Not quite fitting in: Asian international students in Singapore

Gomes, Catherine

https://researchrepository.rmit.edu.au/esploro/outputs/9921862525001341/filesAndLinks?institution=61RMIT_INST&index=null

Gomes, C. (2016). Not quite fitting in: Asian international students in Singapore. In Global Perspectives and Local Challenges Surrounding International Student Mobility (pp. 281–296). IGI Global.

<https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-9746-1.ch015>

Document Version: Published Version

Published Version: <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-9746-1.ch015>

Repository homepage: <https://researchrepository.rmit.edu.au>

Copyright © 2016, IGI Global. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI Global is prohibited.

Downloaded On 2023/04/26 10:54:52 +1000

Thank you for downloading this document from the RMIT Research Repository.

The RMIT Research Repository is an open access database showcasing the research outputs of RMIT University researchers.

RMIT Research Repository: <http://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/>

Citation:

Gomes, C 2016, 'Not quite fitting in: Asian international students in Singapore' in Krishna Bista and Charlotte Foster (ed.) Global Perspectives and Local Challenges Surrounding International Student Mobility, IGI Global, Hershey, United States, pp. 281-296.

See this record in the RMIT Research Repository at:

<https://researchbank.rmit.edu.au/view/rmit:34745>

Version: Published Version

Copyright Statement:

© 2016, IGI Global. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI Global is prohibited.

Link to Published Version:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-9746-1.ch015>

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS PAGE

Global Perspectives and Local Challenges Surrounding International Student Mobility

Krishna Bista
University of Louisiana at Monroe, USA

Charlotte Foster
Missouri Western State University, USA

A volume in the Advances in Higher Education
and Professional Development (AHEPD) Book
Series

Information Science
REFERENCE

An Imprint of IGI Global

Published in the United States of America by
Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global)
701 E. Chocolate Avenue
Hershey PA, USA 17033
Tel: 717-533-8845
Fax: 717-533-8661
E-mail: cust@igi-global.com
Web site: <http://www.igi-global.com>

Copyright © 2016 by IGI Global. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or distributed in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without written permission from the publisher. Product or company names used in this set are for identification purposes only. Inclusion of the names of the products or companies does not indicate a claim of ownership by IGI Global of the trademark or registered trademark.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bista, Krishna, 1980- editor. | Foster, Charlotte, 1967- editor.

Title: Global perspectives and local challenges surrounding international student mobility / Krishna Bista and Charlotte Foster, editors.

Description: Hershey, PA : Information Science Reference, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015041964 | ISBN 9781466697461 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781466697478 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Students, Foreign--Social conditions--Case studies. | College students--Social conditions--Case studies. | Foreign study--Social aspects--Case studies. | Student mobility--Case studies.

Classification: LCC LB2375 .G56 2016 | DDC 378.1/691--dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015041964>

This book is published in the IGI Global book series Advances in Higher Education and Professional Development (AHEPD) (ISSN: 2327-6983; eISSN: 2327-6991)

British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

All work contributed to this book is new, previously-unpublished material. The views expressed in this book are those of the authors, but not necessarily of the publisher.

For electronic access to this publication, please contact: eresources@igi-global.com.

Chapter 15

Not Quite Fitting In: Asian International Students in Singapore

Catherine Gomes
RMIT University, Australia

ABSTRACT

For more than a decade Singapore has been investing heavily in establishing itself as a rising star in the competitive international education market that services students from the region and elsewhere. Singapore is an attractive destination for international students because of scholarship opportunities, a high standard of living and job opportunities post-graduation. Moreover Singapore has geographical and cultural proximity for students coming from Asia while being 'Western' enough to attract those from beyond the region. By interviewing 57 international students about their sense of belonging in Singapore, impressions of Singapore and the social networks they developed in the island-state, this chapter suggests that despite a welcoming local government, seeming cultural similarities to the host nation, substantial periods of time studying in Singapore and intentions of taking up permanent residence, international students not only have difficulties adapting to Singapore society but create their own form of agency that allows them to navigate their everyday life in transience.

INTRODUCTION

Work in the area of Asian international students in the well-known international education hubs of Australia-New Zealand, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, often points out that these students find adapting to life in the host nation challenging due to reasons that are home and host country-related (e.g. Fong, 2011; Ying 2002; Portes & DeWind, 2004; Sawir et al, 2008). These reasons are often reflective of being away from the home nation and their families, and the difficulties encountered in adjusting to the host country's culture and society. This work notes that Asian international students report that they face loneliness and experience homesickness while not being able to adjust to the society of the host nation particularly since many students state that they have difficulty developing meaningful relationships with locals due to cultural differences (e.g. Gomes, in press, Sawir et al, 2008). The literature, in other words, acknowledges that international students encounter emotional

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9746-1.ch015

difficulties while in transience and almost never able to successfully integrate with the local population. Asian international students in Australia moreover cite their transience as a factor in not being able to feel a sense of belonging to the host nation and openly state that permanent residence would change this perspective (Gomes, in press). However, what about Asian international students living and studying in other Asian countries? Do they experience the same kind of issues as reported by their counterparts in Euro-America and the Antipodes?

This chapter looks at the experiences of Asian international students in Singapore – a country which prides itself on being a melting pot of Asian cultures. Singapore reported in 2012 that it had around 86,000 international students (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 2012). At the beginning of 2014, international students made up 18 per cent of the university-going students in Singapore with most coming from Northeast Asia, particularly Mainland China, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Do Asian international students feel a sense of belonging in Singapore because the country shares similar cultural traits with them or are these students disconnected in some way from the host nation? If they are disconnected from the host nation, how do Asian international students go about navigating their everyday life in Singapore in order to create a ‘home away from home’ while in transience? In order to address these questions and with the help of two Research Assistants, I conducted in-depth interviews with 57 Asian international students in Singapore in early 2014.

What I found is that while the international students interviewed for this study were keen to successfully apply for permanent residence and admitted that Singapore was a good place to live in for practical reasons such as job opportunities, cosmopolitanism and personal safety and security, they felt that they did not fully integrate into local society. This lack of integration takes place even though participants share common or similar ethnic and cultural traits with Singaporeans who mainly identify as coming from Chinese, Indian or Malay backgrounds. Instead, participants reveal that they attain a greater sense of belonging in Singapore through the meaningful relationships they made with fellow international students who came from the home nation. *I argue thus that Asian international students do not necessarily integrate into Singaporean society even though the island-state supports a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual population that has close similarities to the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the students.* Before discussing the results of this study, it is necessary to understand Singapore’s rise as an international education hub and its attraction for the Asian international student.

International Students in Singapore

In the early 2000s, the Singapore government began to imagine itself as a global education hub host to diverse public and private institutions of higher learning from local and foreign education providers attracting international students from the region and elsewhere (Sidhu, Ho & Yeoh, 2014; Ziguras & Gribble, 2014). This was done through the Global Schoolhouse initiative which witnessed diverse institutions and programs establish themselves in the nation-state in 2002 followed by the launch of the Singapore Education brand in 2003 which was meant to promote Singapore as a ‘premier education hub’ with the aim of attracting international students (Dessoff 2012, p. 19). Looking at the higher education sector alone, Singapore has two public universities (National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University), three government supported universities (Singapore Management University, Singapore University of Technology and Design; and the Singapore Institute of Technology), private universities (e.g. Singapore Institute of Management which administers foreign university degree programs on top of their own) and branch campuses of foreign universities (e.g. Chicago Business School and Technische

Universität München). In addition, Singapore has 5 polytechnics (e.g. Nanyang Polytechnic and Singapore Polytechnic and other government affiliated institutions providing industry-specific diploma and degree programmes (e.g. BCA Academy) (The Complete University Guide, United Kingdom, 2014; Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2014a). While this chapter looks at international students attending state-funded universities, it is worth mentioning that the creation of the Global Schoolhouse is not confined to serving solely international students. By 2011, Singapore had around 70 registered private higher education providers catering to 47,500 full-time and part-time Singaporean students (ICEF Monitor 2012).

Singapore had other reasons for investing heavily in education besides making inroads into the lucrative international education market. Turning Singapore into a global education hub where Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans benefit from local and foreign institutions is a key strategy the government relied upon to make Singapore into a knowledge-based economy which would see the city-state strengthen its position as a regional services hub and manufacturing base for multinational companies (Sanderson, 2002). In addition, becoming an international hub would help prevent a local brain drain since 1 in 10 Singaporeans studying in higher education were doing so outside Singapore (Ziguras & Gribble, 2014).

In order to attract top international students to its publicly funded universities and polytechnics, the Singapore government, under its Ministry of Education, administers tuition grants worth about SGD\$210 million each year (6 per cent of the 1700 polytechnic students and 13 per cent of the 2200 public-funded university-going undergraduates).¹ The grants heavily subsidise international student fees with recipients paying very little in this regard. Upon graduation, these students are then bonded in Singapore for 3 years to work for locally-based companies (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2014b). They thus join the large numbers of foreign migrants in Singapore taking up white collar jobs – an issue I discuss later in this chapter. In this study, half (28) of the participants are recipients of these scholarships and therefore bonded in Singapore after graduation. In addition, Singapore also has scholarships, grants and fellowships that are specific to the region such as the Singapore Government Scholarships for Southeast Asians and the ASEAN Foundation Scholarships in Development, Environment, and IT for ASEAN Nationals.² International students without scholarships find that international student fees are not near as expensive as those in other popular education hubs such as those in Australia, New Zealand, the US and Europe. This is because education in Singapore is subsidised even for international students. An Arts and Social Science undergraduate degree for new students entering university in 2014 for instance costs SGD\$26,800 per year in Singapore while the same course costs approximately SGD\$60,974 per year at a Group of 8 (G8) university in Melbourne, Australia.

Singapore as a Destination

Singapore is an attractive destination for international students for both economic and lifestyle reasons. Singapore is a nation full of job opportunities. The Ministry of Manpower reports that in the final quarter of 2013, there were over 40,600 newly employed people in addition to 59,900 job openings waiting to be filled. The unemployment rate, needless to say at 1.8 per cent, is one of the lowest in the world (Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, 2013). Moreover, Singapore has a wide range of established manufacturing and service industries and emerging businesses in order to be world class and competitive.

The Singapore government frequently mentions that Singapore's only resource is its people (e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 2012). By this, it considers people as workers to fill positions at various levels of the employment chain. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Singapore embarked on ambitious modernity projects that saw a great need for unskilled labourers to help build Singapore's in-

frastructure and to replace the rising number of women entering the workforce to meet labour demands. Hence enter the unskilled migrant worker and foreign domestic worker, respectively. By the late 1980s and thereafter however, Singapore realised that it was facing a brain drain where (university) educated and skilled Singaporeans were migrating with little or no intention of returning to the homeland. In order to meet its labour shortage, Singapore started looking overseas as part of its recruitment program to fill an ever increasing number of jobs available in various industries. While attracting foreign workers to fill skilled positions was one way of addressing the labour shortage, another way was by attracting international students and training them locally. The latter avenue would mean that international students are also contributing to the economy through the secondary industries connected to the exportation of higher education (e.g. hospitality). At the same time international students are possibly acculturating and assimilating into Singaporean society and therefore more hungry to take up permanent residence and stay indefinitely in their host nation or at least for a significant number of years.

Since Singapore is rich in job opportunities, international students are able to find work locally after graduation. Current immigration policies in Singapore allow them to apply for permanent residence once they are on skilled working visas (S-Pass or E-Pass).³ The availability of jobs in locally-based companies for international student graduates is in contrast to the situation of education hubs in Western countries where preference is given to citizens and permanent residents.

Besides a robust economy filled with job prospects, Singapore is listed as a developed country by The World Bank (2014). It has a high standard of living, a comprehensive education system, an infrastructure that is constantly changing to meet the demands of the nation and a stable government that actively promotes law, order and ethnic harmony. Singapore also supports a citizenry that is multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multilingual with the Chinese, the Indians and the Malays being the primary groups.

Multiculturalism in Singapore

Singapore prides itself on being a well-manicured multicultural society that has come a long way very quickly from the days of communal politics and violence that dominated the final years of British imperial rule and the difficult years of federation. It is now a nation that has seemingly formed a harmonious society that tolerates ethnic and religious difference (D.P.S. Goh, 2008). Singapore's multicultural identity is primarily made up of three broad ethnic groups – Chinese, Malay and Indian – with the Chinese by far being the largest community. Singaporeans have been brought up to believe that Singapore is a successful multicultural nation because there are no obvious signs of racism which for many other countries take the form of race riots and racially motivated violence. While there is an 'Others' category which allows for those Singaporeans such as Arabs, Armenians and Eurasians who fall outside the Chinese, Malay and Indian groups to be classified, they are not as culturally nor ethnically recognizable because of their relatively small numbers. The Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others nexus makes up what is popularly known as the CMIO racial categorization in Singapore.

Singapore in other words, seems to be the perfect place for international students from Asia due to the government's openness to international students, a robust economy with healthy job opportunities and a multicultural local population with ethnic and cultural similarities to themselves. However do Asian international students feel that Singapore is indeed the best place for them?

RESEARCH METHOD

Fifty-seven international students studying at Singaporean universities were interviewed as part of a larger qualitative study involving the identities of transient migrants (international students and foreign workers) in Singapore and Australia. Table 1 provides demographic details of the participants reported in this chapter. Participants were recruited through advertising in international student society groups and hostels, through canvassing and through the snowball effect where participants informed their friends of the project or brought them along for scheduled interviews with the researchers. The advertisements requested for participants over the age of 18 and who had lived in Singapore for a minimum of 3 months. Participants were remunerated with a \$30 shopping gift voucher each for their time.

As indicated in Table 1, the sample included students from a range of countries undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate study. Notably most of the participants came from Indonesia and China. Possible reasons for the higher numbers from these countries could be because of Singapore's proximity to Indonesia and its active recruitment of students from China (Yang 2014). Also of note is the period of time participants have spent in Singapore. Here more than half (32) have spent 4 years or more in the island-state. This is because many of the participants undertook their earlier education in Singapore where they completed their secondary (middle school) and junior college (high school) prior to enrolling into university.

The participants were interviewed in small groups and as individuals in addition to completing a short written survey which captured their background information such as age, gender, country of birth/citizenship, ethnicity(s) and number of years in Singapore to date. The data in this chapter is reflective of the open-ended questions we asked pertaining to participants' sense of belonging, impressions of Singaporean society, plans for the future and social networks. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes, depending on the willingness of the participants to go into more depth. The results revealed that despite a welcoming local government, seeming cultural similarities to the host nation, substantial periods of time studying in Singapore and intentions of taking up permanent residence, international students not only have difficulties adapting to Singapore society but create their own form of agency to allow them to navigate their everyday life in transience.

FINDINGS

Impressions of Singaporeans

Around 54 per cent (n=31) of participants overwhelming stated that they would like to apply for permanent residence in Singapore while almost 60 per cent (n=34) stated that they felt that Singapore was, in varying degrees, home to them. Here 18 participants said Singapore was home to them while others noted that Singapore was sometimes (n=13) or increasingly (n=3) home to them. Moreover, half of the participants had spent their teenage years in Singapore as junior college and/or secondary school students. Participants, in other words, had a good number of years in Singapore to make observations of the society they live in. Table 2 below provides a glimpse of the positive and negative impressions and experiences participants have of Singaporeans.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Variables	Number of Respondents
Gender	
Female	27
Male	30
Age Range	
18 to 24	44
25 to 29	10
30 and over	3
Country of Citizenship	
China	16
Indonesia	19
India	7
Malaysia	7
Philippines	1
South Korea	3
Vietnam	4
Ethnicity	
Batak	1
Biracial	2
Chinese	28
Indian	9
Indonesian	5
Korean	3
Vietnamese	3
Length of Stay in Singapore	
> 1 year	11
1 year to > 2 years	3
2 years to > 3 years	7
3 years to > 4 years	4
4 years to > 5 years	2
5 years to > 6 years	0
6 years to > 7 years	7
Degree	
Undergraduate	42
Graduate	15

Table 2 suggests that a few participants noted that Singapore is well organized and that it was generally a diverse, open and generally good country. Moreover, participants commented that Singaporeans were warm and friendly. They also observed with reserved admiration, that Singaporeans worked and studied hard. Meanwhile other participants who were critical of Singaporeans commented that the locals

Not Quite Fitting In

Table 2. Positive and negative impressions of Singaporeans

Positive Impressions	Number of Respondents
Study hard	7
Determined	1
Organised / Disciplined	6
Friendly, warm and welcoming	10
Open and diverse	1
Rushed and stressful	6
Negative Impressions	Number of Respondents
Don't follow rules	2
Complain a lot / Easily upset	6
Aggressive	1
No humour / Robotic	5
Intimidating and Competitive	4
Unsure of identity	2
Difficult to be friends with	1
Materialistic	4
Country of contradictions	1
Oppressive	1
Feel tension / Discrimination towards foreigners	4
Racist /Xenophobic	1
Create barriers to foreigners	5
Stereotype foreigners	1

complained a lot, were competitive, aggressive and intimidating, were materialistic or lacked humour. Participants in other words, were able to cast a critical eye on their host society and recognise both the good and the not so good traits of Singaporeans. While participants generally said that they were not subject to anti-foreign sentiments, they acknowledged that such feelings existed in Singapore.

Anti-Foreign Sentiments

Participants revealed that they were aware that there anti-foreign tensions existed in Singapore. These tensions are seen in the ways in which respondents' experiences with locals and their perception of this behavior towards them. The following male Indonesian undergraduate for instance explains:

Some of the Singaporean that I know are really nice like they are really caring and care about you. But then I also see a different part of the Singaporean society where they kind of dislike the foreigners. It's like we are some discriminated like – it's like discrimination at the first lunch that you meet. I remember when I was back in JC [junior college] it's like half of my class are foreigners and half of my class are Singaporeans. And on the first day of school the Singaporeans it's like they are grouped together and sometimes they talked about the foreigners that kind of sense.

However he also explained that he understood why Singaporeans did not like them by reasoning that foreign talent migrant takes away resources (e.g. jobs and university places) from Singaporeans. He states:

[S]o I mean part of me thinks' it is their life you know some of them complain about how foreigners come and use their resources. I think actually their right to be not so happy about it. It's like I don't think I'm very affected by it – the comments.

Others such as the following Indonesian female undergraduate observed with disappointment that the anti-foreign sentiments were now becoming institutional. Here she noted that companies in Singapore were only offering internships specifically targeting Singaporeans over and above international students. She explained:

[I]n the last year I felt a lot of hostility and that was strange because in my first year it wasn't there like I mean the job discrimination and stuff like that, it was bound to happen but sometimes it just feels really unfair, like let's say it's me and a Singaporean student next me, just by virtue of being – having the Singaporean title they have access to a lot more jobs. Like for example I just applied for internships and ...[some] ...specify if you're not Singaporean ... do not apply

Since the 2000s Singaporeans have been incredibly critical of transient migrants – the overwhelming majority of whom come as workers while a significant number are made up of international students – entering their country and have been expressing their anger through xenophobic comments online in particular (Gomes, 2014; Matthews, 2013), in private discussions and through open demonstration.⁴ 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. Unlike the transitional foreign domestic workers and unskilled labourers who have been coming to Singapore since the 1980s, foreign talent migrants are educated professionals who often take up permanent residence in their adopted country. The Singapore government sees foreign talent migrants as an investment in Singapore's economic future and argues that it has to open the country's doors to them because Singaporeans are not reproducing enough in order to replenish the workforce and that they will help take care of the ageing Singapore population. With these reasons in mind, the Singapore parliament endorsed the *Population White Paper: A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore* which would see the nation's population increase to 6.9 million by 2030 through migration in February 2013.

Singaporeans view foreign talent migrants with great suspicion as they anecdotally feel that they are threatening their livelihood and way of life. They argue that foreign talent migrants are unable to integrate into Singapore because they are not adopting Singaporean culture fully (e.g. always speaking Mandarin rather than English or Singaporean English also known as Singlish) (Gomes, 14). In relation to this, Singaporeans believe that white collar transient migrants are able to get permanent residence easily yet do not display any form of loyalty to the Republic. By loyalty, Singaporeans state that they want new migrants to disconnect themselves from their homeland (e.g. not return but stay in Singapore indefinitely) and to not engage in their own cultural practices but to embrace Singaporean culture wholeheartedly (Gomes, 2014). In 2014 for instance, Singaporeans became very angry and took to the internet to express their rage at a proposed plan for Filipinos to celebrate their national day in the main shopping district of Orchard Road (Palatino, 2014). The event was eventually cancelled because of the fear of violence.

While face-to-face skirmishes have not happened as yet, real life expressions of anti-foreign sentiments, unfortunately, have taken place. On Saturday 16 February 2013, around 4,000 Singaporeans turned up at an organised protest against the *White Paper on Population* which had already been endorsed in parliament a week earlier. Organised by transitioning.org – an organisation that ‘cater[s] to the emotional needs of the unemployed’ Singaporean – the event was billed as an exclusively Singaporean-only occasion with foreign talent (inclusive of new permanent residents) encouraged not to attend (Goh, 2014). Protesters held up placards such as ‘Singapore for Singaporeans’ and ‘Stop Gov Unfairly Treatment Singaporean’ (Ramesh, 2013; Yahoo Newsroom, 2013).

While Singapore is strongly committed to multiculturalism and racial harmony as discussed earlier in this chapter, these policies however are limited to its citizenship. The anti-foreign sentiments in Singapore thus are able to thrive primarily because the laws that govern racial tolerance do not include temporary migrants. Besides issues of overpopulation, the taking over of resources from Singaporeans and the perceived tears in the fabric of Singaporean culture and society, the anti-foreign sentiments also reveal that Singaporeans who are primarily of Chinese, Indian and Malay backgrounds do not feel a connection to foreign talent from similar or closely related ethnic and cultural heritages. Do the Asian international students feel the same way?

Same but Not Really: Inability to Identify with Ethnic Cultures in Singapore

Singapore is a unique international education hub particularly for the Asian international students.⁵ As a host nation, Singapore is unlike other popular destinations for Asian international students such as Australia, New Zealand, North America or the United Kingdom because of cultural proximity and similarity. Paradoxically while the majority of Asian international students are able to identify with Singapore because it is an Asian nation with a diverse (Chinese-Malay-Indian) population, this multiculturalism also presents itself as problematic and unsettling. Those who come from Asian cultures explain that while they find Singaporean culture familiar on one level, they are also unable to connect to it with a quarter (n=14) of participants stating that they felt culturally different to Singaporeans. Moreover more than half (n=31) felt very little or no sense of belonging to Singapore. They explained that Singapore culture is ‘different’ to what they are used to in their respective homelands with a few stating that they felt like ‘an outsider’. A male international student from India described his feelings about his place in Singapore society:

[T]here are times when I feel like an outsider, the fact that I have to use English, the fact that sometimes I have to repeat what I’m saying because people in certain places don’t understand my accent. It – the fact that I’m putting in so much effort to get a point across makes me feel that this is something not natural. The fact that I can’t use Hindi very often, the fact that sometimes I don’t laugh at their jokes and they don’t laugh at mine or yeah I think that the fact that I sometimes I feel inhibited to put my point across in a group but – let’s say four other Singaporeans because they will have majority opinion and if I think differently I know it wouldn’t get through.

This student explained how he still felt like an outsider even though he had been in Singapore for almost 5 years at the time of the interview. He clearly was affected by the fact that he was unable to speak Hindi to those he met in Singapore even though 9.2 per cent of Singaporeans identify themselves as Indian (World University Football Championships, 2013). This could be because the Singaporean

Indian population is a broad ethnic umbrella that includes anyone of South Asian ancestry whose mother or ancestral tongue includes other Indian languages besides Hindi. Ethnic Chinese international students from Southeast Asia and Mainland China likewise expressed a sense of disconnectedness with Singaporeans as they felt culturally dissimilar from Singaporeans even though 74.2 per cent of Singapore citizens identify themselves as ethnically and culturally Chinese (World University Football Championships, 2013).

A few Malaysian Chinese participants vocalized that they were unable to identify with Singaporean Chinese who they consider ‘different’ even though they are ethnically similar. This is so even though Malaysia supports a multicultural nation similar to that of neighboring Singapore (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Eurasian) and both nations have a shared history of British colonial rule. Meanwhile, Indonesian Chinese who made up a significant number of participants in this study also felt disconnected from local Chinese despite both diasporic Chinese groups (Singapore and Indonesia) sharing similar migrant heritages as descendants of nineteenth and early twentieth century Southern Chinese migrants (Owen, 2005).

Likewise Chinese participants revealed that they felt that Singapore-born ethnic Chinese were similar yet unlike them. Chinese participants admitted that they felt foreign in Singapore even though the island-state is somewhat similar to China because of the strong Singaporean Chinese demographic and because Mandarin is one of the four main official languages and frequently used in the media and among Singaporean Chinese in general. As the following male undergraduate from China explained:

[O]ver 70% of Singaporean are Chinese but I think the culture has been evolved very different from mainland China although we are all Chinese 50 years ago maybe a lot of Chinese immigrated to Singapore but the culture have been just like driving 2 cars in very different direction already which is also natural because Singapore now is more international and but meantime there lot of ... Malaysian culture

While this student is from China, he found it challenging living in Singapore because he saw more differences than similarities. More than anything else, he conveyed how Singapore is poles apart from China because the (Singaporean) Chinese culture had drifted away from China and influenced by other non-Chinese influences such as ‘Malaysian culture’. Perhaps the regional Chinese diaspora and the mainland Chinese are unable to totally identify with the Singapore (Chinese) culture as a result of globalization and varied communal and national histories. The diasporic Chinese in Southeast Asia after all are largely descendants of nineteenth and twentieth century migrants whose societies adapted to the national cultures and histories of their homelands.

Most of the participants we interviewed saw a future in Singapore and have had a long-term relationship with this country. As mentioned earlier in various parts of this chapter, permanent residence is a goal for a number of participants and the majority of international students in this study have been studying in Singapore since they were in their early teens. However, an analysis of all participants’ social networks revealed that the students surrounded themselves with friends from the home nation. These friendship groups allowed participants to create a sense of belonging *in* Singapore while not necessarily *to* Singapore.

Creating a Sense of Belonging with Friends from the Homeland

The participants in this study generally have a vibrant and complex network of friends which they have made in Singapore. However while 28 per cent (n=16) admitted that they do not have any Singaporean

Not Quite Fitting In

friends, almost all note that fellow international students from the homeland dominate their social circles. Participants declared that their friends were fellow international students from their respective home nations as the following excerpts illuminate:

Actually most of my friends are Indonesians but about maybe say 90%. But like it's about 20% of it is still in Indonesia – I mean the friends I met during my secondary primary school days and I still keep in touch with them. But most of them, most of the other Indonesian actually they're Indonesian who are also studying here like me. [Indonesian female undergraduate who had spent 5 years in Singapore]

I think I hang out with mostly Chinese because actually I don't really hang out that often, I'm – I just stay at the – student hostel for most of my time and I think my social network is comprised ... of the Chinese students and some Singaporean students who I'm in the same program ... yeah [Chinese female undergraduate who had spent 6 months in Singapore]

so when I first came here my social circle would consist of approximately 40% Indian, and one Singaporean, a Singaporean, Malaysian, some Vietnamese, European etc. Of late my social circle would be more like 80% Indian, mainly because a bunch of people I knew from my bachelor's days in India have also come and joined so old friends ... new and new friends have graduated, gone away etc [Indian male postgraduate who had spent 5 years in Singapore]

Almost all participants made friends with people in close proximity to them (university, accommodation, religious groups/institutions primarily churches, and university clubs). Some participants who let us know that some of their friends were Singaporean noted that these were long-term friends they made from their earlier schooling days. They also explained that they found making friends with Singaporeans easier when they were in secondary school and junior college. Participants noted that it was harder to make friends with Singaporeans now that they were at university because locals tended to study in their free time and had families to go back home to, whereas the international students tended to spend their after class hours living and studying with friends from the homeland.

Participants also explained that they made friends with people from their home nations primarily because of need. The following male undergraduate from India reveals the reasons why he makes friends while in transience:

I think the main reason I made friends was that I needed them to survive, I was in a completely new environment, so it was very important for me to have a support base and some kind of network to help me adjust to the problems of living in a new country, so it was – we shared times together for example when we didn't understand the ways of doing certain things, we shared the problems together, we went out and enjoyed things together, so it was very important for me to have someone to share my feelings and joys with, so that's why it was really important for us to have friends. But it wasn't very critical for me because I have a twin brother and we both are here, so of course since I have family I've never really felt the need to make too many friends, but for people who were single children, for them it was more important.

The student who had been living and studying in Singapore for almost 5 years also let us know that while he met his friends at his classes in university, from his hostel and from the hobby clubs he joined

which were also university-based, all his friends in Singapore were from India. His time in Singapore had not resulted in him making Singaporean friends although he viewed friendships as necessary for support. His lack of Singaporean friends could well be because similarity is important to him. So even though there are locals who are of Indian descent, he did not find commonality with them but with fellow international students from India. The significance and desirability of sourcing friends from the homeland as opposed to those from Singapore primarily because of cultural similarity is emphasised by the following female international student from Indonesia.

I think the first one – the most important one for me is the nationality cost. When we as Indonesians have a totally different culture from Singaporeans especially when I arrived – I think I needed someone to support me to be the minority then Singapore. So can I also by interest – we all like can join CCA for example dance or culture production. So we are all united so we have practice – we can have dinner together – somewhere together.

Even though she has been in Singapore for the past 3 years and a third of her friends there were local, she still placed emphasis on nationality as a significant factor in her choice of friends.

The contribution of social networks to the happiness, well-being, acculturation and social stability of international students is well acknowledged by researchers (e.g. Kudo & Simkin 2003; Ying, 2002; Gomes & Alzougool, 2013; Gomes, Berry, Alzougool & Chang, 2014). Literature has shown that international students' social networks are strongly made up of other international students (e.g. Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kashima & Pillai, 2011). The literature also notes that international students form friendships with individuals from their own country, from other countries, and from the host country with research showing that international students often have more friends from their home country. Portes and DeWind (2004) for example, found that international students in the U.S. formed friendships primarily with other foreigners citing differences between American and foreign experiences as the reason for their lack of assimilation.

Research has also demonstrated a relationship between having more host country friends with satisfaction, contentment, decreased homesickness, and social connectedness. Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011), for instance, analysed the relationships between friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels of international students and explored these relationships through a social network lens by examining friendship network ratios, strength, and variability of the three friendship groups of 86 international students in the University of Hawai'i. A friendship network grid was developed to assess where international students' friends are from and how strong those friendships are. Contrary to prior research, international students did not report having a higher ratio of individuals from their home country in their friendship networks. However, international students with a higher ratio of individuals from the host country in their network claimed to be more satisfied, content, and less homesick. Furthermore, participants who reported more friendship variability with host country individuals described themselves as more satisfied, content, and more socially connected. This correlates with Sawir et al.'s (2008) earlier Australian study that argued for more social interactions between international students with people from outside the home nation as a more successful way of curbing loneliness. Here Sawir and colleagues suggested that international students who formed friendships with nationals from the home nation were more lonely than those who broadened their friendship networks to include people from outside the homeland.

CONCLUSION

For more than a decade, Singapore has invested heavily in establishing itself as a rising star in the competitive international education market that serviced students from the region and elsewhere. Singapore is an attractive destination for international students because of scholarship opportunities, a high standard of living and job opportunities post-graduation. Moreover, Singapore has geographical and cultural proximity for students coming from Asia while being ‘Westernised’ enough to attract those from elsewhere. Against this background of positivism, this study looks at the experiences of international students in Singapore. Singapore, in other words, seems like an ideal destination for Asian international students where issues such as integration due to cultural differences faced by their counterpart in the traditional education hubs of North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, might be elevated. However after interviewing 57 Asian international students, I found that this was not the case even though many of them had been living and studying in Singapore for a number of years.

Instead, in revealing interviews with participants about their sense of belonging in Singapore, impressions of Singapore and the social networks they developed in the island-state, I found that the students like their counterparts in the West, also encountered integration issues. While Singapore boasts a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual population that has close similarities to the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the Asian international students it hosts, the students themselves found gaps in these similarities. These persistent gaps were heightened by the anti-foreign sentiments expressed by Singaporeans themselves about the presence of foreign talent migrants in their country who they feel take away opportunities (e.g. education and job) from locals. Despite these issues, the participants in this study generally were keen to take up permanent residence in the near future. For these students, it was the friends they made with fellow international students from their home nations that allowed them to navigate their everyday life in transience. While they may not feel a complete sense of belonging *to* Singapore, they created a sense of belonging *in* Singapore through their friendship groups.

REFERENCES

- Chuah, J. S. C., & Manjet-Kaur, M. S. (2013). International students’ perspectives on quantity and quality of social interaction with host national students. *Education Research International*, 2(2), 7–15.
- Dessoff, A. (2012, July-August). Asia’s burgeoning education hubs. *International Education*, 16-26. Retrieved from http://www.nafsa.org/_/file/_/ie_julaug12_asia.pdf
- Fong, V. L. (2011). *Paradise redefined: transnational Chinese students and the quest for flexible citizenship in the developed world*. San Francisco, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Goh, D. P. S. (2008). From colonial pluralism to postcolonial multiculturalism: Race, state formation and the question of cultural diversity in Malaysia and Singapore. *Social Compass*, 2(1), 232–252. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00065.x
- Goh, G. (2014). About. *Transitioning.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.transitioning.org/about-2/>
- Gomes, C. (2014). Xenophobia online: Unmasking Singaporean attitudes towards ‘foreign talent’ Migrants. *Asian Ethnicity*, 15(1), 21–40. doi:10.1080/14631369.2013.784511

Gomes, C. (2015). Footloose transients: International students in Australia and their aspirations for transnational mobility after graduation. *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, 6(1), 41-58.

Gomes, C. (in press). Living in a parallel society: International students in Australia and their navigation of everyday life in transience. *Journal of Youth Studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13676261.2014.992316>

Gomes, C., & Alzougool, B. (2013, December). *Transnational citizens and identities: International students' self-perceived identities, their social networks and their consumption of entertainment media in Australia*. Paper presented at the 24th ISANA International Education Conference. Retrieved from http://proceedings.com.au/isana/docs/2013/Gomes_Catherine.pdf

Gomes, C., Berry, M., Alzougool, B., & Chang, S. (2014). Home away from home: International students and their identity-based social networks in Australia. *Journal of International Students*, 4(1), 2-15.

Hendrickson, B., Rosen, D., & Aune, R. K. (2011). An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels of international students'. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(3), 281-295. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.08.001

Immigration & Checkpoints Authority, Singapore. (2013). *Terms & conditions of student's pass (STP)*. Immigration and Checkpoints Authority. Retrieved from http://www.ica.gov.sg/data/resources/docs/Visitor%20Services/Terms_and_Conditions_STP.pdf

Kashima, E., & Pillai, D. (2011). Identity development in cultural transition: The role of need for closure. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 45(5), 725-739. doi:10.1177/0022022110362749

Kashima, E. S., & Loh, E. (2006). 'IS' acculturation: Effects of international, conational, and local ties and need for closure. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(4), 471-485. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.12.003

Kudo, K., & Simkin, K. A. (2003). Intercultural friendship Formation: The case of Japanese students at an Australian university. *Journal of Intercultural Studies (Melbourne, Vic.)*, 24(2), 91-114. doi:10.1080/0725686032000165351

Lim, C. (2011). How GE 2011 proved me—oh, so wonderfully!—wrong. *Catherinelim.sg: Political commentaries on Singapore*. Retrieved from <http://catherinelim.sg/2011/05/09/how-ge-2011-proved-me-oh-so-wonderfully-wrong/#more-999>

Matthews, D. (2013). Singapore: No sleep for the lion city's universities. *Times Higher Education*, 21. Retrieved from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/no-sleep-for-singapores-universities/2009064.fullarticle>

Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2014a). Post-secondary education'. *Ministry of Education*. Retrieved from <http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/3142/SANDERSON.pdf?sequence=1>

Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2014b). TG online. *Ministry of Education*. Retrieved from <https://tgonline.moe.gov.sg/tgis/normal/index.action>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore. (2012). Education in Singapore. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/washington/about_singapore/education_in_singapore.html

Ministry of Manpower, Singapore. (2013). Labour market statistical information. *Ministry of Manpower*. Retrieved from <http://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Home.aspx>

Ministry of Manpower, Singapore. (2014). Passes and visas. *Ministry of Manpower*. Retrieved from <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/Pages/default.aspx#sthash.X8CJOYRI.dpuf>

Monitor, I. C. E. F. (2012). Singapore's 'carefully calibrated' expansion plans'. *ICEF Monitor*, 4. Retrieved from <http://monitor.icef.com/2012/09/singapores-carefully-calibrated-expansion-plans/http://monitor.icef.com/2012/09/singapores-carefully-calibrated-expansion-plans/>

Palatino, M. (2014). Xenophobia and public discontent in Singapore. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/xenophobia-and-public-discontent-in-singapore/>

Portes, A., & DeWind, J. (2004). A cross-Atlantic dialogue: The progress of research and theory in the study of international migration. *The International Migration Review*, 38(3), 828–851. doi:10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00221.x

Ramesh, S. (2013). *Singaporeans hold protest against white paper on population*. Retrieved from <http://ifonlysingaporeans.blogspot.com.au/2013/02/sporeans-hold-protest-against-white.html>

Sawir, E., Marinson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2008). Loneliness and international students: An Australian study. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(2), 148–180. doi:10.1177/1028315307299699

Sidhu, R., Ho, K. C., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2014). Singapore: Building a knowledge and education hub. *International Education Hubs*, 8, 121–143. doi:10.1007/978-94-007-7025-6_8

Singapore Economic Development Board. (2014). Industries. *Future Ready Singapore*. Retrieved from <http://www.edb.gov.sg/content/edb/en/industries.html>

The Complete University Guide. (2014). Studying in Singapore. *The Complete University Guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/international/asia/singapore/> <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/post-secondary/>

The National Population and Talent Division. (2013). *Population white paper: A sustainable population for a dynamic Singapore*. Retrieved from <http://202.157.171.46/whitepaper/downloads/population-white-paper.pdf>

The World Bank. (2014). Singapore. *The World Bank*. Retrieved April 10, 2014 from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/singapore>

World University Football Championships. (2013). Singapore. *6th World university football championships 2014*. Retrieved from www.wufc2014.sg/about/singapore

Yahoo Newsroom. (2013). '4,000 turn up at Speakers' Corner for population White Paper protest'. *Yahoo! News Singapore*. Retrieved from <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/huge-turnout-at-speakers--corner-for-population-white-paper-protest-101051153.html>

Yang, P. (2014). *Foreign talent: Desire and Singapore's China scholars*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Oxford University, Oxford, UK.

Ying, Y. W. (2002). Formation of cross-cultural relationships of Taiwanese international students in the United States. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(1), 45–55. doi:10.1002/jcop.1049

Ziguras, C., & Gribble, C. (in press). Policy responses to address student 'Brain Drain': An assessment of measures intended to reduce the emigration of Singaporean international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. Retrieved from <http://jsi.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/12/11/1028315314561121.refs>

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Anti-Foreign Sentiments: Local attitudes towards anyone who is a temporary migrant.

Asian International Students: International students who come from Asia.

Belonging: Feelings of connectedness to the host nation.

Ethnic and Cultural Identity: The concept and expression of an individual's or a group's perception of self-based on ethnic and/or cultural lines.

International Education Hub: A country who specialises in international education and is thus host to large and/or growing numbers of overseas students.

Multiculturalism: Citizenship policy governing a nation which is not ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously homogenous.

Social Networks: Friendship groups.