STATE POLICY, CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENTS AND THE ‘PLACE’ OF TALENT/LABOUR/MARRIAGE MIGRANTS IN THE SINGAPORE COSMOPOLIS

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Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism

- Existing literature on cosmopolitanism tends to focus on ideal abstractions for a yet-to-be realized cosmopolitan society, lacking in empirical sense-making within particular contexts.

- Need to pay attention to the different actors involved in articulating cosmopolitanism but also to the practices of articulation themselves.

  - offers an opportunity to address the ways in which cosmopolitanism is grounded,

  - makes it possible to shift beyond thinking about the concept as a fixed universal ideal towards recovering the notion of multiple cosmopolitanisms, not just the cosmopolitanism associated with “business elites, tourists, corporate networks, and the Western metropolis” but also those that fall outside of these zones.

  - focuses on the contested processes underpinning multiple articulations of cosmopolitanism in which different actors may seek to enable cosmopolitan spaces or norms with different objectives.
Aims

- Focus on the different actors and practices involved in the contested processes of making the distinct versions of cosmopolitanism that have been articulated in Singapore in recent years as they relate to **talent, labour and family migrations**.

- Address the roles **state** and **civil society actors** and the forms of conflict and collaboration that have contributed to approaches to difference in the city-state.
Singapore: (Un)Cosmopolitan Histories?

- **Colonial times:**
  - trading emporium associated with a cosmopolitan demography, culture and landscape engendered by a liberal open-door policy on immigration and pragmatic tolerance of ‘plural societies’.

- **Immediate postcolonial nation-building phase:**
  - nation-building imperatives which emphasize economic nationalism and the welding of heterogeneous groups into “one people” on the basis of 4Ms+M

- **Turn of the 21st century:**
  - declining fertility rates among the citizen population coupled with labour augmentation programmes through aggressive immigration policies have produced a high degree of diversity.
Colonial times:
- trading emporium associated with a cosmopolitan demography, culture and landscape engendered by a liberal open-door policy on immigration and pragmatic tolerance of ‘plural societies’.

Singapore under Raffles: Ethnic Precincts (Kampongs) in the Jackson Plan of 1822
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Immediate postcolonial period: Nation-building discourse of multiracialism

- In the immediate postcolonial nation-building phase and against the backdrop of a plural society with racialized categories hardened by colonial policy, the new national leaders had little choice but to advocate the welding of heterogeneous groups into “one people” on the premise of an ideology of a “separate but equal” multiracialism.

- Primary emphasis on economic nationalism as well as a preoccupation with the management of race within the strictures of Singapore’s founding philosophy—the logic of the 4Ms+M (Multiracialism, Multiculturalism, Multilingualism, Multireligiosity plus Meritocracy).
Immediate postcolonial period: Nation-building discourse of multiracialism

- Designation of four “official” races – Chinese, Malays, Indians and ‘Others’ (CMIO).
- 4Ms: ‘separate but equal’ to encourage acceptance of co-existence of different religious practices, customs and traditions of various communities “without discrimination for any particular community” (Chan and Evers, 1978)
Immediate postcolonial period: Nation-building discourse of multiracialism

- **Multiracialism + Meritocracy**
  - Virtue of meritocracy where no one race is favored over another?
  - Functions as a “means of disempowerment”?
    - by erasing “grounds upon which racial group may make claims on behalf of its own interests without ostensibly violating the idea of group reality” (Chua, 1998)
(Un)Cosmopolitan Histories?

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Rapid fertility decline

**Singapore’s baby blues**

“...The stork hasn’t been doing its job; the population isn’t replacing itself.”

*(Business Times, Oct 1999)*

TFR in 2009 = 1.22

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**Figure 1: Population Policies and Fertility Trends by Ethnic Group.**

**Sources:** Population Trends 2009; Saw, 2007

**Notes:** From 2000, figures refer to Singapore residents (citizens and permanent residents); Singapore Department of Statistics, Population Trends 2009. (Singapore Department of Statistics’ definition of Total population includes Singapore citizens and permanent residents.)

Figures prior to 2000 refer to total population; based on Saw, 2007. (Saw’s definition of Total population includes Singapore citizens, permanent residents and non-residents.)
### Table 1: Singapore’s Population and Annual Growth

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population&lt;sup&gt;2,4&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Citizens</th>
<th>Permanent Residents</th>
<th>Non-Residents</th>
<th>Average Annual Growth&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt; (%)</th>
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<td>Number as at June (Mid-Year) (‘000)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Residents&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>Permanent Residents</td>
<td>Non-Residents</td>
<td>Total Population&lt;sup&gt;2,4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>3,081.0</td>
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<td>3,164.4</td>
<td>478.2</td>
<td>1,196.7</td>
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2. Total population comprises Singapore residents and non-residents. Resident population comprises Singapore citizens and permanent residents.

Source: Compiled from Singapore Department of Statistics 2008: 1; 2009.
Singapore’s Post-independence Demography

- Continues to bear the hallmarks of diversity.

- **1970 demographic profile:**
  - total population of just over two million comprising
  - an overwhelming majority of citizens (90.4 percent)
  - much smaller proportions of PRs (6.7 percent) and
  - non-residents (2.9 percent)

- **2009 demographic profile:**
  - total population of 4.99 million
  - under two-thirds (64.2 percent) citizens
  - 10.7 percent PRs and
  - 25.1 percent non-residents
Singapore’s Current Project of Becoming ‘Cosmopolitan’

- draws selectively on cosmopolitan imaginings of the colonial past and builds in highly contradictory ways on the multiracialism of post-independence times, but essentially driven by economic necessity to secure a key role in the globalised economy.

- much more part of state-imposed projects to purposively ‘cosmopolise’ the city and its people than sensibilities that emerge from the tumult of Singaporean society.

- problematic as it cannot easily smooth over the striations created by racialised ideologies and policies central to the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods.
“To succeed, Singapore must be a cosmopolitan centre, able to attract, retain and absorb talent from all over the world. We cannot keep the big companies out of the local league. Whether we like it or not, they are entering the region. Now in a globalised economy, we are in competition against other cities in the First World. Hence we have to become a cosmopolitan city that attracts and welcomes talent in business, academia, or in the performing arts. They will add to Singapore’s vibrancy and secure our place in a global network of cities of excellence.”

(Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew)
TALENT MIGRATION
Attracting talent is a key plank in re-engineering Singapore to compete effectively in a globalised knowledge-based economy.

‘quest for talent’ represents ‘the final contest’ for nations competing to stay ahead in the 21stC (MM Lee Kuan Yew)
‘The Quest for Talent’

- In order to attract and retain ‘foreign talent’, remaking Singapore as a ‘cosmopolitan’ city is of strategic importance:

  - Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s 1997 National Day Rally speech:
    - In the information age, human talent, not physical resources or financial capital, is the key factor for economic competitiveness and success. We must therefore welcome the infusion of knowledge which foreign talent will bring. Singapore must become a cosmopolitan, global city, an open society where people from many lands can feel at home.

Gong Li, a Singapore citizen
‘The Quest for Talent’

- **Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s 2006 National Day Rally**

  ...Today we get people from all over the world too. We have people from Turkey, there are Portuguese, somebody from Venezuela, somebody from Morocco, even a Korean or two, some Russians. And they add colour and diversity to this society. So our cuisine is something special. Singaporeans love food. You want Korean ginseng chicken, you can get the real thing cooked by a Korean. You want Arab food, you go to Arab Street, you can eat shawarma, which is shish kebabs. You can smoke the hubble-bubble, the waterpipe. Now harder because new rules on no smoking. But it's something different for Singapore.... And we have other customs too. Recently there was a splendid wedding in Singapore. The groom came riding on a white horse. He was a Marwari, it's an Indian group, Indian businessman, very successful caste. So the zoo is now thinking of going into the service of providing horses and elephants for weddings.

  (PM Lee Hsien Loong in The Straits Times, 19 July 2006)
Attracting global talent essential to global city aspirations

A slew of measures to promote integration between immigrants and citizens was announced by the National Integration Council last week. One is a $10 million fund for projects to help immigrants and Singaporeans get to know one another, while another is to get non-English speaking citizens to attend English classes to pick up basic conversational skills.

(ST 24 Sep 2009, B4)
Talent-driven Cosmopolisation of Singapore

- Influx of migrants of the professional and managerial class have led to development of nationality-based enclaves in private residential and condominium belts: Woodlands (Americans), Serangoon Gardens (French and Australians), Tanjong Rhu and Meyer Road (Indians), West Coast (Japanese) and East Coast (Koreans), often in the vicinity of their respective country’s international schools.

- Degree of resentment that these ‘foreign talent’ take away jobs, are paid too much, and enjoy all the privileges of living in Singapore with none of the responsibilities that citizens bear, BUT also acknowledgement that the Singapore economy currently needs foreign talent to enhance its global competitiveness.
Talent-driven Cosmopolisation of Singapore

- **Transformative effect**: The influx of well-heeled expatriates has boost property prices and rental yields reaped by homeowners and transformed neighbourhoods:
  - “old-school shops selling joss sticks and simple grocery items” have turned into alfresco eateries, upmarket specialist shops, modern convenience stores or supermarkets, wine shops, and new beauty and wellness services that *attract a “more diverse ‘globe-trotting’ crowd” or serve a “cosmopolitan clientele”*. 

[Holland Village]
Talent-driven ‘Cosmopolisation’ of Singapore

- very much state-driven.

- inextricably linked to and primarily driven by economic imperatives and the creation of Singapore as ‘Talent Capital’ of the global economy.

- talent-driven cosmopolitanism tends to extend ‘upwards, not sideways’ as it places a premium on certain (elitist) forms of ‘diversity’ and not others.
BOTH RIDING THE TRAIN OF GLOBALISATION:

But while foreign professionals (Left) are given a first-class welcome, foreign construction workers (Right) may not be treated in the same way
LABOUR MIGRATION
Labour Migration

- **Imperatives: economic development and labour shortages**
  - post-independence reliance on imported foreign labour
  - Economic restructuring and shift towards service and finance and (more recently) high-technology

- **Labour migration regime of ‘permanent temporariness’**
  - Highly managed system of work permits, dependency ceiling (ratio of local to foreign workers), foreign worker levy
  - Admitted into the city-state on short-term work permits as disposable labour without any residency rights
  - Presence in the everyday landscape is most keenly felt in the form of ‘weekend enclaves’, social and commercial landscapes containing migrant concentrations which are transient in nature.
Absence of Labour Migrants from State-driven Cosmopolitan Discourses

- Low-skilled low-paid migrant workers have been **conspicuously absent** from discourses on cultivating a cosmopolitan society.

- Public discourses have also been largely negative, focusing on the public nuisance of male migrant workers and impact on neighbourhoods.

- State discourses and policies systematically construct foreign workers as outsiders.
The place of foreign workers in the city-state?

- Weekend enclaves and foreign worker gatherings are often viewed negatively or with unease by Singaporeans who consider them a form of “intrusion” into “their own backyards”:
  - Authorities asked to step up security measures or relocate these workers to out-of-sight locations such as offshore islands.
  - Residents of HDB flats located in Little India have put up steel barricades around their blocks to keep foreign workers out.
  - When the state announced plans to site a foreign workers’ dormitory in Serangoon Gardens, a middle-class residential estate, 1,600 residents signed a petition in protest.
  - Debates about whether foreign domestic workers should be allowed into private clubs or use the swimming pools in condominiums are indicative of the spatial politics of exclusion at work in the global city, dangerously reminiscent of discriminatory “Dogs and Asians Not Allowed” policies prevalent in the colonial era.
NGOs and Alternative Cosmopolitan Visions?

- **Alternative cosmopolitan visions emerging from Singapore’s fledgling civil society?** (context of strong state and weak civil society)

  - Labour activism in relation to migrant workers is circumscribed by legal constraints on civil society organizations as well as “co-optive mechanisms to defuse political challenges through state-led organs” (Piper).

  - Yet, in recent years, the rights and welfare of migrant workers have been one of the leading edges in progressive developments within the civil society landscape in Singapore.
Of catalytic effect was the growing sense of dismay and outrage – starting with those within the women’s movement who were already concerned about violence against women – at what appeared to be inadequate state action and public apathy in the face of an increasing incidence of ‘maid abuse’ in recent years (Yeoh and Annadurai, 2008).

A broad range of NGOs focusing on migrant labour has since emerged, including mainly service-oriented groups (of which a number grew out of faith-based organizations) such as ACMI, An-Nisa, HEALTHSERV, H.O.M.E. along with skills training centres and women’s shelters; and a smaller number of advocacy-oriented groups (TWC2).
Alternative visions and discourses?

**NGOs**

- ‘Ambulance services’ to address the plight of the disadvantaged
- Campaigns for ‘Sunday off’ and standard employment contract with legal rights
Alternative visions and discourses?

- **TWC2 draws on international human rights discourse:**
  - “everyone is entitled to be treated with respect and dignity, with no discrimination of any kind, such as along lines of race, colour, language, religion or class”

- **H.O.M.E. draws on government discourse and combines this with the ideology of ‘being family’**
  - The work of H.O.M.E. promotes a ‘culture of welcome’ in the remaking of Singapore 21... where ‘No man, woman or child is a stranger. We are family.... Singapore is law abiding and welcomes guest workers to contribute to nation building.... We believe that Singapore, as a host nation should take the interests of migrant workers into consideration and build a community that is a global family to all.”
The Place of Labour Migrants in the Cosmopolis

- Where the state has systematically focus on migrant labour as an economic resource subject to the logics of demand and supply, civil society groups in recent years have been active in humanising migrant worker issues and rendering migrant workers more visible.

- However, given the current strength of state hegemony, the overall depoliticized culture of the citizenry, and the incipient nature of civil society developments, the transformative power of civil society groups forwarding an alternative, more inclusive vision of society based on non-discrimination and the accordance of some rights to migrant workers is at best limited in its effects on wider society.

- Through the looking glass of civil society, cosmopolitan ideals which extend ‘sideways’ to include not just foreign talent but also the large numbers of less skilled migrant workers can perhaps be glimpsed as a possible, but not certain, future.
MARRIAGE MIGRATION
International marriage with Asian wives on the increase

- Increased marriage migration has led to increasing cross-nationality and inter-ethnicity marriages
  - In 2008, cross-nationality marriages involving a citizen spouse and a foreign spouse accounted for 39 percent of all marriages registered in Singapore; while marriages across ethnic categories made up 16.7 percent of all marriages

Figure 2: Marriages of Singapore Citizens to Non-Singaporean Spouses by Gender (‘000)

Note: Parentheses refer to gender of SC spouse – M for males and F for females.

Matchmaking Tour Part 1/3

Source: http://www.lifepartnermatchmaker.com/
Major issues

Foreign wives (Vietnamese, PRC Chinese, other less developed Southeast Asian countries):

- Residency rights dependent on husbands; slow process of securing residency and citizenship rights
- No rights to engage in paid work while on a social visit pass, leading to economic dependence on husbands
- Communication difficulties and social isolation
- Domestic violence
- Lack of access to welfare and support services
Children of mixed marriages and CMIO arithmetics

- Up to recently, Singapore law requires children to automatically adopt their father’s ethnicity at birth.
- These children may also not fit easily into any of the CMIO categories including the catch-all “Others”.
  - As a disgruntled new citizen—a Caucasian man with a Malaysian wife of Indian heritage and three children (two from a previous marriage to a Chinese woman and one from this marriage)—who was unable to purchase public housing due to racial quotas laments, “We don’t fit a cookie-cutter definition of race and to simply categorize us as ‘Other’ overlooks our unique blend of race and culture.” (The Straits Times, 31 January 2008).
A recent controversial innovation allows children of mixed marriages to choose between adopting the race of either the father or the mother, and to use double barreled race classifications in official documents.

In announcing this change, PM Lee clearly based the rationale on the “significant number of Singaporeans marrying across racial lines”:

‘... the couple has to consider carefully how their kids will be brought up and what the kids' identity will be: Will they be a Chinese kid, an Indian kid, maybe European, maybe Japanese, maybe Vietnamese - there are many Singaporeans here who have married Vietnamese spouses,' he said. 'We think it's best to leave it to the parents to say how they want to describe their kids' ethnicity.'
Children of mixed marriages and CMIO arithmetics

- In short, while the rapid increase in international marriages has been an important catalyst to unbinding ‘identity’ and allowing for a few more degrees of freedom (for the children of these marriages) when it comes to self-description, it has hitherto not posed any significant challenge to the CMIO gridlock or led to more inclusive policies for marriage migrants in the social, political or economic spheres.

- The existence of a multiracial/multicultural framework in Singapore has not made it any easier for immigrant wives to advantageously position themselves to make claims on cultural rights such as language support for themselves and their children.
The ‘Family’ Mode of (Non-)Incorporation and the Rights of Immigrant Wives

- The key issue here relates to the contradictions engendered by the fact that immigrant wives are incorporated into the nation-state via their incorporation into the Singapore family.

- As a result, the politics of inclusion/exclusion at the family/household level impinges directly on their (weak) positioning within the nation-state.

- Unlike migrant workers who are differentially incorporated into the nation-state via their position in the labour market, immigrant wives are inserted into the geobody of the nation-state as dependents of their husbands, and can only be legitimately incorporated into the nation-state via their roles and identities within the ‘family’ (as wives, mothers and daughters-in-law).
Increase in marriage migration: state and civil society responses

- **State: policy of non-policy**
  - Explicitly ‘dependents’ reliant on husbands for rights to residency, work and children
  - Marriage is a private matter
  - Existing multiculturalism reduces the ostensible challenge that marriage migration presents to state and society

- **Civil society: more focused on migrant workers**
  - Some concern over practices of matchmaking agencies within the industry – a need for government regulation
  - Some response as a result of increasing number of foreign brides within women’s shelters
Conclusion

Talent Migrants

- Talent migration is inextricably aligned with cosmopolisation projects led by the state and portrayed in state discourses and practices as compatible with the economic and cultural aspirations of the global city.

- Given its multicultural legacy, Singapore has selectively incorporated past and present narratives of diversity as a key part of making a cosmopolitan city-state, in the process constructing itself as an always and already diverse city that foreigners can easily join and contribute to.

- The social acceptance and integration of a transnational elite class into society however remains problematic in Singapore shaped by a formulaic multiracial arithmetic.

- Concern has arisen beyond the economic sphere, prompting more attention recently to the much trickier process of building connections between different populations, including the integration of foreigners and locals.
Labour Migrants

- Developments within civil society have provided the leading edge in pushing for a cosmopolitanism that is broad enough to include increasing numbers of migrant workers as socio-political subjects with some rights and not just an economic resource.

- Tracing a pathway to cosmopolitanism via civil society advocacy for the incorporation of migrant workers is however not straightforward given the Singapore state’s longstanding allergy to human rights discourses.
Conclusion

Marriage Migrants

- In Korea, marriage migrants have been a significant force in the production of a rhetoric of ‘multiculturalism’, even as the reality has been to expect female marriage migrants to be assimilated into the norms and forms of Korean society so as to secure the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation.

- In contrast, in Singapore where a multicultural framework already exists, incipient discussions on marriage migrants and the phenomenon of mixed marriages have tended to follow a ‘social problems’ template requiring legislative support and service provisioning to assist vulnerable women.

- While there is no doubt that marriage migration presents real ‘social problems’ which need urgent attention, there is also a missed opportunity here of not discerning the possibility of harnessing cosmopolitan subjectivities for a new generation from hybridised families.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!