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Multiculturalism on Its Head: Unexpected Boundaries and New Migration in Singapore

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Abstract This study investigates how discourses of multiculturalism shape public debates surrounding new migration in Singapore. Singapore's immigration policies led to the influx of Chinese and Indian professionals, many of whom share race and class identities with local Singaporeans. However, Singaporeans of Chinese and Indian backgrounds rejected these presumed similarities, using discourses of multiculturalism to differentiate themselves from co-ethnic migrants. Based on a content analysis of news reports and online forums, this study shows how local actors portrayed new migrants as too prejudiced or bigoted to adapt to Singapore's multiracial society, thereby creating a paradoxical application of multicultural ideals. This example highlights how contemporary immigration is creating diverse forms of inclusion and exclusion within migrant-receiving nations, challenging models, and policies of multiculturalism based solely on ethnicity and race. This paper also demonstrates how individuals can utilize the discourse of multiculturalism in forwarding their own interests and concerns. Scholarly debates have often portrayed multiculturalism as an ideology or policy imposed by state institutions, where local actors are left to either resist or accommodate such ideas. In the Singapore context, individual Singaporeans transform discourses of multiculturalism, creating a counter-discourse that challenges state immigration policies.

Keywords Singapore · Multiculturalism · Race · Class · Immigrants · Super-diversity · Boundaries

Introduction

The migration field has seen a burgeoning literature on how post-World War II immigration challenges traditional notions of citizenship within the western nations (Bloemraad et al. 2008; Castles 2002; Joppke 1999). With this emergent scholarship

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comes a growing interest in the complex outcomes of multiculturalism in migrant-receiving countries. While definitions vary, scholars generally refer to multiculturalism as a set of policies that seek to integrate diverse groups into society (Gordon and Newfield 1996; Parekh 2006; Taylor 1994). In recent years, such policies faced massive opposition in North America and Western Europe, with critics blaming multiculturalism for either undermining national unity or glossing over structural inequalities. Existing studies have provided a rich discussion of the debates surrounding multiculturalism (Joppke 1996; Però and Solomos 2010; Vertovec 1996). Yet, such work tends to be situated in countries like the USA, UK, and Canada, thereby assuming conditions particular to western states such as the dominance of a white Anglo mainstream and the notion that migration is "new" and nationhood is "old." In reality, many countries beyond the west are facing new waves of immigrants and also seek to manage increasing diversity (see Kim and Oh 2011; Wang 2012). There is then a need to understand the interaction of contemporary migration and multiculturalism within these contexts.

This paper investigates how discourses of multiculturalism shape public debates surrounding new migration in Singapore, a wealthy island-state where foreign-born individuals constitute more than 30 % of the population,[1] Unlike western nations, Singapore is not a homogenous society dealing with the influx of diverse "others." Rather, Singapore is a multiracial society where state-endorsed multiculturalism seeks to maintain peace among three major groups: Chinese, Malays, and Indians. Singapore state officials link racial harmony with national survival, portraying multiculturalism as necessary in ensuring the sustainability of the country's independence. In the last two decades, the state's active recruitment of skilled workers led to an influx of new migrants, with the country's population growth predicted to outpace much larger nations like Australia and Canada (Esipova and Ray 2010). While many of these new migrants share ethnic and socioeconomic similarities with Chinese and Indian Singaporeans, there has been widespread opposition to the state's immigration policies and a growing animosity towards co-ethnic migrants from middle class backgrounds.

This study discusses how local Singaporeans used discourses of multiculturalism as a structural and normative basis to differentiate themselves from Chinese and Indian immigrants. In particular, Singaporeans create a paradoxical application of multicultural ideals, where local actors portray new migrants as *unassimilable* because they are not *multicultural enough* for Singapore society. This example highlights how contemporary immigration is creating diverse forms of inclusion and exclusion within migrant-receiving nations, challenging models and policies of multiculturalism based solely on ethnicity and race (Vertovec 2007). At the same time, the Singapore case provides an important venue to investigate how discourses of multiculturalism can be transformed and utilized by different actors on the ground. Scholarly debates have often portrayed multiculturalism as an ideology or policy imposed by state institutions, where local actors are left to either resist or accommodate such ideas. This study demonstrates how multiculturalism is a discourse that can lead to unpredictable outcomes, depending on context and location.

[1] Singapore's total population is at 5.4 million people. This number includes approximately 531,000 permanent residents and 1.5 million foreigners working and studying in Singapore (Department of Statistics Singapore 2013). Professionals and white-collar workers comprise about 175,100 of the 1.3 million total foreign workforce (Ministry of Manpower 2013).

Multiculturalism and Immigrant Integration

Multiculturalism generally refers to the coexistence of various cultures in one country, challenging traditional notions of national identity based on an ideology of common culture or ethnic roots (Gordon and Newfield 1996; Smith 1986). In recent decades, multiculturalism has become a dominant approach to issues of immigrant incorporation, manifesting either as state policies to address growing diversity among local constituents or as grassroots movements initiated by minority groups seeking recognition (Joppke 1996; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). In academic scholarship, multiculturalism also serves as a normative theory of how diverse societies must be governed (Bloemraad et al. 2008). It calls for states to recognize and accommodate minority groups, allowing them to participate as citizens of their new homes without letting go of their cultural practices and beliefs (Parekh 2006; Taylor 1994).

Multiculturalism received widespread support in the 1980s and 1990s. This period saw a proliferation of policies in North America and Europe seeking to accommodate ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences and to provide immigrants a sense of belonging in their host societies (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). Yet, more recently, these multicultural policies have faced widespread criticism within western nations. These critiques have emerged from two very different groups. On one hand, politicians and conservative groups have accused multicultural policies of preventing the assimilation of ethnic minorities into mainstream society. Sometimes called the "assimilationists," these critics believe that the successful integration of immigrants relies on their willingness to assimilate into their host country's culture. Therefore, they argue that accommodations for new immigrants can fragment their host country by undermining the values and practices that define national identity (Gordon and Newfield 1996). On the other hand, multiculturalism also faced criticism from scholars and advocates who represent groups that supposedly benefit from multicultural policies. While recognizing the good intentions of multiculturalism, these groups portray current policies as mere attempts to manage diversity, where state programs promote shallow definitions of culture to fit bureaucratic needs (Gordon and Newfield 1996; Vertovec 1996). Scholars also discuss how multicultural policies gloss over the structural and systemic issues that create racial and ethnic inequality (Banerjee 2000).

These discussions of multiculturalism provide important insight on recent efforts to deal with the changing demographics brought by international migration. However, Vertovec (2010) has criticized the tendency for existing multicultural models to rely on ethnicity as a basis in defining "diversity," focusing mainly on the "difference between an ethnic 'other' and a majority" (p. 83). He argues that many migrant-receiving nations now face a period of *super-diversity*, where differences between and within groups are shaped by a multitude of other variables, including nationality, visa status, occupation, and others (Vertovec 2007, 2010). Existing studies on multiculturalism have also centered on the experiences of western nations in North America and Europe—a serious limitation considering the growing number of postcolonial nations that are now popular destinations for immigrants. These conditions lead to forms of prejudice and intergroup conflict that current models of multiculturalism are unable to address. This paper provides an empirical example of such super-diversity, demonstrating how new immigration in Singapore has led to unexpected social boundaries beyond race and class. The next section discusses the development and context of multiculturalism in Singapore.

Co-Opting the Colonial: British-Drawn Boundaries and Singaporean Multiculturalism

For many postcolonial nations, racial diversity was present long before the institution of any formal government. Therefore, multicultural policies within postcolonial settings were meant to "manage" diversity from its inception (Goh and Holden 2009). Such policies involve taking the colonial categories of race and portraying the state as the rightful institution to ensure peace and order within the country. Such narratives insinuate that without the state, postcolonial societies will descend into racial conflict and anarchy, threatening the future of the entire nation.

Scholars often refer to Singapore as a prime example of multiculturalism in a postcolonial context. Like Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore originated as a diverse society, where indigenous Malays lived alongside Arabs, Chinese, and Indian Hindus (Hefner 2001). When the British arrived in the nineteenth century, they created ethnic enclaves, preventing different groups from mingling as a political unit (Kwok 2007; Purushotam 2000). The colonial government then assigned economic roles to each ethnoracial group, based on racist perceptions of their capabilities. Such policies were based on the rationale that once social life was compartmentalized, ethnic groups would not fight among themselves or against their colonial masters (Kwok 2007). This separation continued to define Singapore society until the end of World War II (Hill and Lian 1995).

The imperative for nation-building only came after Singapore's failed merger with Malaysia in 1965,[2] turning the island from a minor British port to an independent country. With no natural resources or established political structure, the island-state's survival became the unifying factor for nationhood (Chan 1971). Multiculturalism served as a key part of the Singapore state's survival strategies. First, to ensure that Singapore would not dissolve into interethnic conflict, Singapore's political leaders adapted the same strategies used by their former British masters. Rather than define a "core" Singaporean identity, Lee Kuan Yew, the country's first Prime Minister, developed a co-opted version of colonial social policies (Goh and Holden 2009), relying on the ethnoracial "foundations" of Chinese, Malay, and Indian culture. Scholars have termed these policies, *CMIO multiculturalism*, representing the four main categories used by the state: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (Lai 1995). The state's approach to nation-building in 1965 was to nurture a multicultural identity that would surmount the tensions and biases different ethnic communities had against other groups. This multicultural identity also allowed the Singapore state to avoid antagonizing nearby Malay nations while establishing itself as the "neutral umpire" that oversees different cultural groups (Chua 2003, p. 61). Until recently, the Singapore state maintained these categories, requiring citizens of mixed heritage to follow their fathers' racial designation (Purushotam 2000; Benjamin 1976).[3]

Second, Singaporean state officials developed a *survivalist sense of nationhood*, emphasizing the need for different racial groups to come together in ensuring the future

[2] The merger of Singapore and Malaysia lasted from 1963 to 1965. Hill and Lian (1995) provide a comprehensive discussion of the events that led to its failure in their book, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore.*

[3] Recent policy changes allow children to choose either of their parents' racial designation or adopt a double-barrelled race classification in official documents (see Yeoh, Leng, and Dung 2013).

of their small nation (Goh 2008). Singapore's longevity as an independent country then served as a common interest that binds Singaporeans together, regardless of race or ethnicity. Singapore state officials have used this discourse numerous times throughout the years, in order to rally Singaporeans to work towards national progress. For example, in Singapore's National Day celebrations in 2000, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said, "[Singapore] is home because *we built it* [emphasis added]. Every Singaporean has given a part of himself, big or small, to the country. Singapore is the sum of our dreams, our fears, our sweat." (cited in Lee 2008). As such, multiculturalism was not simply a response to new waves of immigration (as is the case in western nations). Rather, the Singapore state justified CMIO multiculturalism as a means to ensure the survival of Singapore as a nation.

Like multiculturalism in the west, Singaporean citizens and organizations have questioned the assumptions inherent in the state's definition of CMIO multiculturalism. Scholars argue that CMIO multiculturalism flattens local diversity, forcing its citizens to fit idealized caricatures of what it means to be "Chinese," "Malay," and "Indian" (see Goh 2011; Chua and Kwok 2001; Purushotam 2000). Despite such criticism, Singapore society has generally accepted CMIO multiculturalism as a necessary policy for a young, diverse nation (Lai 1995). While multicultural policies in the west face accusations of isolating racial minorities and worsening social inequalities, policymakers have cited Singapore for avoiding social unrest while achieving high levels of economic growth since the 1980s (Goh 2008). Yet, in recent years, the Singapore state has found itself facing a different challenge with the steady increase of new migrants within the country (Chua 2003; Ho 2012). The following section discusses the Singapore state's migration policies and its implications for CMIO multiculturalism.

Growing the Global City: New Migrants in Multicultural Singapore

Studies on western nations have framed post-World War II migration as an unexpected consequence that receiving states failed to predict and subsequently control (Castles 2002; Joppke 1999). In contrast, migration to Singapore is regarded as a planned process, meant to counter low birth rates and attract multinational corporations (Chua 1997). In the 1990s, state leaders began to promote Singapore as a "global city" (Poon 2009), open to talented professionals from across the world. Motivated by ideas of human capital and development, the Singapore state used liberal immigration policies to recruit new citizens and encourage population growth (Ho 2006). In managing migration, Singapore state officials have made repeated public statements emphasizing the importance of immigration in growing Singapore's economy (Chan 2011; Rahman 2008).

However, like many other receiving nations, Singapore has explicitly defined *which migrants* will be allowed to permanently settle in the country. State agencies classify migrants into three distinct groups, *foreign workers*, *foreign talent*, and *foreign students* (Yeoh 2007), with an obvious preference for the last two categories. Foreign workers comprise blue-collar laborers, usually found in construction, domestic work, and food services. As part of a "temporary" labor force, these migrants are highly regulated, subject to routine health checks, strict residence rules, and a law that forbids them from marrying local Singaporeans (Yeoh 2004). Both the state and Singaporean society

make it difficult for these workers to obtain benefits such as housing and permanent residency. Numerous scholars have critiqued Singapore's treatment of foreign workers, particularly in the case of domestic helpers (see Coe and Kelly 2002; Bell 2001; Yeoh et al. 1999). In contrast, the categories of foreign talent and foreign students include white-collar professionals and scholars who can apply for permanent residency. Until 2011, permanent residents had the privilege of receiving health insurance and purchasing public housing at subsidized rates (Yeoh and Lin 2012).

Singapore's liberal immigration policies were unpopular from the beginning of its implementation, with Singaporeans worried about increasing competition for jobs (Chua 1997; Ng 1997). However, a significant backlash against foreigners began to grow at the beginning of the 2000s. In 2010, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2010a) bowed to public pressure and promised stricter controls on migration inflows. By the next year, foreign professionals granted PR status totaled only 29,265, less than half the new permanent residents in 2008 (Li 2011). The strength of the immigrant policy backlash was ultimately felt in the 2011 General Elections, when the share in voters for Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party dropped to its lowest number since independence (Yeoh and Lin 2012). This backlash has had a strong online presence, with the growth of Internet forums criticizing the influx of foreigners into the country (Ho 2012). Perhaps most striking is how this backlash reveals rising antagonism towards foreign students and professionals, many of whom are highly educated, middle class, and from countries where many Singaporeans' ancestors also originated. This raises the question of how Singaporeans differentiated themselves from new immigrants, and how discourses of multiculturalism shape such social boundaries.

Method

I situate this study among research projects that seek to investigate how powerful discourses, while meant to serve the interests of particular institutions, can also open up space for unpredictable outcomes (see Drobowolsky 2013). This paper's analysis focuses on how individual Singaporeans use discourses of multiculturalism in different ways, drawing boundaries between themselves and co-ethnic immigrants and challenging the goals of the Singapore state.

In analyzing the discourse surrounding immigration in Singapore, I looked at three main sources: *The Straits Times*, Singapore's official newspaper; *The Online Citizen*, a website featuring sociopolitical commentary; and *SgForums*, a website where Singaporeans can initiate or join public forums on a variety of topics. Recent scholarship has recognized the role of print and online forums as venues for civic and political participation, providing citizens with social capital to critique government action (Skoric et al. 2009; Ellison et al. 2007). Such trends are evident in Singapore, where citizens have increasingly turned to online petitions, blogs, and forums in discussing local issues (George 2005).

I selected articles in *The Straits Times* and *The Online Citizen* using keyword indexing (i.e., foreign talent, migrant, migration, foreign student, foreign professionals) at the Newsbank Access World News and search engines of the publications' websites. I paid particular attention to letters written by *The Straits Times* readers and comments on articles in *The Online Citizen*. I used the same keywords in searching through forum

topics in *SgForums*. A total of 212 newspaper articles, 97 online articles, and 55 online forums were reviewed for this paper. I examined articles from *The Straits Times* from the beginning of Singapore's liberal immigration policies in 1997 to 2012. I studied public forums on *The Online Citizen* and *SgForums* beginning in 2008 and 2003, respectively. Singaporean writers have noted that anti-immigrant sentiments intensified in the early 2000s (Singh 2009; Yeoh and Lin 2012); hence, both websites provide insight to the discourse surrounding the backlash as it began to gain strength.

However, both public discourses in print and online sources have their own limitations. Articles and letters published in *The Straits Times* are vetted by editors who may have their own perspectives and biases on what "deserves" to be read by the general public. On the other hand, the anonymity offered by online forums makes it more likely to attract Singaporeans who are more vehemently opposed to immigrants, thereby repelling those who take a more moderate view. Both mediums do not provide a "complete" picture of public discourse surrounding Singapore's immigration policy, yet I would like to argue that they represent a significant part of the backlash against foreigners in the country. This study also does not analyze the actual process of policy-making in Singapore. Many actors such as community organizations, policy analysts, and government agencies also shape immigration discourse in the country, and their contributions to policy are not always seen in newspaper articles and online forums. Rather, this paper focuses on the way local Singaporeans critical of state immigration policies differentiated themselves from new migrants and how discourses of CMIO multiculturalism shaped their arguments.

Multiculturalism on Its Head: Unexpected Boundaries in Anti-Immigrant Sentiment

Differences in terms of race and socioeconomic status have defined many of the tensions between Singaporeans and new immigrants. In the case of foreign workers, anti-immigrant sentiments have largely centered on the former's "cultural inferiority due to economic underdevelopment" (Chua 2003), despite racial similarities shared between many blue-collar workers and local Singaporeans.[4] Comments in online forums portray foreign workers' home countries as poor, backward nations that push their citizens to look for better jobs overseas. As written by one Singaporean in a Facebook forum on Filipino workers, "[The reason] why you Filipinos are hired is because your people work for shit (sic) low income. Remember that…"[5] At the other end of the spectrum, discourses of race and class differences also define local hostility towards white expatriates, many of who work as "foreign talent" in multinational corporations located in Singapore. Singaporeans accuse state officials of encouraging the presence of "arrogant," overpaid westerners, given that many Singaporeans are now qualified of doing the same work. Underlying such critique is the notion that the state

[4] A large proportion of construction workers come from South Asia and "can be generalized locally as 'Indians'," domestic workers from the Philippines can be considered "Malay," while many workers from Vietnam and Thailand also have ethnic Chinese origins (Chua 2003).

[5] This comment was taken from a Facebook page named, "Say 'NO' to an overpopulated Singapore." A full list of comments was featured in *The Online Citizen* (www.theonlinecitizen.com/2014/04/revisiting-the-protest-on-the-philippine-independence-day-event).

considers Singaporeans are inferior to their white counterparts and are not worth the special treatment the latter gets.[6]

In contrast to both these cases, Singapore media reports and online forums also reveal animosity towards Chinese and Indian professionals and students. Such animosity is striking given that Singapore's immigration policy had focused specifically on recruiting migrants from countries like China and India, with the assumption that these individuals will adopt (and not alter) Singapore's CMIO framework (Chua 2003). Singapore Chinese and Indians also had the lowest birth rates in the country, causing concern regarding future racial demographics. Hence, the state geared both immigration policies towards adding numbers to these specific racial groups, and Chinese and Indian nationals now comprise the largest proportion of permanent residents, professional workers, and foreign students ("In Singapore now or forever?" 2003; "Graduate Schools" 2009). Media reports indicate that migrants come to Singapore because of perceived cultural similarities, including the existence of four official languages. Yeoh and Huang (2004) found that migrants from Asian countries expressed a stronger desire to settle in Singapore as compared to their western counterparts, adapting quickly to middle class Singaporeans' way of life.

Yet, newspaper reports and online forums reveal that tensions between foreigners and Singaporeans continue to erupt *within* racial groups. Members of Singapore's parliament have noted rising ferment specifically among local Indian and Chinese communities, where the influx of Indian and Chinese immigrants is claimed to affect "social and intra-community unity" (Singh 2010). Public forums also reflect the same sentiment, with a number of self-identified Chinese and Indian Singaporeans criticizing the presence of co-ethnic immigrants. In the following sections, I discuss how public discourse against immigration actually reflects narratives of CMIO multiculturalism that the Singapore state itself constructed. Yet, Singaporeans turn the ideal on its head, using multiculturalism to challenge and oppose the state's liberal immigration policies.

Beyond Race: When the "National" Culture Is Multicultural

Online forums indicated how Singaporeans drew boundaries between themselves and co-ethnic migrants, demanding that immigrants learn to "assimilate" into the norms and practices of Singapore society. Such demands are similar to discourses used by assimilationist groups who oppose multicultural policies in the west. Yet, unlike western nations, Singaporeans did not refer to a one specific culture in defining the "core" values that migrants must adopt. Rather, Singaporeans define their "national culture" as *multicultural*. As stated by one forum member,

> Do these FT [foreign talent] know who we are? We are not mainland Chinese or Taiwan Chinese. We are Singaporeans!!! Whose roots might be associated with *China, India, Malay and others* [emphasis added]. You can call us overseas Chinese and be proud of PRC's [People's Republic of China] achievements but we are one Singapore Chinese and not China Chinese.[7]

[6] Internet forums criticizing white foreigners are especially common when white expats are caught "misbehaving" in public. When Anton Casey, a British wealth manager, uploaded offensive posts against a local taxi driver and called Singaporeans "poor," online forums called for the cancellation of his permanent residency and lambasted the government for being "too easy" on white immigrants.

[7] Why do we need more foreign talent? August 26, 2006. http://sgforums.com/forums/10/topics/207012

The author of this post defines "Singaporeans" in terms of the state's CMIO framework, stating explicitly that while many Singaporeans are part of an overseas Chinese diaspora, they are different because their "roots" include interactions with Indians, Malays, and "Others." Most critiques of the state's immigration policies then focus on how new migrants are insular, racist, and unable to interact to other ethnic groups. Online forums have been especially active in searching for examples of new migrants' supposed bigotry. For example, in 2011, a Chinese foreign student posted an online rant, complaining about the locals' broken Mandarin and poking fun at Indian and Malay women (Feng 2011). Singaporean forum members felt that the student was looking down at Singaporeans for being "coolie" Chinese and defended this by upholding the differences between Singapore and China. These differences included derogatory comments about China's "communist government" and "backwardness." Yet, also noticeable were a number of posts that emphasized Singaporeans' cultural sensitivity and multiracial society.

In a paradoxical application of multicultural discourse, forum members argued that the government's inability to change migrants' "racist" attitudes will threaten social cohesion within Singapore society. It is interesting to note that while migration issues in the west revolve around the assimilation of immigrants into the culture of a white, Anglo-Saxon majority, the Singapore case shows how Chinese and Indian immigrants are pressured to adapt to a national culture that "recognizes" racial diversity. These types of demands are particularly salient for Chinese immigrants, given that Singapore society is also 75 % Chinese. As noted by one forum participant,

> When the PRC [People's Republic of China] Chinese come here, most of them have a singular image of Singapore. That Singapore is entirely Chinese. When they come here they have a culture shock. With the government putting down Singaporeans, and accommodating the foreigners, these foreigners, specially the PRCs, now have a sense of pride… So why the hell would they care what Singaporeans think of them?[8]

This post reflects a common complaint that Chinese migrants assume local Singaporeans will have no problems speaking Mandarin or accepting "Chinese" habits and practices. Other online comments have noted Chinese foreigners' refusal to speak English, making communication difficult for non-Chinese locals ("Not many native Singaporeans," 2012). A number of forums also criticize Indian professionals for being "arrogant" and portraying themselves as superior to local Singaporeans. As noted by one forum member, "[Indian professionals] condescend upon locals, regardless of race…They also willfully choose not to integrate, opting to send their [children] to international schools instead of our schools."[9] State officials have responded to such sentiment by calling for more understanding among Singaporeans, often reminding its

[8] S'poreans will always do worse than us, says PRC student. November 24, 2011. *Sgforums*. http://sgforums.com/forums/3317/topics/442154

[9] "Indian nationals, and why they are so proud." *SgForums*, August 6, 2011. http://sgforums.com/forums/8/topics/435604

citizenry that their ancestors were immigrants as well. In a National Day Rally speech, current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2006) appealed to Singaporeans for empathy and tolerance, stating,

> I understand these concerns because somebody new coming in, fitting in—they are different. A Chinese-Chinese is different from a Singapore-Chinese. An Indian-Indian is different from a Singapore Indian…But we are different doesn't mean we have to reject them. Our forefathers were immigrants too. If they had been kept out of Singapore, we wouldn't be here today.

Yet, Singaporeans countered this discourse by claiming that foreign professionals themselves were actually the ones who lacked tolerance and understanding of Singapore's diversity. Fueling anti-immigrant sentiment is the perception that government agencies continue to provide Chinese and Indian immigrants with attractive scholarships and benefits equal to Singaporean citizens. Forum members blame this "special treatment" for immigrants' "deregatory" attitude towards locals. Such discourse indicates that Singapore's multiculturalism is now shaped by social boundaries that go beyond race and ethnicity. In fact, an analysis of other forums reveals how local Singaporeans would lambast "foreign talent" within the same racial group, in support of a fellow "local" of a different ethnicity. For example, another online debate occurred when a forum member posted a news article of an incident where Chinese migrants lodged a complaint against their Indian Singaporean neighbor for cooking curry. Government community leaders supposedly mediated the conflict by asking the Indian family to only cook curry when their Chinese neighbors were not home. In response, Singaporean Chinese were quick to distinguish themselves from their foreign counterparts, with online forums filled with posts professing a "love" for Indian food.[10] As stated in a comment under the name *True Singaporean*, "I am a born here, Singaporean Chinese. What is wrong with Curry??!!! Allow the Indian to cook it… I love Curry. If our PRC [People's Republic of China] friends cannot stand Curry, go live another place."[11] These types of comments portrayed new immigrants as insistent on maintaining their own cultural biases, at the cost of interracial understanding that is supposed to define Singapore society.

Public forums also reveal how Chinese and Indian Singaporeans who are critical of the state's immigration policies also tend to express outward support for Malay Singaporeans. These discussions specifically target defense policies that exclude Malay Singaporeans from particular branches of the Singapore Armed Forces. In the early years of Singapore's history as a nation, Lee Kuan Yew had raised concerns as to whether Malay Singaporeans would be able to fight their Muslim brothers when conflicts arise between Malaysia and Singapore (Lee 2008). Yet, as more Chinese and Indian foreigners come into the country, Singaporeans have begun to question who

[10] "PRC family to Sporean Indian neighbors: Can u not cook curry?," August 13, 2011. (http://sgforums.com/forums/3545/topics/435878?page=6).

[11] "Number of neighbour disputes hit high," *The Online Citizen*, August 8, 2011. (http://theonlinecitizen.com/2011/08/number-of-neighbour-disputes-hit-high/)

the government should "trust" more. Singh (2009) elaborates on this dilemma in the excerpt below,

> [The influx of foreigners] raises uncomfortable questions for those who question the loyalty of a Malay (or any other race for that matter) soldier whose family has stayed in Singapore for generations against that of a newly-arrived Chinese or Indian who may claim to be as loyal as a Pavlovian dog but who cannot sing the *Majulah Singapore* [national anthem] without looking or sounding like an oddball.

Such reactions show how many Singaporeans reject the idea that racial similarities will allow migrants to easily integrate into Singapore society. Therefore, while critics of western multiculturalism blamed such policies for threatening national unity, Singaporeans in this study blame immigrants for jeopardizing their country's multicultural identity. In particular, Singaporeans bemoan the inability of their foreign counterparts to understand the cultural practices of *other* racial groups, making explicit references to the four major "racial" categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (Tan et al. 2008). Multiculturalism is then the normative basis in arguing *against* the entry of new migrants and questioning whether these groups "belong" in Singapore society.

Beyond Class: Opportunists and Precarious Nationhood

In justifying the need for multiculturalism, Singaporean state leaders often refer to the country's precarious status as an "unlikely nation," highlighting Singapore's lack of natural resources and its violent history of racial riots (see Lee 2008). It is interesting to note that this discourse of survival and multiracial unity is now especially prevalent in public forums criticizing the state's immigration policies. This section demonstrates how ideas of survival and precarious nationhood create boundaries between local Singaporeans and co-ethnic migrant groups who share similar socioeconomic backgrounds. In particular, I define "class" in terms of immigrants' wages and occupations, especially as it compares to the majority of Singapore society.

Research has shown how anti-immigrant sentiment often draws boundaries based on socioeconomic status, where immigrant groups are sometimes portrayed as burdens of the state and its citizens (see Kasinitz 2012). However, the recent backlash against immigration also indicates a growing animosity towards co-ethnic migrants who are highly educated, well resourced, and likely to blend into Singapore's largely middle class society. While the discourse of immigrants "stealing jobs" is common in other countries, perhaps most striking about the Singapore case is how Singaporeans use narratives of their country's precarious status to question the loyalties of new migrants.

While Singapore has enjoyed economic prosperity since the 1980s, local Singaporeans differentiate themselves from wealthy migrants by referring to their ancestors' experience when the country was still a struggling nation (Lee 2010b). Chinese Singaporeans trace their roots to China's Fujian Province, where poor economic conditions forced their ancestors to migrate to Singapore with the hope of starting a new life. In contrast, new waves of Chinese migrants generally come from mega-cities like Beijing and Shanghai, often wealthier than previous generations of

Chinese Singaporeans (Er 2010; Wee 2011). Forum members use these contrasting histories to portray foreigners as opportunists who come to take advantage of the nation's booming economy without having to experience its periods of misfortune.

Such sentiments are most evident in forums discussing migrants in professional positions—jobs that local Singaporeans also wish to attain. In particular, Singaporeans question whether government efforts to turn Singapore into a "global city" have led to an influx of migrants who are only interested in milking the country's resources. Given Singapore's highly competitive educational system, local Singaporeans also begrudge the fact that their government needs to attract foreign talent, as if local graduates are not good enough. As noted in one forum,

> …if these Foreigners are exceptional talents or are willing to fill up positions where there is a shortage of supply (e.g. nursing), we should welcome them with open arms. However, out of the [permanent residents] and Foreigners here holding white collar jobs, how many of them are doing jobs that Singaporeans can't do?? …In times of war, these foreign talent will be the ones who will take the first flight out of Singapore and if we need to rebuild the nation again, will they be here or are we going to depend on the "Singaporeans who lack the expertise?"[12]

Singapore state officials have responded to this backlash by emphasizing how highly skilled immigrants are key contributors to the country's development (Chan 2011; Nathan 1997). However, local Singaporeans portray these individuals as threats to the nation's future sustainability. Both discourses emphasize the need for Singapore to survive as a nation, yet they portray wealthy immigrants in completely different ways. As noted in a letter to *The Straits Times*,

> Yes, we are a migrant society; thus, we should be readily receptive to new immigrants. However, migrants today can go wherever there are opportunities. Whether they are totally committed to Singapore or flee at the slightest sign of trouble remains to be seen (Chan 2010).

Such doubts on foreigners' commitment to the Singapore are also directed at white professionals, many of who come to country to work as highly paid expats in multinational companies. Yet, there is a clear difference in *where* foreign professionals are likely to "flee" when Singapore's economy fails to provide them with economic benefits. While white expats are assumed to simply "go home" to their own countries, the Singapore passport gives Chinese and Indian professionals more mobility, providing better access to other countries like Canada and the USA. Local Singaporeans question whether it is wise for their government to provide such groups with economic opportunities and incentives, given that they will simply use Singaporean citizenship to move somewhere else. As such, Singaporeans critique the government's quick process of granting citizenship and permanent residency. During the height of Singapore's liberal immigration policies, foreign professionals could apply for permanent residency

[12] "Foreign talent or Singaporean?," *Sgforums*, September 21, 2004 (http://sgforums.com/forums/8/topics/94515)

status after only 6 months of being in the country, while the residency requirement for citizenship was shortened from 10 to only 6 years. Foreign students from desired courses (e.g., engineering, science, business) were also offered permanent residency shortly after graduation (Nirmala and Lin 2004). In this sense, local Singaporeans also worry about the standards by which the state "accepts" migrants as citizens. As noted by one forum member,

> Is our PM [Prime Minister] and his cabinet treating SG [Singapore] citizenship in the right manner? Or is he diluting the value of Singapore citizenship? By making the criteria for citizen application so easy to obtain, one might almost be forgiven if people saw it as applying for membership into a country club instead of a country.[13]

Aside from jobs, the wealthy status of many foreign professionals also leads to intense competition for housing, an important resource in a nation with limited space. As foreign professionals become permanent residents, they often choose to purchase public housing, which then leads to a rapid spike in housing prices. While government agencies have rushed to build more public housing, Singaporeans have noted how these new flats have gotten smaller in order to accommodate the country's growing population (Wei 2011; "Population paper" 2012).

These perceptions provide a material justification for anti-immigrant sentiments, especially those targeted at particular ethnic groups like Chinese and Indians. As expressed by one Singaporean amidst a heated online conversation on foreign talent, "I am glad that the comments posted here are xenophobic and borders on bigotry. It shows that Singaporeans do care a lot for their country—built by their parents' bare hands and life of toil."[14] In line with government discourse, local Singaporeans believe that their ancestors had struggled to build an unlikely nation, whose power and wealth can also be taken away. Yet, they use such notions of insecurity to challenge the state's immigration policies, arguing that there is a danger in accepting foreigners who fail to understand the nation's precarious history. As noted by another letter-writer in *The Straits Times*,

> Were our nation a hundred times bigger with natural resources to depend on, the story would be totally different. Yet countries hundred of times bigger than Singapore and with vast capacity to absorb immigrants are not even half as open to foreigners as ours. In other words, our nation has to know where it stands (Chia 2006).

Hence, while government immigration policies recruit foreign talent with the "desired" socioeconomic status, local Singaporeans depict these new migrants as incapable of understanding Singapore's precarious condition as an independent nation. These reactions show that while migrants who comprise foreign talent are actually of the similar class backgrounds to locals, this class status still creates social boundaries between them and mainstream Singapore society.

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[13] "Why do we need more foreign talent?," *SgForums*, August 28, 2006. (http://sgforums.com/forums/10/topics/207012)

[14] This statement appeared under the comments section of the following article: Pritam Singh "Foreign talent policy remains contentious, and for reason too," *The Online Citizen*, August 18, 2009. (http://theonlinecitizen.com/2009/08/foreign-talent-policy-remains-contentious-and-for-reason-too/)

Conclusion

On the surface, it is easy to assume that Singapore would provide a welcoming context for immigration. Unlike many western nations, Singapore society has espoused an explicitly multicultural identity, with an emphasis on tolerance and racial harmony. Many of the country's new immigrants also share racial and class similarities with Chinese and Indian Singaporean communities, supposedly aiding their incorporation into mainstream society. However, the last two decades has seen widespread opposition to the Singapore state's immigration policies and a growing animosity towards co-ethnic migrants from wealthier backgrounds. Singapore state officials have sought to address such public reactions in two ways: by portraying the influx of new immigrants as an economic need and referring to Singaporeans' own immigrant histories in appealing for multicultural harmony (Yeoh et al. 2013). This paper discusses how local Singaporeans have countered state discourse by constructing their own discourse of multiculturalism—in particular, one that is different from the Singaporean state and that of anti-immigrant sentiment in the west.

First, Singaporeans use their multicultural identity as a normative standard in judging new migrants' interactions with other members of Singapore society. In its original conception, Singapore state agencies referred to multiculturalism as a means to overcome racial tensions and discriminatory biases among the country's different ethnic groups. Yet, local Singaporeans use the same multiculturalism discourse to criticize the state's liberal immigration policies and differentiate themselves from co-ethnic migrants. Online forums portray Chinese and Indian migrants as too bigoted and too prejudiced to interact with Singapore's diverse ethnic groups, making them *inassimilable* for Singapore's multicultural society. Forum members then question the state's active recruitment of such individuals, given migrants' supposed refusal to adapt to Singapore's multicultural identity. While western nations have seen a massive backlash against multiculturalism due to immigration, Singapore faces a paradoxical situation where multiculturalism serves as the rationale for the rejection of co-ethnic immigrants.

Second, Singaporeans draw from discourses of precarious nationhood in distinguishing "loyal" citizens from migrants with questionable motives. While similar nationalist sentiments might be found among conservative groups in the USA and UK, Singapore is unique in that the nation is barely half a century old. The anxieties that drive anti-immigrant backlash are then rooted in recent history and a less stable sense of nationhood than western theorists tend to take for granted. State narratives of precarious nationhood were meant to unite the different ethnic groups towards the survival of Singapore as an independent country. Yet, in the context of today's immigration backlash, local Singaporeans use the same discourse to portray immigrants as privileged opportunists who are not invested in the country's future. Immigration is then a danger to Singapore's survival, as wealthy immigrants compete with locals over scarce resources.

The Singapore case highlights the need to understand how discourses of multiculturalism are transformed and utilized at different levels of analysis. To date, most studies have tended to portray multiculturalism as an overarching policy or program that institutions impose on its citizens. While undeniably important, such work runs the risk of portraying local actors as passive receivers of this discourse, unable to alter its

outcomes. This paper demonstrates how individuals can utilize the discourse of multiculturalism in forwarding their own interests and concerns. In the Singapore context, individual Singaporeans transform discourses of CMIO multiculturalism, creating a counter-discourse that challenges state immigration policies. Here, multiculturalism serves as the normative standard to evaluate migrants' capacity to assimilate into Singapore society and, ultimately, becomes the justification for the rejection of race and class similarities.

This study also supports Vertovec's (2007, 2010) call for studies of multiculturalism that look beyond differences in terms of ethnicity. The Singaporean case provides an example of super-diversity that is relatively unexplored in the current literature, where social boundaries are created around an idea of multicultural identity that specifically excludes co-ethnic immigrants. In many ways, Singapore's struggles with new immigration indicate how societies are engaging with multicultural discourses and policies in more robust and unpredictable ways, especially in migrant-receiving countries beyond the west. There is then a need to explore such outcomes in current studies of contemporary immigration.

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