



SINGAPORE

Immigration and Changing Public Policies

By Chris Hudson

Immigration control at Changi International Airport in Singapore. Source: Photo by Tang Yan Song . © Shutterstock.

The demographic composition of the contemporary population of Singapore reflects a complex and vibrant history of a melting pot nation that has grown out of successive waves of immigration stretching back nearly 200 years.¹ As an immigrant society, Singapore is a product of the forces of globalization that have been a constitutive feature of the historical development of many nations. When Britain's Sir Stamford Raffles signed a treaty in 1819 with local rulers, a swampy little island was transformed into a colony of the UK and a vibrant entrepôt. It was never really the uninhabited backwater of myth, and when Raffles arrived, around 1,000 people populated the island. They were mostly Chinese traders, Malays, and a sizable group known as *orang laut* (sea people), often referred to as "sea gypsies." These sometime-pirates—indigenous to the Malay Archipelago—were seafaring, nomadic peoples who made a living from fishing.

The establishment of the colony resulted in a rapid influx of people from China, India, the Malay Archipelago, and further afield in Asia, so much so that by 1821, the population had exploded. It is estimated by that time to have increased to 4,724 Malays and 1,150 Chinese; to a total of 16,000 by 1829; to 26,000 five years later; and 60,000 by the beginning of 1850.² Immigration established and sustained the population of Singapore from its beginnings as a colony and continued unabated into the twentieth century until independence from Britain in 1965. More stringent government regulation of immigration in the period 1970–1980 slowed it significantly. The birth rate of the Singapore-born also decreased during the 1980s and 1990s, especially amongst the ethnic Chinese. Successive government strategies to increase it have failed.³ For this reason, immigration has been the only means to achieve a significant-enough population increase to maintain a steady supply of labor and sustain the desired levels of economic development.

In many immigrant societies, such as the United States, Canada, or Australia, that have experienced successive waves of immigrants, the integration of newcomers is facilitated by the social structure and a tradition of integration and absorption of immigrants—notwithstanding the obvious forms of everyday racism and the recent emergence of new forms of

discrimination. Singapore citizens, however, remain officially differentiated on race or ethnic grounds, regardless of the length of their generational ties to the island. The most obvious manifestation of this is the national identity card proclaiming a citizen's race, determined by the race of the father. These clear racial boundaries are reflected in discriminatory policies that separate immigrants by the categories of labor they perform and their contribution to different sectors of the economy. In reality, this translates into disparities in rights, conditions, and remuneration for labor, demarcated along race, class, and gender lines. Since the 1990s, Singapore has encouraged the entry of two clearly distinguishable immigrant groups to alleviate the labor shortages caused by low fertility rates and stagnant population growth: foreign talents and foreign workers.

Foreign Talents

One response to increasingly complex forms of economic and cultural globalization and the imperative for Singapore to compete as a cosmopolitan space amenable to private-sector economic development was to encourage the importation of what are referred to in Singapore as "foreign talents." Professional and business immigration had been a feature of the Singapore economy since the 1980s, but the necessity to transform itself into a global city required the development of a knowledge economy predicated on the complex and specialized skills and expertise of entrepreneurs, technocrats, and educationalists, amongst others. "Foreign talents" is usually understood to mean university-qualified foreigners with advanced skills working in higher-paid professions such as the financial, information technology, engineering, architecture, artistic, and education sectors that add value to the Singapore economy and provide cultural capital. In the past, most skilled professionals came from the United States, Britain, France, and Australia, so that foreign talent was seen, by and large, as a category of "whiteness." Nowadays, foreign talents are just as likely to be from China or India and other Southeast Asian countries. Additionally, the government expanded the professional categories available for foreign talent to include mid- and lower-level white-collar positions.

National anxieties about a brain drain caused by citizens emigrating, studying, and working overseas and failing to return, coupled with

plummeting fertility rates, were in large part a catalyst for the Foreign Talent Policy. The government was also influenced in the early 2000s by the theories of American urban studies theorist Richard Florida that made such an impact internationally on thinking about the cultural economy and its advantages for urban development and global capitalism in general. Florida believed that metropolises with high concentrations of creative people gave rise to a creative class made up of artists, musicians, designers, and especially substantial numbers of gay men such as one would find in San Francisco or Sydney that would yield much higher levels of economic development.⁴

To achieve the desired creative stimulus to the economy, the instrumental rationality and extreme pragmatism for which Singapore is known had to be tempered so that it could transform itself into a cosmopolitan space to attract such people. To this end, Singapore devised a strategy to reinvent itself as a “Renaissance City” and unveiled the plan in parliament in 2000. The redesign of Singapore’s image as a state of excitement and fun had two objectives: first, to establish Singapore as a global city for the arts that would be conducive to creative, knowledge-based industries and talent; and second, to strengthen national identity and belonging among Singaporeans by nurturing an appreciation of shared heritage.⁵ In aiming to create a vibrant space for the arts in particular, and creativity in general, its stated agenda was to create an environment hospitable to bold innovation and the creative sensibilities of foreign talents. In effect, foreign talents were a privileged group who were invited to take part in the national cosmopolitan project in a context where urban development, cosmopolitanism, and the sometimes-unruly impulses of creativity could be managed.⁶

Strategies to attract talent and harness creative energy have been demonstrably successful. Florida reported in 2015 that Singapore was the fifth-most creative hub in the world, after New York, London, Paris, and San Francisco.⁷ What has also helped maintain Singapore’s position as one of the most competitive economies in the world is the high percentage of knowledge and creative workers in its workforce. A creative class of roughly 30 percent of the workforce indicates the development of a large and vibrant economy, but in Singapore, nearly half (47.3 percent) of the workforce is in the creative class.⁸ Singapore is third out of 139 countries worldwide, ahead of the United States, Australia, and Canada, in terms of its creative resources.⁹

A hierarchy of work passes and employment permits that are granted by the government’s Ministry of Manpower—based on the salary level and the type of work undertaken—regulates employees’ rights and the length of time people are permitted to stay in Singapore. Foreign workers in the professions can hold one of a range of “employment passes” that confer benefits not available to lower-skilled holders of work permits. Salaried professionals may bring families and dependents may seek work, among other privileges. Certain classes of employment passes may even lead to permanent residence or citizenship. International students are another group of foreigners who may be granted temporary resident rights. The two most prestigious tertiary institutions in Singapore—National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University—offer scholarships to students from other ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Viêt Nam, and the Philippines. These scholarships offer subsidized tuition fees on the condition of being bonded to a Singapore company on successful completion of the qualification.

Foreign Workers

One important category of low-skilled foreign workers in Singapore are female domestic workers. Once known as *ayahs* or *amahs* (common in colonial times) whose job it was to care for children, clean, cook, and generally tend to the needs of whole households, they are now called maids. Official figures show that more than 230,000 migrant women worked as domestic help in Singapore in 2015 and that they come predominantly

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from the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Cambodia. It is, of course, a profoundly female-dominated occupation and not always a positive experience for many women, some of whom have to leave their own children behind in their home countries to care for other people’s children. Mistreatment of domestic workers, known anecdotally and recognized officially, may take the form of exploitation through sometimes-unlimited working hours, poor living conditions, and sexual and physical abuse. Some maids report that they are subject to food rationing, withholding of passports, and other forms of human rights abuse. Since they are required to live with employers—a regulation applying only to foreign domestic workers, therefore in effect only for women—there is very little privacy or limitation on working hours.¹⁰ While the government has taken steps to minimize exploitation and such ill treatment, domestic workers are not extended the protections of the Employment Act and so are more vulnerable than most to abuse. The incidents of abuse were numerous enough that the Indonesian government in 2016 announced its intent to ban domestic workers from working in Singapore (and other nations as well). As of March 2017, the Indonesian government reversed the ban, but there are reports of domestic workers from other Southeast Asian nations facing the same difficulties in Singapore. Poor training and lack of preparedness for work in a foreign setting have been factors in the maladjustment to life in Singapore and the exploitation of women from elsewhere in Southeast Asia, such as Myanmar and Cambodia.

There are many positive social and economic consequences for a nation with a cheap supply of immigrant labor, such as the freeing up of well-educated local women for workforce participation. One visible social effect of the high numbers of foreign domestic workers is the air of festivity that pervades some parts of Singapore on any given Sunday. Maids—often identifiable by their cheaper and less fashionable dressing styles than permanent citizens—congregate in favored spots around the city in their Sunday leisure time. In parts of Orchard Road—one of the most elegant shopping thoroughfares in Asia—for example, maids resting on blankets sit out on the asphalt on their day off to chatter with compatriots in Tagalog or Indonesian and share picnic lunches and stories from home. A major reason they are reduced to sitting amidst high-rises is that public spaces formerly available for them to gather and mingle on weekends and days off have been converted into high-end real estate or commercial developments. Lucky Plaza in Orchard Road is a favored location for Filipina maids, while Indonesian maids flock to City Plaza in Paya Lebar. Both these sites are the location of outlets for cheap goods, such as clothing and mobile phones, amidst the glittering department stores that sell high-end global chain fashion. I can confirm from personal experience that these hardworking women not only converse cheerfully with strangers, but also insist on sharing their lunches with interested passersby. Due to the large number of maids in Hong Kong, a similar scene is played out in Kowloon Park in Tsim Sha Tsui, Victoria Park in Causeway Bay, and other parts of Hong Kong on Sundays.

Workers in the construction industry are the other statistically significant group of low-skilled migrants. Coming mainly from India, Bangladesh,



Domestic workers get one Sunday a month off, and Lucky Plaza is a favorite place to gather. Source: Screen capture from *Filipino Maids in Singapore—Modern Slavery* on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/y74d926u>.



Tens of thousands of foreign workers spend their free weekends in Little India. Source: *Transient Workers Count Too* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yayc7el6>.

Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand, and China, these are the people whose labor underpins the massive infrastructure projects and the seemingly unrelenting development of the built environment in Singapore. As readers may be aware, Singapore is known not only for its culture of consumption, evident in the ubiquitous shopping malls, but also for a high-rise skyline that could be mistaken for a tropical New York or Shanghai. Marina Bay Sands, a spectacular hotel-casino-shopping complex featuring an infinity pool and a SkyPark Observation Deck, was completed in 2010. During its construction, the sparks and flashes of light from welding and the noise of heavy construction under arc lights could be seen and heard well after midnight while foreign workers toiled to meet building deadlines.

Construction workers live in dormitories provided by the employer or a dormitory operator. While there are regulations governing the management of workers' living quarters, stories of overcrowding, poor standards, and inadequate hygiene are legion. In 2016, a dormitory operator was fined \$300,000 for housing workers in conditions described as "dirty and cramped sleeping areas with clothes strewn all over, garbage littered over the floor, and cockroaches crawling on tabletops."¹¹ "Rat-infested" was how one dormitory housing sixty workers was described. It was deemed by the Ministry of Manpower to be "unacceptable" accommodation with "unhygienic living conditions."¹² On their days off, construction workers typically congregate in Singapore's "Little India," where they can meet

Foreign Domestic and Construction Worker Permits

Permit Type	Dec. 2012	Dec. 2013	Dec. 2014	Dec. 2015	Dec. 2016
FDW Work Permit (Foreign Domestic Workers)	209,600	214,500	222,500	231,500	239,700
Foreign Construction Worker Permits	293,300	318,900	322,700	326,000	315,500
Totals	502,900	533,400	545,200	557,500	555,200

Source: Based on a chart from the Singapore *Ministry of Manpower* website at <https://tinyurl.com/jokvztq>.

compatriots and indulge in their favorite dishes from home. While there have been some efforts to encourage interaction of locals with the migrant workers¹³ who have built the luxury hotels and high-rise tower blocks in which citizens live, real integration has not been universally accepted, and the debate over integration versus segregation has been in the public discourse for some time.¹⁴ In 2013, a riot involving some 400 workers from India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh erupted in Little India after a foreign worker was killed by a bus. This incident served only to harden attitudes among locals to immigration and was apparently the catalyst for the government to ban public drinking between 10:30 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. in Little India and in Geylang, a district popular with foreign workers from China.

Work permit holders such as domestic or construction workers are subject to constraints not applied to the higher-skilled employment pass holders. They are required to undergo regular medical checks, including X-rays and tests for HIV/AIDS. They are forbidden from marrying Singaporeans or permanent residents without permission, and any domestic worker found to be pregnant is expelled from Singapore summarily and without exception.

Current Policies and Attitudes to Immigrants

In December 2016, there were 239,700 female domestic worker visas and 315,500 construction worker visas effective in Singapore; employment passes and other categories of work permit for foreign talents amounted to some 372,000. Using the number of valid visas for noncitizens employed in Singapore as a guide, it indicates that the number of foreigners living in Singapore was approximately 1,393,000.¹⁵ The total population of Singapore as of January 2017 was 5.75 million. Clearly, Singapore has one of the highest percentages of nonpermanent resident foreigners of any nation in the world.

Immigration to Singapore has always been a feature of its role in a global economy as a magnet for people seeking work, even in the nineteenth century. More recently, it has become a node in twenty-first-century labor flows. Large-scale migration and mass population movements are defining features of contemporary social life and a key dynamic of globalization that has had a profound effect on many nations. This has not been without its critics in Singapore, and there has been a discernible backlash against immigrants from the general population in recent years. Singapore has an extremely stable economic and political system in which housing, health care, and education, while expensive, are among the best in the world; but, like other nations, it has also been vulnerable to the vagaries of the global economy. While unemployment is low compared to international norms, an increase in the jobless rate and the threat of more rises is causing some concern among citizens. In early 2013, the Singapore government released a population white paper titled *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore*.¹⁶ This document grapples not only with the possibilities of unemployment, but with the issues precipitated by an aging population—

“Singapore for Singaporeans” was one of the rallying cries that could be heard. Such a display of dissent is rare in Singapore.

a problem common to low-birth rate countries, in particular Japan. The white paper argued that foreign workers were still needed for economic growth but that there should be a balance between the number of skilled and lower-skilled workers. The government projected the population of Singapore to be 6.9 million by the year 2030. It was noted by some critics that the urban infrastructure was already under pressure and that a steady increase in immigrants would only exacerbate this and create tensions between citizens and foreigners. On February 16th, 2013, nearly 3,000 people rallied in a public park to protest against the white paper and its suggestion that immigration should continue in order to achieve annual productivity increases. “Singapore for Singaporeans” was one of the rallying cries that could be heard. Such a display of dissent is rare in Singapore.

In a television interview on August 2, 2015, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that in 2014, due to government intervention, the inflow of migrants was the slowest it had been for some time. Asserting that this had not been the result of bowing to populist pressure, he said there was a need to balance productivity and economic development against other factors that may affect Singapore. He singled out national identity as one factor that loomed large in his desire to find the right “trade-off.” Apart from the obvious stress on the infrastructure and capacity of the country to cope with more than a million new inhabitants, one of his concerns was how foreign workers would affect the “tone of Singapore society.”¹⁷

Singapore faces the problems that so many advanced societies in Asia and the West face today: declining birth rates, aging populations, increased health care costs, and the rising cost of labor. Net migration to Singapore in the period 1990–2000 outstripped natural growth through births and accounted for nearly two thirds of the population increase. In the last decade, this has precipitated policies to curb immigration for the sake of maintaining social cohesion. The Little India riots shocked many people, who began calling for tighter controls and restrictions on immigration and public behavior, such as the banning of alcohol in spaces of conviviality for foreign workers. The potential for racial conflict has long been a source of anxiety in Singapore, and memories of the seven days of communal rioting in Singapore in May 1969, in which four people were killed and eighty injured, cannot have been far from the minds of many older citizens. Immigration and its consequences—crowding on public transport, public behavior, road congestion, community safety, noise levels, and even effects on property values—has been on the public agenda for decades. In 2008, some 1,600 residents of affluent enclave Serangoon Gardens signed a petition to stop the government from turning an old school in the district into a foreign workers’ dormitory. Residents cited, among other concerns, the threat to the safety of children and old people from foreign workers and the potential for a drop in the value of assets. The dormitory was completed and now houses 600 workers; however, an access road forms a barrier between the dormitory and the residents of Serangoon Gardens. In addition, the dormitory has been fenced off, and the sensibilities of local residents have been saved from offense by the planting of trees to hide it from view. Like other such living spaces for foreign workers, it offers a level of invisibility that helps maintain the appropriate “tone” of society to which Lee referred, and the social and physical differentiation that citizens expect.

While multiculturalism and respect for ethnic and religious diversity are understood to be defining features of the nation, this does not extend

to embracing diversity in the form of immigrants. Immigration and population growth were again dominant issues in the 2015 general elections, the first since the death of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of the nation. While immigration causes anxieties that may be exploited for electoral advantage by political parties, the fact remains that imported labor is a necessity if Singapore is to maintain productivity and the materially rich, high standards of living its citizens enjoy. After all, many of the jobs that fall into the unskilled category are jobs that the well-educated populace does not want to do. Singapore’s moral dilemma, as reflected in public policy that seeks to limit or expand immigration in response to perceived economic imperatives, is the result of being a small tropical island with a small population that mixes high levels of social cohesion with discriminatory and somewhat-insular attitudes. ■

NOTES

1. Chinese 74.3 percent, Malay 13.4 percent, Indian 9.1 percent, other 3.2 percent.
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3. Chris Hudson, “We Need 50,000 Babies a Year: Marriage and the Family in Singapore,” *Education About Asia* 13, no. 1 (2008): 21–23.
4. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); *Cities and the Creative Class* (London: Routledge, 2005).
5. Singapore Government, *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore* (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000), 4.
6. Selvaraj Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization. Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 139.
7. Richard Florida, “The Global Creative Economy is Big Business,” *Citylab*, December 28, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/ycnzj3r9>.
8. Richard Florida and Melanie Fasche, *The Rise of the Creative Class in Southeast Asia* (Toronto: Martin Prosperity Institute, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/yb7kheph>.
9. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
10. Kirsten Han, “Singapore’s Migrant Domestic Workers Face Food Rationing, Long Hours, and Sexual Abuse,” *ABC News Australia*, April 6, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/j322qfq>.
11. Ronald Loh, “Inside a Foreign Workers’ Dormitory,” *The New Paper*, June 2, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y8cxfahh>.
12. Priscilla Goy, “Construction Firm Charged for Housing 60 Foreign Workers in Rat-Infested Dormitories,” *The Straits Times*, March 15, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y7hbwem8>.
13. Felicia Tan, “Locals and Foreign Workers Bond Over Games,” *The Straits Times*, August 8, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y75a38qk>.
14. Yolanda Chin, “Foreign Workers in Singapore: Integrating or Segregating Them,” *Rajaratnam School of International Studies RSIS Commentaries*, October 9, 2008, <https://tinyurl.com/y7s8klwr>.
15. “Foreign Workforce Numbers,” *Ministry of Manpower*, accessed July 28, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/jokvztq>.
16. Singapore Government, “A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore,” *Strategy Group Singapore*, last modified January 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/yb6uah5w>.
17. Rachel Chang, “No Easy Choices on Foreign Worker, Immigrant Policies: PM Lee,” *The Straits Times*, August 3, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/ycqaxt8>.

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