and experiences.

Interestingly enough, however, these immigrant associations have not developed into exclusive and inward-looking groups.

Instead, from observing activities of forty immigrant associations, they seem to make substantial effort to reach out to locals and invite them to their events, and to participate in national events such as the annual Chingay Parade.

Many immigrant associations also encourage their members to volunteer and engage in philanthropy. Some associations tie up with local charities to organise fundraising events. For example, the Netherlands Charity Association supports local charities for the children, the disabled, and the elderly who fall through the cracks of social safety nets. Some associations also generously contribute scholarships – the Tianfu Association contributed \$10,000 to the Malay self-help group, MENDAKI, to assist less privileged Malay students with their education. Other associations provide volunteers to work alongside society's less privileged segments.

Beyond establishing social ties with the local community and engaging in volunteer work, immigrant associations educate their members on diverse local cultures. They conduct tours of local heritage sites, such as the Tiong Bahru housing estate, and of places where multiple cultures co-exist, like Chinatown and Kampong Glam. Some associations also organise talks to educate their members about local laws and how they differ from the laws at home.

Integrating Newcomers

IMMIGRANT associations' commitment towards engaging the local community is heartwarming. Most of these efforts can be attributed to Singapore's multicultural policy, which preserves the right for different cultures to co-exist and allows immigrants to preserve their cultural identities. This commitment can also be attributed to Singapore's framework for social cohesion, which encourages people of different ethnicities and backgrounds to unite and forge a collective sense of community.

Many immigration associations also take the initiative to reach out by organising events that provide cross-cultural understanding and encourage locals and non-locals to interact. The State supports these efforts through schemes such as the Community Integration Fund, which provides funding for integration initiatives. The People's Association (PA) also organises nation-wide initiatives such as the One Community Fiesta and the Chingay Parade, which are mass events that provide immigrant associations with spaces to showcase their culture while reaching out to local attendees.

Immigrant associations can act as public voices for mediating conflicts and for providing advice whenever societal tensions occur between locals and immigrants. Such advice, which draws on similarities between immigrants and Singaporeans instead of differences, is helpful for resolving misunderstandings.

Immigrant associations can also provide valuable services to Singaporeans seeking to conduct business, cultural exchange or humanitarian work in the countries represented by these organisations. By providing language expertise, social networks and cultural know-how, these associations will greatly facilitate Singaporeans' ability to navigate through the new terrain.

In turn, local community organisations – 'first wave' immigrant associations as well as grassroots groups – should build bridges with immigrant associations. By regularly conversing with these organisations, immigrants' issues will be understood, which allows Singaporeans to serve as cherished hosts to the migrant community.

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