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Xenophobia Online: Unmasking Singaporean Attitudes Towards ‘Foreign Talent’ Migrants

Abstract: In recent years, Singaporeans have become highly anxious about the future of their country and their own personal livelihood due to the influx of educated and professional migrants known as ‘foreign talent’ and express their ire at the presence of these migrants through xenophobic posts online. This paper suggests that such comments however, are indicative of the feelings of disillusionment and abandonment Singaporeans have towards the People’s Action Party — the only government Singaporeans have ever known . While Singaporeans have been critical of their government on economic issues that impact their lifestyle and existence, it is the presence of foreign talent migrants that have pushed Singaporeans into using the migrant situation to emotively express their opinions of disappointment in the government and its policies online like no other issue; functioning as the unlikely glue that has galvanised and united an ethnically disparate Singaporean population.

Key words: Singapore, xenophobic online posts, foreign talent migrants, People’s Action Party government

Singaporeans have been incredibly critical of ‘new’ migrants entering their country and have been expressing their anger through xenophobic comments online. Despite strict laws against racial vilification, these comments can be seen in online forums such as those in *Asiaone.com*, *The Online Citizen*, *Sam’s Alfresco Haven* and *The TR Emeritus*, in personal weblog entries and on social media platforms. Known as ‘foreign talent’, these migrants are professional arrivals from Mainland China, South Asia, the Philippines and beyond who have been entering Singapore in droves since the mid-1990s. Singapore is host to foreign talent migrants from nations outside Asia, primarily Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States with others coming from different parts of Europe, Latin America and Africa. However, Singaporeans seem to exhibit the more ire towards migrants from Mainland China, South Asia and the Philippines primarily because of their increased visibility due to higher numbers. Unlike the transient foreign domestic workers and unskilled labourers who have been flocking into Singapore since the 1980s, foreign talent migrants are educated professionals who often take up permanent residence in their adopted country. The online xenophobic comments reveal that Singaporeans view foreign talent migrants with great suspicion as they anecdotally feel that they are threatening their livelihood and way of life. Moreover, the comments expose Singaporean displeasure at the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) whom they hold responsible for the influx of the foreign talent migrants as revealed by any online discussion by Singaporeans on the matter, examples of which I will show in this paper. Here Singaporeans note that they are no longer able to identify with Singapore due to the increasingly overcrowded and changing ethnographic landscape which they blame on government policies.

While Singaporeans have always grumbled about the PAP government and its policies in private, the rise of online forms of communication have allowed them to express their dissatisfaction with the government more prolifically and loudly. Doing so has created a space for Singaporeans to identify with each other on issues that they are concerned about which, most often, are caused by government policies: the cost of living, widening income gap and elitism of PAP members of parliament.

However it is the presence of new migrants – transitional and permanent — that has dominated Singaporean online discourse like no other issue; uniting Singaporeans and functioning as a catalyst to push locals into greater political awareness. Singaporeans, fed up with the influx of these new migrants — whom they call ‘foreigners’ despite many overseas born professionals taking up permanent residence and citizenship – have progressed from being apathetic to becoming politically aware as demonstrated by the greatest withdrawal of electoral support the PAP has ever encountered at both the General Elections and Presidential Elections in 2011.¹

While the online criticisms of foreign talent migrants are no doubt xenophobic, they function as a proxy of other government policies affecting the existence and lifestyle of Singaporeans. Singaporeans, in other words, blame the foreign talent migrant presence for the economic issues citizens face such as the widening income gaps which they feel favour, PAP office holders, and unemployment. While Singaporeans blame their economic issues on foreign talent migrants, the xenophobic comments that are expressed such as through online mediums, for instance, in actuality bring to light feelings of abandonment experienced by local citizens. Singaporeans feel abandoned by a government which they have been actively supporting since independence in favour of the émigrés. Singaporeans have generally expressed discontent for migrants working in Singapore starting with the transient migrants. However, transient migrants are often, if not always, seen as the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy in Singapore and are governed by very strict immigration laws allowing them very few rights and no avenue for permanent residence. Foreign talent migrants have a much more privileged existence in Singapore primarily because they are graduates who compete with Singaporeans for jobs. They are financially on par with Singaporeans from different economic levels and have the opportunity to migrate permanently with their families. Such privilege has come at a price with Singaporeans harbouring and expressing unbridled feelings of dislike, distaste and sheer loathing towards them. However, while Singaporeans are bitter about the foreign migrant presence in Singapore — and to a large extent, the Singapore government for allowing this to happen – new migrants have become the unlikely glue that binds an otherwise culturally diversified society. In other words,

the presence of foreign talent migrants has created a sense of national unity that has been arguably met with more success than government initiatives. So why are there a high proportion of foreign talent migrants in Singapore and what has been said about them online?

New Migrants in Singapore

For the past three decades, the Singapore government has been strongly encouraging young university educated Singaporeans to marry and procreate through various methods that include setting up a national match making agency, tax incentives, housing schemes and of course, strongly worded government messages that emphasise national duty through procreation.² The Singapore government has often reminded Singaporeans that since the city-state's only resource is its people, Singaporeans have a national duty to procreate in order to make sure that there is a continuous supply of workers to feed the economic needs of the nation.

Singapore thus has been incredibly anxious about its population and has attempted to meet shortfalls by opening its borders to temporary and permanent blue and white collar migrant workers from the region beyond. Blue collar workers or transitional migrants are usually unskilled labourers who are also known colloquially as guest workers, foreign workers and work permit holders. White collar workers are professionals often in management positions, hold university degrees and are colloquially known as foreign talent.³ Foreign talent migrants usually become permanent residents while work permit holders are not provided with this option. Foreign students studying in post-secondary and tertiary institutions have also been classified as 'foreign talent' since they may eventually take up white collar positions in Singapore. Figures from the Singapore Department of Statistics reveal that as of 2011, out of the 5.18 million people in Singapore, 3.8 million are Singaporean and permanent residents while 1.4 million are non-resident migrants. The move to allow both transitional and permanent

migrants to enter Singapore has caused huge dissatisfaction and discord amongst Singaporeans which has been expressed online.

Xenophobia Online: Local Dislike for Foreign Talent

Everyday Singaporeans, who heavily utilise online technology and identify themselves as netizens (Singaporeans who take to the internet to make commentaries), make use of online forums to air their grievances by doing it non-anonymously. The forums in online sites such as the news site *Asiaone.Com* (<http://www.asiaone.com/A1Home/A1Home.html>) and popular political sites *The Online Citizen: A Community of Singaporeans* (<http://theonlinecitizen.com/>), *Sam's Alfresco Haven: Celebrating Singapore's Golden Period!* (www.sammyboy.com) and *TR Emeritus: The Voice of Singaporeans for Singapore* (<http://www.tremeritus.com/>) formerly known as *The Temasek Review* are well used by contributors and readers alike. Singaporeans use online platforms to express their discomfort with the rapid transformations they see happening around them, much of which is attributed to Singapore's status as a global-city state. These transformations include physical amendments in the landscape, ethnographic shifts in the population and an explosion of 'foreign' cultural practices.

This paper will provide a small sample of the anger, tension and disillusionment Singaporeans express online in response to opinion pieces, commentaries and reports that directly refer to foreign talent migrants in terms of the ethnographic/societal/cultural changes Singapore encounters as a direct result of their presence in the country and their loyalty to their adopted country as well as to the economic situation of Singaporeans (see Table 1 in Appendix). The posts are responses to opinion pieces taken from *The TR Emeritus* and *The Online Citizen*. The article in *The TR Emeritus* written by 'Grey Hippo' is titled '400000 expats in Singapore living the best of both worlds' appeared on 29 May 2011 while Jen writes a piece called 'Love Singapore, Our Home' which appeared on 2 May 2012.

Two themes are overtly present in the sample of comments above: they are xenophobic and incite hatred towards foreign talent migrants, and they express seething rage and disappointment at a government Singaporeans believe has abandoned them in favour of these new émigrés.

Xenophobia Online and Everyday Racisms

Clearly, the posts are highly xenophobic with netizens using derogatory terms to describe foreign talent migrants such as ‘foreign trash’(e.g. Nation of Idiots, May 20, 2011 and polishapple, 3 May 2012) while accusing them of polluting the environment and of practicing bad hygiene (e.g. ‘They stink and smell’ by Nation of Idiots, May 20, ‘The pungent smell of North India is pervading in Singapore’ by Belinda Goh, May 29, 2011 and ‘You people are very filthy and very unhygienic. You bastards shit and urinate every where and any where you like’ by Raymond Tan, May 20, 2011).

The comments also incite hatred through a fear of self-livelihood. Singaporeans here blame foreign talent migrants of destroying the country by bringing about ‘economic genocide’ and that ‘citizens have no work and will go hungry!!!’ (Delay Tactic, May 20, 2011). They further accuse new migrants of not being loyal to Singapore and predict that they will abandon the country once they become wealthy and successful. As fair fare, 3 May 2012 laments: ‘i loathe to say this but i do not wish to see our country which we all,true lions,love,become filled with ft/pr/new citizesn whose only true love for this dearly beloed country we all help to build is only the MONEY they could harness for themselves at our expense’.

Singaporeans make such xenophobic comments despite the very strict laws in Singapore regarding racial vilification. This is perhaps because Singaporeans do not consider the foreign talent migrants as fellow residents even though they may take

up permanent residency or citizenship. Singaporeans instead consider ‘True Singaporeans’ — a term commonly used by netizens online — describes those who can trace their lineage to migrants who came to Singapore when it was still a colony of the British (1819-1963).⁴

Since independence, the Singapore government has spared no expense in making sure that there is racial harmony amongst its multiethnic population. The city-state has not seen a communal riot throughout its years as an independent nation in part because of the strict laws preventing racial incitement. Penal Code Section 298A states:

Promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion or race and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony
298A. Whoever —
(a) by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, knowingly promotes or attempts to promote, on grounds of religion or race, disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious or racial groups;
or
(b) commits any act which he knows is prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different religious or racial groups and which disturbs or is likely to disturb the public tranquillity,
shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 years, or with fine, or with both.

While the laws prevent open communal conflict from taking place, this has not stopped Singaporeans from taking to the internet to air their frustrations; something which the government has allowed to take place without penalty. Moreover, Singaporean internet laws do not converge with the penal code. Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts Dr Yaacob Ibrahim has asked parliament to consider the need for tighter laws regarding racial vilification online. For now, however, Dr Yaacob has requested netizens use common sense when discussing and criticising people from different ethnicities, whether they are Singaporean or not.⁵ In lieu of laws governing racial vilification online, the government has instead elected to educate Singaporeans of the importance of integration with new migrants through the Civics and Moral Education program — a curriculum that runs from primary school to post-secondary education. Singaporean Ministers have also been communicating the significance of foreign talent migrants to the local economy

through official speeches. Such speeches, though, have not been well received by Singaporeans who have unsurprisingly taken to online platforms to disagree with their government leaders. An example of this can be seen in Howard Lee's (2010) opinion piece in *The Online Citizen* on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2010 National Day Rally and the resultant 75 responses to it. The strong ethnic tensions Singaporeans feel towards the new migrants however, are surprising. Anxiety over the 'ethnic other', in other words, has been in existence in Singapore long before the presence of new foreign talent migrants.

Singapore considers itself a multicultural nation as it is made up primarily of Chinese, Malay and Indian diasporic communities together with other minority ethnic communities such as the Eurasians, Arabs and Armenians. Multiculturalism in Singapore, as Barr & Zkrbiš and Velayutham argue however, is steeped in racism primarily rooted in the dominance of the ethnic Chinese in politics, economy, culture and society.⁶ Barr & Zkrbiš, for example, suggest that Singapore has a well defined hierarchical society that is created not on meritocracy, as claimed by the Singapore government, but through a well-oiled education system that favours and maintains an English-educated but ethnic Chinese elite over and above other racial groups. However, they also point out that while there may be some tension and minor resistance over the status of the elite in Singapore, particularly by ethnic Malays who are indigenous to the region, Singaporeans generally accept and support the maintenance of this hierarchical situation as they do the government. Velayutham's critique suggests that in Singapore's multicultural society, racism is practiced on a daily basis right at the grassroots level. While his case study is primarily focused on everyday racism towards ethnic Indians in Singapore, Velayutham also points out that racism is not solely directed from ethnic Chinese to the ethnic minorities (Malays and Indians, for example) but also takes place between the different ethnic minorities.

As long as there are no open physical communal conflicts, everyday racisms and racial tensions, in other words, are not out of the ordinary. It is thus not surprising

that xenophobic comments made towards foreign talent migrants takes place openly and with wild abandon online. To date, there has not been any Singaporean taken to task with regard to comments they make about foreign talent migrants online. The same however, cannot be said about foreign talent migrants and their comments about Singaporeans. In August 2011 Filipina Rachelle Beguia, an administrative clerk at a hospital, was targeted by online and social media users such as those on *The TR Emeritus*, for ‘anti-Singaporean’ comments about national servicemen and the work attitude of Singaporeans she made in defence of PAP Member of Parliament Penny Low on the latter’s Facebook page.⁷ Singaporean netizens took Beguia to task and asked her employer — the National Health Board — to investigate. Some online commentators even vehemently called for her resignation.⁸ A few months later in February 2012, Mainland Chinese student Sun Xu who was on a Singapore government scholarship and studying at the National University of Singapore, generated tremendous anger amongst Singaporeans for blogging in Mandarin that ‘there are more dogs than humans in Singapore’.⁹ Sun soon apologised for the remark in his blog but not before Singaporeans complained to Singapore’s Ministry of Education for his comment with many more taking to online forums and social media to demand not only his expulsion from NUS and revocation of his scholarship but for criminal charges to be brought against him.

While Singaporeans express a tremendous loathing for new migrants through online xenophobia, such expressions of contempt are accompanied by criticisms of the government for its foreign talent policy. These comments reveal a strong belief of abandonment by both the Singapore nation and the PAP government.

Government at Fault

Singaporeans have been criticising the PAP government in the private space amongst friends, family members, colleagues and neighbours for decades with discussions often revolving around unpopular PAP policies which many feel have contributed to the rising costs of living and rapid changes in the urban and ethnographic landscape. Ironically these policies mostly are in aid of Singapore’s accomplished quest for

global-city status. Singaporeans in recent years have taken to social media as a new platform to express their frustrations, anxieties and hurt at the PAP government. Singaporeans who once hid under the covers of self-censorship in the public space by not openly critiquing the PAP for fear of arrest and detention under the Internal Security Act for questioning Singaporean leadership, are now expressing their displeasure for the government openly online and through social media. There is thus arguably a culture of complaint in Singapore, most of the time directed towards the government, its ministers and its policies as Singapore develops further as a modern global city.

Singaporeans, while living in a free market capitalist economy, are now questioning the government in terms of what they consider is the unequal distribution of wealth. Singaporeans believe that years of hard work and self-sacrifice dictated by the Singapore Shared Values has not resulted in the fruits of their labour. Anecdotally they suspect that this wealth has been held not by industrialists or private business operators but by the PAP government leaders (Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers) because of their exceptionally high salaries. The Prime Minister's salary in 2007, for example, was SGD \$3.1 million which was about five times more than the annual salary of the President of the United States of America.¹⁰ While the PAP has often justified the high salaries of its leaders as a form of anti-corruption and the carrot to attract high calibre people into politics and government, Singaporeans feel that meritocracy in the political realm does not exist. Instead, Singaporeans explicitly state online and anecdotally that the PAP often appoint and anoint future elected Members of Parliament who are pro-PAP and have little to do with ordinary Singaporeans.

Much of the recent Singaporean angst for the government, as this paper puts forward, is expressed through xenophobic sentiments towards the presence of foreign migrants. Singaporeans fear the perceived impact the migrant presence has on the financial status and quality of life of natural born 'True Singaporean' citizens. The new migrants, in other words, have become an emotive and nationalist proxy for Singaporeans to express their dislike and distaste for the government and its policies.

Singaporeans convincingly express feelings of abandonment (see posts under 'Loyalty to Nation' in particular) and distance from Singapore. Even though they are 'native' Singapore citizens (e.g. F.T.govt, May 29, 2011), they feel 'mistreated in our own 'home'' (Lions 2 May 2012) by both the government as well as the country. As I will explain later in this paper, Singaporeans have learnt to associate the PAP with Singapore in most part because of government initiated projects meant to instil nationalism in citizens. Singaporeans also complain that they are unable to recognise or identify with Singapore (e.g. Homeless, 3 May, 2012). The increasing numbers of foreign talent migrants have also led Singaporeans to question the government's loyalty to its citizens. Here the posts unashamedly accuse the government of favouring foreign migrants over locals since the PAP 'has sold our children's future away to foreigners' (Homeless, 3 May, 2012). Whether real or imagined, tensions between Singapore-born citizens and foreign talent migrants are brimming.

Singaporeans make use of the foreign talent presence to blame the government for the economic issues they face. For instance, writing on 29 May 2011, Dealay Tactic directly links the presence of foreign talent migrants with the economic issues concerning Singaporeans when they state: 'The employment, housing, healthcare and even ministerial pay issues have the FTs as a major factor for their existence. For example, FTs drive up the GDP artificially, increasing ministerial bonus but not benefitting the ordinary Singaporean'. Likewise for Libran who takes the economic issues affecting Singaporeans one step further when they note that the foreign talent presence affects not only Singaporeans today but Singaporeans of tomorrow. Writing on 2 May 2012 Libran observes:

Singaporeans may not realise it now, but the PAP govt. has sold our children's future away to foreigners. All the 'prosperity' we thought we had were bought by 1) selling a large chunk of Singapore to foreigners, 2) by enslaving our young with 30-year mortgage loans, and 3) by flooding the small country with millions of foreigners. In a small country where we have to jostle with foreigners for everything from public housing to transportation to health care to education to

jobs, what pride can we feel? While our PAP politicians enrich themselves with millions while we slave for peanuts?

The cause of the Singaporean woes, in other words, seems to be the government and its policies. The xenophobia Singaporeans express has become *the* issue which Singaporeans latch on to communicate their frustration with the PAP and the decisions it has made that have impacted on the local population. So why are Singaporeans invested emotionally with their government?

A Government Project: Forging a National Collective Identity

To be Singaporean, really, is to openly show love and loyalty to country.¹¹ The Singapore government — ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP) — has been incredibly successful in creating a unified national identity amongst its multiethnic citizens through diverse and official schemes. The reason for this is because Singapore has long believed that its only resource is its people. The campaign to encourage a deep sense of loyalty to Singapore however, does not stop at country but extends to government.¹² The government's efforts have successfully resulted in the creation of a unique cultural trait where the Singaporean collective identity is a nationalist one that is linked not only to country but arguably to government as well. Singaporeans however both embrace and struggle with this cultural trait. They do so because while they feel the government has made Singapore into a wealthy and prosperous nation yet this wealth is not evenly shared amongst Singaporeans. As a child growing up in Singapore, I remember hearing the rhetoric 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer' from various adult family members.

The PAP government is the only ruling party Singaporeans really know.¹³ Singaporeans generally have conditional respect and admiration for the PAP government and its titular head Lee Kwan Yew whom many attribute as the creators of modern Singapore not only in the interrelated obvious and practical sense of economy, infrastructure and quality of life but in other ways that intimately affect

local societal and cultural identity. The PAP has spent time and effort cultivating a strong sense of nationalism in its disparate population. Nation-building, with the idea of creating a loyal citizenry connected to Singapore, has been a priority for the PAP government since it became an independent nation in 1965. The PAP does this through various schemes that include the scripting of a national past that highlights the PAP and Lee as the heroes of Singapore history, the creation of a list of shared values with emphasis on hard work and sacrifice for the good of the nation and the active engagement of young people into various national projects.

Singaporeans are all too familiar with the official narrative of the nation known as The Singapore Story which traces Singapore from its colonial to post-colonial narrative.¹⁴ The Singapore Story tells the continuing tale of Singapore from its origins as a Malay fishing acquired by Sir Stamford Raffles of the British East India Company in 1819 to its current status as a financial and industrial powerhouse and global city-state. While the British are credited with Singapore's evolution from a mere trading port to jewel of the British crown, the PAP and Lee Kwan Yee are the prominent if not only contributors of Singapore's unstoppable road to modernity.¹⁵

The Singapore government is also the hand behind the development of the Singaporean people as a loyal and unstoppable workforce through a cultivated work ethic that includes hard work and self-sacrifice for nation enshrined in the Singapore Shared Values doctrine. This doctrine serves as the official ethos of Singapore society. This work ethic however permeates out of the government's adoption of selected tenets of Confucian Chinese culture which the other ethnic groups are able to identify with, namely the importance of respecting the family and upholding family values. While Confucian Chinese culture highlights obedience to the family hierarchy, Singapore's interpretation replaces family with nation and government.¹⁶ The other ethnicities in Singapore would not find extending the paradigms of family much of a stretch since community relations is emphasised strongly in all ethnic groups such as the Malays. Singaporeans are indoctrinated with The Singapore Story through the formal education system (e.g. the Civics and

Moral Education and Social Studies curricular) and public education (e.g. memorials, museums and commemorative exhibitions and events).

Although the Singapore government actively engages in selective aspects of Confucian Chinese culture as a model for its official value system, there are other aspects which it also adapts accordingly. Singapore, like many parts of the Western world, is a youth-oriented society. While Confucian Chinese culture gives reverence to the elderly, Singapore places great emphasis on the young, particularly in what the government calls 'the next generation'. To inculcate a strong sense of nationalism in young Singaporeans, the government has embarked on projects that make new generations of Singaporeans believe they are responsible for the future of the country. These include recruiting young people, usually under the age of 35, to actively engage in government sponsored activities, mentoring young university graduates who enter the civil service, and engaging young people to respond positively to various government policies for the good of Singapore such as procreation to increase the nation's population.

The government also targets teenagers in their campaigns to cultivate allegiance to state and administration. The youth are strongly encouraged to take on responsibilities that emphasise loyalty to the nation, even in their leisure time. These activities include volunteering or taking on the role of enthusiastic spectators in the 2010 Youth Olympic Games. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports (MCYS), the parent ministry that oversaw Singapore's successful bid for the first Summer Youth Olympic Games and its organisation and implementation through the Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee (SYOGOC), attempted to drum up nationalist support, enthusiasm and momentum for the games by promoting the games ethos to secondary students through various modes such as Wikipedia entries such as the 2010 Summer Youth Olympics

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore_Youth_Olympic_Games_Organising_Committee) and related sites.

The Singapore government, aware that there are a number of Singaporeans who live, work and study overseas, is always adept at creating schemes and events to entice overseas Singaporeans back to the homeland. The aim of securing Singaporeans back to the homeland is to build and work on the various modernization projects the nation engages in. For instance, in order to encourage young people with little or weakly developed ties to Singapore in the foreign countries they live in, the Singapore National Youth Council has devised a grant to attract these Singaporeans back to the homeland through its Young Change Makers program. According to the NYC website, the grant:

Aims to provide seed funding for short term community projects that will engage our Overseas Singaporean Diaspora and encourage them to actively reach out and connect with their peers (living abroad and/or in Singapore), contribute to the local communities they live in, and help promote Singapore as a great city to live, work and play in.

The grant is worth \$3000 to cover direct costs for the project. However, the NYC will provide resources and support from a pool of mentors. Projects that are funded will ‘benefit the Overseas Singaporean community and/or the local community in the host country’ and ‘the core activities of the project should be carried out overseas’. The Young Change Makers program thus is another way in which to instil a strong sense of loyalty to Singapore and the Singapore government amongst young overseas Singaporeans. Overseas Singaporeans who are eligible to apply must be between 13 to 25 years in age and can apply as individuals, youth groups or organisations. When Singaporeans become working adults, the government has other schemes to aid in national allegiance.

The public service is Singapore’s largest employer, employing around 127,000 officers across 15 Ministries and in more than 50 Statutory Boards.¹⁷ As Singapore’s largest employer, it actively recruits fresh university graduates who receive their degrees from both local and overseas tertiary institutions. Once recruited, these fresh graduates are mentored by more senior members of the

government department they work in and loyalty to Singapore and to the government are emphasised. Stand out young employees who are identified as complying with the department's organisational goals are sometimes given opportunities such as scholarships for approved postgraduate courses. While these scholarships mean they are bonded to the parent ministry or statutory board, their promotion through the public service is accelerated, thus in principle ensuring the continuation of the loyalty cycle.

The government, in other words, has done everything in its power to encourage and inculcate a sense of loyalty to both Singapore and to the PAP; something which Singaporeans have responded to as seen in the Party's constant re-election in the General Elections, and the lack of obvious citizen dissent. The influx and perceived favouritism of foreign talent migrants by Singaporeans has left many citizens feeling angry and abandoned by a government and to a lesser degree, a country, they feel that they have been loyal and deeply devoted to. As Lions, 2 May 2012 so passionately put it:

we have been mistreated in our own "home" by our elite countrymen and some of us are even being mistreated by those foreign guests who now are "stealing" our home and "everything" we have worked so hard to out in our "home".

what a shame that while exhorting singaporeans to be welcoming of migrant workers,we actually NEGLECT n MARGINLAISED our own people.

tell us,can we still honestly call SG OUR HOME AND ALL TRUE BLUE SINGAPOREANS

With Duh 3 May 2012 continuing:

Singapore has already ceased to be a nation – it is now a resort island where every foreigner is welcomed and endorsed by our govt to come take a chunk of the Singapore pie so that they can retire in their homeland in comfort.

To deal with their feelings of anger and abandonment, Singaporeans have developed a unique and nuanced national culture that thrives on rebelling against what they consider the elitist and authoritarian government. This is most obviously seen in the sample Singaporean comments this paper has highlighted that are largely and unashamedly critical of the government for allowing the surge of new migrants through its foreign talent migrant policy. While Singaporeans are unable to do very much to change the ethnographic landscape of their country due to the new worker migrants, they are expressing their Singaporean cultural identity and collective solidarity through language and food.

Standing up to the Paternalistic PAP Government — Unity and Empowerment through *Singlish* and Curry

While the anti-foreign feelings in Singapore are no doubt shaped by economic, social and cultural considerations, the most public show of unity and empowerment for Singaporeans has taken place through the expression of cultural (ethnic) identity. Singapore citizens take issue with new migrants for not attempting to fit in primarily because of language barriers. Many Singaporeans feel that English and even simple Malay helps bridge the gap between the main racial groups in Singapore. Older Singaporeans regardless of whether they are Chinese, Indian, Malay or Eurasian, converse cross-culturally through the use of basic Malay. Yet, Singaporeans do warm up to new migrants in the country if they adopt *Singlish* — a creolised version of English with the Chinese languages of Hokkien and Teochew intermingled with Malay and some Tamil. *Singlish* also dominates any internet forum, website, blog and social media sites heavily populated by Singaporean users. Doing so allows Singaporeans to identify with each other, site unseen, and thus forming Anderson's quintessential nationalist 'imagined community'.¹⁸ In 2010, *Razor TV* — a segment in the online version of the nation's flagship English language newspaper *The Straits Times* — featured the *Singlish* talents of an American teenager living and studying in Singapore. The teenager's ability to speak *Singlish* was very well received by the presenters of the segment who were not only impressed but felt he mastered the art of *Singlish*. In the same year, *Razor*

TV featured a segment on foreign students studying at the Singapore Management University who were adapting to Singapore by learning *Singlish*. The segment painted these students in a positive light because they were making efforts to blend into Singapore culture by communicating in *Singlish*.¹⁹

Realising the role *Singlish* can play in easing tensions and sensing the seething anger the population have towards new migrants and towards the PAP, the government has recently embraced Singapore English as part of its campaign to 'educate' foreign talent migrants as well as foreign students enrolled in Singaporean institutions about local culture. In 2010, PM Lee Hsien Loong referred to a locally produced guidebook for international students in Singapore known as *Singapore Sh10k!* during his National Day Rally speech. *Shiok* is *Singlish* for 'feel good'. *Singapore Sh10k!* originally started off as an information guidebook for international students at the Singapore Management University (SMU) but has become an encouraged 'must have' for new migrants to learn how to integrate and assimilate into Singapore society. By doing so, PM Lee placed localism as a pivotal tool for integration as the campaign strongly encourages new migrants in Singapore to embrace *Singlish* and the multi-tired and complex local discourse that accompanies it. While on one level, this seems to be the intention of the government, on another level, the active encouragement of *Singlish* is a thinly veiled movement to convince Singaporeans who trace their ancestral roots to the era of colonialism, that they still indeed matter. The primary theme of the 2010 Singapore National Day celebrations was the issue of integration of new migrants into Singapore society and culture with the National Day Rally speech (a platform for the government to outline its 2010-2011 policies) and a number of focus groups chaired by cabinet ministers organised to 'allow' Singaporeans to air their grievances.

Food also plays a significant part in Singaporean national identity and national solidarity.²⁰ The annual Singapore Day (SG Day) events that are held in cities hosting large numbers of overseas Singaporeans are testament to the lengths

Singaporeans go to for familiar cuisine. At the SG Day in Melbourne in 2008, there was an abundance of hawker food served from three separate pavilions. Each pavilion was host to hawkers dishing out Singapore favourites such as *satay* (barbequed meat on a stick), *ice kacang* (sweetened ice shavings served with red beans desert), *chendol* (coconut and molasses ice desert), *hokkien mee* (fried seafood and pork noodle/vermicelli dish), chicken rice, chilli crab and others. Some of the hawkers in attendance are based in food centres around Singapore and were flown in specially to provide authenticity to the occasion. Participants of the event lined up for anywhere between 45 minutes to an hour for a small bowl or plate of their favourite Singaporean hawker food. The event, which was successfully spread by the online media, was reported by *The Straits Times* on October 8, 2008 to have been attended by an estimated 11,000 Singaporeans.

Food has been successfully used as an avenue for activism to highlight Singaporean concerns regarding new migrants and their inability to integrate into Singaporean culture and society. In 2011 a Facebook campaign to ‘Cook and Share a Pot of Curry’ on Sunday 21 August was launched in protest against foreign talent migrants — and to a greater extent even temporary migrants — for their inability to accept Singaporean multiculturalism. According to a report in *Reuters* on August 21, 2011, the campaign attracted tens of thousands of Singaporeans both in Singapore and overseas to commit to cooking and sharing curry with friends and neighbours. The event came about because of a newspaper on a local residential council’s arbitration in a case involving a foreign talent migrant family from Mainland China and their ethnic Indian Singaporean neighbours. Both families live in a block of flats that are part of the government controlled Housing and Development Board scheme. The Mainland Chinese family complained that they were offended by the smell of curry emanating from their neighbour’s flat. As part of the mediation process, the Singaporean family agreed to cook curry only on days their Mainland Chinese neighbours were not at home — a decision that angered Singaporeans since they felt that cultural adaptation and acculturation should be the responsibility of new migrants and not locals. While the campaign targeted new permanent and transitional migrants living in Singapore, it was also meant to send a message to the

government for not only siding with the Mainland Chinese family but also for allowing so many foreigners into the country to live, work and study. As blogger Singapore Actually, writing in 2011, observes:

I couldn't help but be annoyed by this story about the Indian Singaporeans who had to stop cooking curry when their neighbours who are from China, were at home, because they didn't like the smell of curry. If the Indian family does not adhere to this, they can be sued in court. The first thought that came to my mind.... "What the heck?!" I am shocked that such a request was even entertained by the mediation centre.

The solution just seems unfair to me. When you're a guest in another person's home country, you wouldn't ask them to stop their cultural practices that are the norm of that country, would you? I find the situation and solution proposed by the mediator highly insensitive. And what kind of precedence is being set? It is this kind of thing that upsets locals and causes unnecessary friction....

Some Singaporeans are becoming acutely aware of their xenophobia towards the foreign talent migrants as evidenced by blogger SpeakSpokeWriteWrote's 2011 analysis of the Singaporean response to the story of the Mainland Chinese family and their Indian neighbours when she notes:

I take issue with the highlighting of this specific case. In the first place, I think this is NOT a common example. In highlighting this case, it makes this particular PRC family look bad, probably deservedly so. The bigger problem is that it shows that our foreign guests are not integrating. Worse still, they know how to make their complaints heard and addressed. It spoils the market for other, more sensitive foreign guests.

Furthermore this is the sort of story that promotes xenophobia. Just read the rapidly increasing no. of comments on facebook links and the content of the comments.

SpeakSpokeWriteWrote's analysis is a concerned commentary of the rise of Singaporean xenophobia. However, in doing so, SpeakSpokeWriteWrote reveals her own issues with the new migrants who she fears are growing increasingly savvy in using established official lines of complaint set up for Singaporeans, against

Singaporeans. The country and its government, in other words, have turned against locals in favour of the new migrants through the very systems set up for Singaporeans to live in toleration with each other.

Conclusion

Singaporeans have been using online platforms to express xenophobic sentiments towards foreign talent migrants. These comments, while draped in anger and fear, are on one level aimed at the waves of new professional worker migrants and their economic, social and cultural impacts on Singapore and Singaporeans, but on another level, indicative of the electorate's emotional relationship with its government. Even though Singaporeans have always been critical of the government and its policies, the presence of foreign talent migrants have pushed Singaporean sentiment into what seems to be a belief that the PAP government — which they have long supported at the polls and never really publicly questioned since self-rule — have forsaken and neglected them in favour of new educated professional migrants entering Singapore and eventually taking up permanent residence. Singaporeans, in other words, use the presence of foreign talent migrants as an emotive proxy to attack the government regarding the concerns they have for their economic well being. The resulting effect is a Singaporean society that is getting more political. Singaporeans are now valuing the freedom of speech and openly criticising the government online. Where there was once a lack of communal integration amongst Singaporeans, the presence of foreign talent migrants has been put aside in favour of unity through a show of uniquely Singaporean cultural nuances of language and food.

The ever increasing use of emergent communication technologies such as social media platforms has provided Singaporeans with a much needed avenue for expressing their dissatisfaction towards the government in ways which has caused changes to the local political scene. Singaporeans now have a platform to make themselves heard to effect as seen in the results of the 2011 General Elections and

Presidential Elections, both of which saw a significant increase in opposition members of parliament. Singaporeans, as well as opposition parties, however, do not wish to see the PAP eradicated from government but rather be held in check particularly when it comes to unpopular policies which seem to disfavour citizens while placing Singapore at the forefront of the global economic and financial arenas. The challenge for the Singapore government is to marry the good of the country to the immediate satisfaction of its citizens. In other words, the government needs to consider how to maintain a balance between economic growth, population growth and the maintenance of a uniquely Singaporean identity.

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INSERT APPENDIX HERE

NOTES

¹ Despite the PAP still retaining power in the General Elections, they lost almost 40% of the popular vote and 6 out of 87 parliamentary seats while their candidate for the Presidential elections — Tony Tan — only won by less than 1% of the final vote as Singaporean writer and commentator Catherine Lim writes in her blog.

² The matchmaking agency, known initially as the Singapore Development Unit and now as the Singapore Development Network, helps single Singaporeans meet with the hope of marriage. Lyons, “The graduate woman phenomenon: Changing constructions of the family in Singapore,” 309-327.

³ According to Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower website on employment passes, foreign talent migrants enter Singapore on a work visa as opposed to a work permit which is reserved for temporary blue collar unskilled workers such as foreign domestic workers and labourers. Minimum eligibility for a work visa includes a minimum fixed salary of SGD\$3000 a month and recognised tertiary education. There is also hierarchy of categories — P1, P2 and Q1 — designated further by income levels. The eligibility income levels are as follows: more than \$8000 for P1, more than \$4500 for P2 and more than \$3000 for Q1. Most often, these temporary migrants are able to attain permanent residence without much difficulty and are able to change employers without repatriation.

⁴ For a humorous list of ‘True Singaporean’ cultural nuances, see the post by Kway Png (2003) in the satirical Singaporean website Talkingcock.Com (www.talkingcock.com).

⁵ As noted in *The Straits Times* on April 6, 2008.

⁶ See Barr & Zkrbiš, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, ethnicity and the nation building project* and Velayutham, “Everyday racism in Singapore,” 255-273.

⁷ This saga was discussed in the Singapore blogosphere by bloggers such as Darryl Kang.

⁸ As the saga unfolded, her Singapore-born husband Gay Chou Hu publicly admitted that it was he and not she who posted the comments. Responding to his admission, netizens trawled the internet for dirt on him. This proved to be a simple task since Gay, a teacher in a junior college (high school), often commented on public forums which seemingly either took a pro-PAP or an anti-Muslim stance. At the time of writing, netizens have written to the Ministry of Education to look into the matter, asking for his resignation as they feel that Gay is not fit to be a teacher for his anti-Muslim comments which contravene Singaporean multicultural policies.

⁹ As reported by *Yahoo News Singapore* on February 22, 2012

¹⁰ As reported by *Associated Press* on April 9, 2009.

¹¹ For instance by flying the Singapore flag for a month as part of the National Day celebrations and by joining various Facebook groups that support Singapore nationalism.

¹² See Barr and Zkrbiš, *op. cit.*

¹³ The PAP has been in power since pre-independence as it was elected by the people as its representative when the British declared Singapore self-governing in 1959. The PAP continued to represent Singapore when the island became part of the Federation of Malaysia and has been the absolute power in Singapore since independence in 1965.

¹⁴ Hong and Huang, *The Scripting of a national history: Singapore and its pasts*.

¹⁵ Hong and Huang, *op. cit.*; Gomes, “Memories Alive: Maintaining Singapore Nationalism Abroad,” 37-50.

¹⁶ Gomes, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ This information is available on the Singapore government’s *Public Service Division* website.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*.

¹⁹ It is not only language that the local media has highlighted as a way for migrants to blend into Singapore society and culture. This includes living in HDB flats, eating at hawker centres, mixing with locals and generally blending into the local cultural landscape. In the 2000s, *The Straits Times*, for instance, sometimes featured Caucasians working in Singapore who have opted for living with Singaporeans in heartlander neighbourhoods rather than in gated expatriate communities. Heartlanders are the nominally educated, often non-English speaking lower middle and lower income groups (Class not applicable). Heartlanders live in what is considered the Singapore heartlands – public housing estates run by the Housing Development Board (HDB). Heartlanders make up the vast majority of Singaporeans.

²⁰ Tarulevicz, “The PAP’s Singapore project: Constructing the future, essentializing the past.”