

Conference on Integration

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Ballroom 1 & 2, Orchard Hotel

STEPPING STONE SINGAPORE

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF ANTI- IMMIGRANT ANXIETIES

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objectives

- suggest that Singapore has national anxieties
- suggest these national anxieties feed anti-immigrant sentiments
- offer cultural reactions to this anti-immigrant sentiments

“Some use us as a stepping stone, take courses at our university, then they go off to US, where the streets are paved of gold, and some don't come back. But even if we have 30 to 40 per cent of them staying, we have reinforced our capabilities immensely”.

Lee Kuan Yew

The Straits Times (23 Jan 2008)

perception and reality

- just how widespread is the anxiety over immigrants?
- at which segments of immigrants are these anxieties directed?
- are these anxieties justified by data?

how widespread are anti-immigrant sentiments?

- “New citizens are likely to use Singapore as a stepping stone to other countries”
- local-born citizens: “agreed” (49.9 per cent); “strongly agreed” (14.1 per cent)*

* IPS “Survey on Integration in Singapore”; sample size 1001

how widespread are anti-immigrant sentiments?

- “New citizens are likely to return to their country of origin after they have achieved some success in Singapore”
- local-born citizens: “agreed” (47.4 per cent); “strongly agreed” (10.7 per cent)*

* IPS “Survey on Integration in Singapore”; sample size 1001

who are targets of anti-immigrant sentiments?

- *Having a SG citizenship or PR, foreigners can apply to migrate to the US, UK and Canada more easily. I know a lot of them take up SG Citizenship and PR for this purpose.*
 - (DaveMMSG) Straits Times Discussion Board. 14 Jul 2008.
- *This is not something new. It has been happening for a long time. One PRC national, wife is a private tutor, husband worked in the electronics industry, said that there is nothing that Singapore can offer them, such a small country. They are used to a big country, so getting a SG passport is a passport to better places. They left for Canada after only 5 years in SG. I can go on to cite more examples.*
 - (Misnomer) Straits Times Discussion Board. 14 Jul 2008.

who are targets of anti-immigrant sentiments?

- neither directed at low-wage foreign workers or high-wage professionals
- but middle income foreigners – Q1 and P2 passes
- mid-level immigrants are often the colleagues, immediate supervisors or classmates of ordinary Singaporeans

are sentiments justified by data?

- 300 new citizens renounce Singaporean citizenship each year (Teo Chee Hean, 2 Mar 2012)
- what is the ratio of local-born citizens to new citizens, and is it higher or lower than 1:4 (300:1200)?
- how many PRs and new citizens are currently living overseas?
- which ethnic group or nationalities are most prone to leaving Singapore?
- more data needed for fuller picture

2 popular explanations

- the cultural explanation:
- the social construction of the immigrant as the ‘cultural Other’;
- immigrant communities perceived to have values and social norms alien to the host community, and thus can never be fully integrated.
- Chinese nationals: loud, uncouth, socially aggressive, and boorish ways;
- non-resident Indians: exclusive, snobbish, and prejudiced, threatening to transport historical socio-cultural divides from India to meritocratic Singapore.

2 popular explanations

- the economic explanation:
- locates anti-immigrant sentiments within a materialist framework.
- anti-immigrant sentiments arise because of intense economic competition, job loss, and suppression of wages due to cheaper entrants into the national economy.
- the cultural and economic explanations are not mutually exclusive.

Singapore's national anxieties

- national narrative:
- “politics of survival” (Chan, 1971); “ideology of survival” (Chua, 1995); “historical trauma” (Yao, 2007); “garrison mentality” (Brown, 1994); “staging of crises” (Birch, 1993)
- a country that succeeded despite the odds.
- a country that is highly vulnerable and whose existence is insecure.
- a country that is constantly paranoid and anxious about its survival.

Singapore's national identity

- national narrative has had beneficial affects:
- competitive, open to globalisation, alert to international trends, and nimble governance.

- however, also has had detrimental consequences:
- national anxieties over competition, livelihood, limited natural and material resources, and space, as well as keenly sensitive to loss of such resources.

anxiety #1: the “leap frog” effect

- anti-immigrant sentiments have not grown in an ideological vacuum
- anti-immigrant feed off latent national anxieties
- civic-republican citizenship: membership based on duty and obligations to state
- new citizens and PRs not perceived to have ‘earned’ citizenship through duty and obligation
- qualify for public subsidies in health and education

anxiety #1: the “leap frog” effect

- national service as sacrifice and duty of Singapore citizenship.
- Singaporean SIA pilots
- ‘citizens by choice’ rejoinder: immigrants make the conscious decision to become citizens
- not convincing for some because implies a weighing of self-interest and opportunities made on the basis of one’s career opportunities and family interests
- in contrast to more primordial and ‘natural’ membership endowed upon birth, whereby one fulfils one’s duty and obligations not by choice but as demanded by one’s very existence

anxiety #2: the “immigrant-scrounger”

- absence of natural resources is a key trope in the national narrative
- the Singapore success story - S\$590 GDP per capital in 1960 to S\$53,143 in 2010
- creates national anxiety over material loss and competition
- global inflow of Third World immigrants into First World sites perpetuate imagery of the immigrant as “welfare scroungers”

anxiety #2: the “immigrant-scrounger”

- Singapore: “immigrant-scroungers” imagery persists because of the core-periphery effect
- immigrants from China and India who take up PR or citizenship in order to facilitate their move to better destinations
- local institutes of tertiary education may offer scholarships to PRC students to undergo under- or postgraduate courses, with many of them leaving for the US upon completion of their studies
- image of them as ‘scroungers’ persists because they are from developing countries which are at least two or three generations away from the level of affluence Singapore enjoys

anxiety #3: the 'hungry immigrant'

- immigration is a straightforward reminder of citizens' inadequacies:
- low fertility rates, lacking requisite skills and talent for the economy, not hungry enough, too soft and complacent
- in contrast: immigrant embodiment of skill, talent, vigour, hunger, and the will to succeed, much needed qualities in the Singapore and global economy

anxiety #3: the 'hungry immigrant'

- narrative of the hungry migrant:
- the immigrant student first arrives in Singapore with little or no English proficiency, lags behind her cohort as a result, but through hard work she finally out-shines her Singaporean peers despite her initial advantage.

The Straits Times, 26 Nov 2009

Top PSLE girl could hardly speak English

Three years ago, her English was so bad she had problems forming full sentences. When Qiu Biqing came to Singapore at 10 years old, her English was so bad that she had problems forming full sentences.

Three years down the road, she is Singapore's top PSLE student, with a score of 290 and an A* in English.

She also says she wants to be a lawyer or a writer. Biqing came from Guangzhou in 2006 and started school in Singapore at primary three at Qifa Primary School.

searching for authenticity

- cultural-ideological reaction to anti-immigrant anxiety
- cultural producers manufacturing authenticity and nostalgia – creating exclusive memories of nation not available to new citizens or PRs
- *Growing Up; Beauty World; Fighting Spiders; Its A Great Great World*, among others
- share the common trope of a newly formed nation, often a metaphor to distinguish between a time of innocence and purity from the present day impersonal global city

conclusion

- Singapore's nation-building narrative has been one of acute vulnerability and insecurity
- national anxieties over citizenship obligations, material competition, and self-worth
- immigrants, often constructed as panacea to failings of locals – soft, complacent, lacking drive and not reproducing
- anti-immigrant anxieties cannot help but tap into national anxieties



thank you