Not many will dispute the fact that immigration has played an important part in transforming Singapore. While many have written about immigration's impact on Singapore's economy, a discussion on the social changes brought about by immigration, especially in terms of the scale experienced in the past ten years, has largely been absent. In response, this volume offers a multidisciplinary set of views on the social and political consequences of taking on large numbers of immigrants for Singapore. Contributions from the fields of demography, political science, sociology, human geography, cultural studies, security studies and public policy facilitate a deeper understanding of complex social issues involving, for example, societal dilemmas, trade-offs and reactions to immigration policies.

Immigration in Singapore is written for a diverse audience such as academics, policy-makers and students of migration studies. In addition, it is hoped the volume will provide valuable insights for Singaporeans who are interested in making sense of the rapid changes taking place in their society as result of immigration.

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We are seeing large numbers coming in now. I can give you one statistic you may not be aware of. For every two babies that are born in Singapore, we bring in one foreign permanent resident. Also, one in four marriages among Singaporeans is to a foreigner. This has doubled in the last 10 years. We have become a migrant society all over again.

Along the streets, you now hear a cacophony of accents. But it is something we have to manage politically. Some Singaporeans who found themselves displaced from jobs or lost out on promotions are unhappy, and we had to explain that having all these foreigners living in our midst is good for Singapore overall.

Former Minister for Trade and Industry George Yeo in 2000

The above excerpt from an interview with Singapore's former Minister for Trade and Industry George Yeo raises interesting questions concerning the issue of immigration for the city-state.1 In the decade since then, Singapore's population increased from 4,027,900 to 5,076,700. Of this total, the number of Singaporean citizens went up by 244,800 (to 3,230,700 as at 2010) and the number of permanent residents by 253,500 (to 541,000 as at 2010), while non-residents went up by 550,500 (to 1,305,000 as at 2010).2 In 2011, 39.4 percent of Singaporeans married non-citizens.3 It appears then that more than ten years on, Singapore has continued to sustain “a migrant society.”

However, as the above quote also implies, the notion of “becoming a migrant society” is nothing new for Singapore. Since its founding in 1819, immigration has been the main contributor to population growth for the city-state. This persisted until the 1930s when domestic population growth

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1 The above is an excerpt from an interview conducted by Business Week in 2000 with then Minister for Trade and Industry BG (NS) George Yeo, published in The Straits Times. See “We have become a migrant society all over again,” The Straits Times, 11 June 2000. Available from Factiva (accessed 16 August 2013).
began to contribute to overall population growth. However, notwithstanding the historical significance of immigration in populating the country, the strains of sustaining a migrant society have started to appear.

How will Singaporeans manage “having all these foreigners living in our midst” this time around? Is the situation something that can be managed politically? More importantly, will this state of affairs be “good for Singapore overall”?

Immigration and Singapore: A “globapolis” or “a cacophony of accents”?

Over the years, Singapore has achieved and maintained impressive economic results. The World Economic Forum for example, has consistently ranked the country high in terms of global competitiveness. With no natural resources, Singapore’s economic achievements are underpinned by many different government initiatives, one of which is the liberal immigration policy in place. This policy has been credited with facilitating the expansion of the country’s labour force to meet the needs of industry and encourage foreign investment. As George Yeo explained in the same interview in 2000, “the key to our continuing economic vitality is our willingness to keep our doors open to foreign talent and our ability to make multinationals feel completely at home in Singapore.” In this respect, both Singapore’s history and economic progression has “always been closely intertwined with migration.”

The country has encouraged labour migration across the spectrum, from the low-skilled manual workers undertaking jobs deemed dirty, dangerous, and difficult to semi-skilled workers all the way to highly skilled “foreign

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4 See chapter one of this volume for a brief background on immigration in Singapore prior to the country’s independence (1965).
6 “We have become a migrant society all over again,” The Straits Times.
talent,” the latter as a result of the country’s bid to build a knowledge-based economy. Overall, the policy structures in place seek to attract and in some cases retain those with the highest skills and qualifications while at the same time allowing companies the flexibility of employing foreign labour, especially in areas that are shunned by local Singaporean workers.

The ability to attract highly skilled labour plays an important part, not only in maintaining the country’s economic vitality but also in bringing the city-state on par with other global cities. Such policies are part of Singapore’s strategy of transforming itself into a global city comparable to places such as London, New York, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. It is with this in mind that then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the aim of turning Singapore into:

a ‘globapolis’, with people from all over the world and well connected to all parts of the globe – by air, sea, telecommunications and the Internet, in market access and investments, and in areas such as education, sports and the arts.9

Cities such as London and New York have often been employed as reference points in envisioning the trajectory of the future development of Singapore. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong surmised during his 2012 National Day Rally speech:

... New York, Los Angeles, London, these I believe will continue to thrive because they are not only connected to their countries and the problems in those countries, they are connected to the whole world. Talent flows in, resources flow in, ideas come in, new projects, new companies start up, new changes which influence the world. And we have to see ourselves against those cities and ask us where do we want to be.10

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8 This dependence can be seen in the existing employment structures covering the country’s foreign workforce. There are two general categories: (a) low or semi-skilled workers regulated under work permits; (b) highly skilled or professional workers regulated under employment passes. For more information, refer to the Ministry of Manpower website at http://www.mom.gov.sg/Pages/default.aspx.

9 Transcript of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s National Day Rally 2001 Speech at the University Cultural Centre, National University of Singapore on Sunday, 19 August 2001 at 8.00 PM, downloaded from the National Archives of Singapore at http://a2o.nas.sg/stars/public/viewHTML.jsp?pdfno=2001081903 (accessed 25 September 2013). Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was the country’s second prime minister and is currently Emeritus Senior Minister.

10 Transcript of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Rally 2012 (speech in English) downloaded from the Prime Minister’s Office website at http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/
A liberal immigration stance is in line with the country’s global ambitions. In fact, official government discourse has often placed and justified the need for a liberal immigration policy as an economic imperative, often through survivalist, pragmatic language and descriptions. Former Prime Minister Goh referred to Singapore’s need for global talent as a “matter of life and death for us in the long term.”\textsuperscript{11} For the country’s first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, the danger is that “if we don’t welcome them, make them stay, we will be out of this race because conditions have changed... So if we just stay in our little pond, we will perish.”\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, the search for global talent goes further than the desire to keep Singapore economically competitive, according to Lee Kuan Yew, who sees immigrants as “spurs” that keep the local-born population driven.\textsuperscript{13}

However, the ambition to become a global city may not be completely complementary with the country’s nation-building project – with the possibility that Singapore the global city is antithetical to Singapore the nation. For while Singapore aspires to be a vibrant global city built up with the help of liberal immigration, the constant influx of new citizens and residents may hinder the development of Singapore’s narrative as a nation. The influx of each new wave of immigrants effectively acts as an ideational reset button that disrupts a settled narrative by keeping conceptions of the nation in perpetual Brownian motion. And in this regard, there is a need to balance its global self with the challenges of maintaining a coherent national one.

Recently, tensions that arise from straddling both a global and a national identity have become more evident. Despite its economic achievements, levels of dissatisfaction with the growing number of immigrants in the country are increasing. A survey carried out by The Straits Times in late March 1999, showed that “[m]ost Singaporeans believe the government should bring foreign talent into the labour market despite current economic difficulties faced by the nation.”\textsuperscript{14} However, in a 2009 survey carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) involving 2,016 citizens, two out of three “felt that national unity would be compromised by the presence of...”

\textsuperscript{11} Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s National Day Rally 2001 Speech.
\textsuperscript{12} “Foreign talent ‘key to S’pore’s future’,” The Straits Times, 15 August 1999.
foreigners, whether they intended settling down or were just temporary workers. Over 60 percent of respondents agreed that attracting more foreign talent would weaken the Singaporean nationalistic feeling of ‘one nation, one people’.”  

Another survey conducted in 2013 by IPS further highlighted the discomfort felt by Singaporeans in dealing with immigrants who are “new” citizens, disclosing that while “94 per cent of non-Chinese accept a local-born Chinese as their boss, that share falls to 74 per cent for a boss who is a new citizen originally from China.”

The dissatisfaction was more apparent after the country’s 2011 general elections. An illustration of how immigration has become the source of much unresolved social tension and is a hot-button issue with the nation may be found in the replacement of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng – a position that would have made him responsible for immigration matters – after the elections in 2011. The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) saw its total vote share fall from 66.6 percent in 2006 to 60.1 percent in 2011, the decline being attributed in large part to dissatisfaction over its immigration approach. Prior to the elections ample anecdotal evidence appears to bear testament to the emerging unease between what is termed “local-born” Singaporeans – employed in the parlance of the times to capture citizens born in the city-state – and foreign immigrants who reside in Singapore as “foreign workers” (Gastarbeiter), permanent residents (PR) or “new” citizens. For example, in an interschool badminton competition, traditional school rivalry was put aside when a team comprised of mainly foreigners was entered by one school, leading to customarily rival schools supporting each other over the foreigner-stocked school team. Also, in some residential estates, the presence of foreign workers clustering together on weekends at and near housing estates has caused friction with Singaporeans, with violence sometimes erupting.

17 Then Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng was given the role of Minister-in-charge of Population Issues in 2004 which effectively made him “Singapore’s new population czar” in charge of “all population-related matters – from procreation and immigration to the integration of foreigners and ensuring citizens feel valued…” See Lydia Lim, “Wong Kan Seng to oversee population issues,” The Straits Times, 30 August 2004.
Residents of some housing estates have erected steel barricades around their apartment block with the concurrence of the government. Others use resident patrols to prevent loitering. The stark symbolism of barricades and patrols should not be overlooked. It is clear that these actions illustrate how the “we” feel an imperative to protect themselves from a very different “them.” Finally, in the political sphere, the tension between the “local-born” and the “new” has also spilled over into domestic politics, where fears have been expressed about relatively new citizens becoming office holders in the PAP. In the 2011 general elections, this us/them divide became part of the election hustings. During the campaign, the PAP’s organizing secretary, Ng Eng Hen, questioned Workers’ Party (WP) candidate Chen Show Mao’s Singaporean-ness because Chen had lived abroad for over 30 years. Likewise, the WP highlighted how Janil Puthucheary, a PAP candidate, became a citizen only in 2008 but had never undergone the commonly considered sine qua non of male Singaporeans’ rite of passage, national service.

With regard to the manner in which the city-state is divided on the issue of immigration, two, largely distinct camps may be identified. The first camp is composed of individuals who express unease with the current liberal immigration policy. This group has argued that the increased inflow of foreigners has taken its toll on Singaporeans, as this is claimed to have brought about rising property prices, an overcrowded transport system, depressed wages, and increased competition for jobs. In addition, the tensions felt have also resonated deeper than bread-and-butter issues to include matters such as national identity, culture, and pride. The second camp, unsurprisingly, is composed of individuals far more comfortable with the current policy. While acknowledging the short-term costs involved, members of this pro-immigration camp posit that it is necessary nonetheless to keep Singapore’s doors open. They argue that foreigners are required to supplement the city-state’s greying population as well as its low fertility rate. In addition, the pro-immigration camp also points out the indispensability of foreigners in keeping businesses afloat by performing jobs at the

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lower end of the economic spectrum that are shunned by Singaporeans and supplementing a shortage of talent at the higher end of the spectrum. Moreover, in response to the non-bread-and-butter issues raised by opponents of the current immigration policy, pro-immigration proponents highlight Singapore’s immigrant past and stress that the integration of new immigrants is possible. 

The concerns and unhappiness of local-born Singaporeans comes at a time when the country is facing a milestone event in terms of its population demographics: the country’s baby boomers – those born between 1947 and 1965 – have started to reach the retirement age of 65 years. In 2030, the number of citizens aged 65 years and above will triple to 900,000, supported by a smaller base of working-age citizens between 20-64 years. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew warned that the country’s diminishing population will slow the country’s economy and called the task of increasing the population the country’s “biggest challenge.”

This has prompted much discussion on the social consequences of an ageing population, an issue that has been repeatedly highlighted by the government of late. The crux of the government’s concerns was restated in starkly pragmatic terms by Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean:

I think it is better to think in terms of if we are going to have 900,000 people over the age of 65 compared to the 340,000 that we have today, a three-fold increase, then we really need to ask ourselves who is going to help, say, in the home. Some will want to have domestic help. Who are going to staff up all the healthcare and hospital facilities that we would need? Who are going to staff up, say, the nursing homes and community

24 One of the most vocal proponents of the fact that immigrants, especially second-generation immigrations, will be able to successfully integrate into Singaporean society has been former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. An example of this can be found in a welcome speech for new citizens on 12 April 2009, where he told the audience that: “Growing up in the same schools, playing on the same fields and sharing the same experiences, your children will become as Singaporean as if they were locally born. For the boys, their Singaporean identity will be further strengthened when they go through National Service.” See Transcript of Speech by Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Minister Mentor, at the SPH integration Seminar, 12 April 2009 downloaded from http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/viewDocx.jsp?stid=40467&lochref=viewHTML.jsp?pdfno=20090420001&keyword=integration (accessed 12 September 2012).


26 Rachel Chang, “Shrinking population will hurt economy, says Lee Kuan Yew,” The Straits Times, 4 February 2012.
step-down facilities that we would need? We may not have enough Singaporeans to do that. Therefore, even just in these sectors alone, we are going to need many more people in order to make sure that our older population will be properly looked after.\footnote{Hansard, vol. 89 (14 May 2012) per Mr. Teo Chee Hean.}

Hence, while recent discomfort and discourse has been about what Eugene Tan has termed in his chapter here as the “immigration imperative,” this is not fully indicative of the challenges facing the country in the coming years. Rather, it is intertwined with a “social imperative” involving far wider and interdependent consequences of the decisions taken by Singaporeans on purely social matters such as marriage, parenthood, ageing, and ultimately whether to remain as Singaporeans or to emigrate and start life anew in another country.

In light of the present situation, the aim of this volume is to uncover and examine the socio-political implications faced by Singapore in its quest to sustain a “migrant society.” It attempts to provide a multidisciplinary view of what it means to be a migrant society from the perspective of the receiving or host society. While many have written on the topic of immigration and its impact on Singapore – especially from an economic perspective – this volume sees the problems as essentially a complex social issue.\footnote{Many books and journal articles capture the extensive arguments and rationale concerning Singapore’s immigration stance from an economic and public policy perspective. A sample of such works include Hui Weng Tat, “Singapore’s Immigration Policy: An Economic Perspective,” in Public Policies in Singapore: Changes in the 1980s and Future Signposts (eds.) Linda Low and Toh Mun Heng (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992); Chiew Seen Kong, “Citizens and Foreign Labour in Singapore,” in Crossing Borders: Transmigration in Asia Pacific (eds.) Ong Jin Hui, Chan Kwok Bun, and Chew Soon Beng, (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1995), 472-486; Pang Eng Fong, “Foreign Talent and Development in Singapore,” in Competing for Global Talent, (eds.) Christiane Kuptsch and Pang Eng Fong, (Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 2006), 155-170; Linda Low, “The Political Economy of Migrant Worker Policy in Singapore,” in Migrant Workers in Pacific Asia (ed.) Yaw A. Debrah, (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 95-118. Other works analyzes specific social aspects of immigration for example from the perspective of challenges to community and ethnic relations or issues with foreign domestic workers. See for example Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, “‘Foreign Talent’ in our Midst: New Challenges to Sense of Community and Ethnic Relations in Singapore” in Beyond Rituals and Riots: Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore (ed.) Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Eastern University Press, 2004), 316-338; Brenda S.A. Yeoh, and Shirlena Huang, “Civil Space in a City-State: Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore,” in Migration in the Asia Pacific: Population, Settlement, and Citizenship Issues (eds.) Robyn Iredale, Charles Hawksley, and Stephen Castles (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2003), 341-354.} Featuring researchers from disciplines such as political science, sociology, human
geography, public policy studies, cultural studies, security studies, and demography, this collection leverages on their individual expertise in analyzing the social impact of immigration from their respective fields. Effectively, the volume captures the manner in which immigration has impacted various spheres of Singaporean life.

Demographic patterns and disagreements

As a whole, Singapore’s population has grown substantially, primarily fuelled by the country’s aggressive immigration stance. Yap Mui Teng’s chapter provides a clear snapshot of the numbers underpinning the country’s population landscape. Accordingly, immigration was the main contributor to population growth for much of the island’s colonial history. This “net migrational surplus” was sustained until the 1930s, when domestic population growth rose. Domestic growth then took over as the main contributor to population growth from 1960 to 1980, in part as a result of restrictive immigration policies put in place. While this period allowed for a gradual “indigenisation” of the population according to Yap, the ensuing years saw rapid changes taking place, driven by the country’s economic objectives. Policies were relaxed to allow in foreign labour to augment the local labour force in meeting the needs of industry and to encourage foreign investment. This increase in foreign manpower has caused a situation where the proportion of local-born citizens dropped from 78 percent in 1980 to 57 percent in 2010. The number of non-residents (comprising those who are not citizens or permanent residents) grew to 1,305,000 in 2010 from 131,800 in 1980, accounting for a third of the total population of the country today. However, while informative, these numbers do not adequately convey the perspective of what it means to be a migrant society. A closer examination of the social implications is necessary to tease out what are essentially complex undercurrents of issues and perceptions.

The social dissonances of being a migrant society is put into perspective in Eugene Tan’s chapter on the “angst and anxieties” of the Singaporean population, coming from the lived experiences of over-crowded buses, trains, and roads and of having to increasingly compete for places in schools, for houses, and for jobs. There have also been complaints about the differ-

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ences in languages, habits, and lifestyles that are not representative of the Singaporean way. This is juxtaposed against the anxieties felt by the government in trying to manage today’s extremely competitive global immigration landscape. As Tan explains, a nation’s citizenship and immigration policies have to be both sensitive to local concerns and nation-building objectives as well as be able to aggressively participate in the increasingly competitive global pursuit of talented individuals between developed countries.

This friction between building a “globapolis” and living amidst a “cacophony of accents” also featured prominently on the political front. While many of the contributors in this volume have discussed the significance of the immigration issue in the 2011 general elections within their various spheres of interest, Bilveer Singh’s chapter brings sharper focus to the political discourse surrounding the country’s immigration policy from the perspective of the PAP and some of the key opposition parties in the elections. Singh argues that while no political party in Singapore – whether incumbent or opposition – would take a completely anti-immigration stand, the issue nevertheless became a constant refrain of the opposition parties in the run-up to the elections. Across the board, the opposition took issue with the pace and scale of the immigration inflow as well as the quality of immigrants entering the country. A further point of interest is the fact that debates over the government’s immigration stance has come not only from the country’s opposition parties but also, going as far back as the 1990s, from its own ranks as well. To illustrate, Singh highlights the 1999 statement by then Member of Parliament for Ayer Rajah, Dr. Tan Cheng Bock, to “think Singaporeans first.” Perhaps rather presciently, Dr. Tan noted back then that “the minister is worried that I’m sending the wrong message to foreigners. I think we should be worried that we send the wrong message to Singaporeans.”

Ultimately, it would appear that the question of sustaining a migrant society is not one than can be managed purely through politics. From the political landscape, Ho’s chapter explores the changing landscapes of “heartland” Housing Development Board (HDB) estates, normally the bastion of the majority of ordinary Singaporeans as opposed to the more cosmopolitan, “globally oriented” Singaporeans. These estates have

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30 “Minister misinterpreted call to tone down foreign talent message,” The Straits Times, 13 March 1999.
31 The “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” dialectic was referred to by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his 1999 National Day Rally speech. According to Goh, the cosmopolitans were mainly bilingual with an international outlook and lifestyle while the heartlanders spoke Singlish with skills that were not marketable beyond Singapore. He noted however that both were important to the country’s well-being: the cosmopolitans were indispensible in generat-
seen a steady increase in the “middling transnational” which she defines as immigrants with tertiary level education or who are relatively well-off in their home countries, who have come to Singapore to occupy precarious jobs or have been employed on local terms of employment rather than the far more generous packages extended to expatriates. Given their circumstances, they are more likely to be found living in HDB estates rather than in the customary expatriate enclaves. Such close encounters have seen frictions arise between Singaporeans and immigrants over more ordinary, pedestrian, every-day issues such as the offending smell of unfamiliar cooking. According to Ho, the contemporary nature of such relations have become so evident in the mainstream that it has even been profiled in a sitcom on television depicting Singaporean families living in close proximity with other nationalities. However, not only has spatial proximity failed to foster good relations between locals and immigrants, it has instead been the production house of misconceptions deployed later as stereotypes of immigrants from similar backgrounds. In addition, even more divisive than cultural stereotypes is arguably the perception that these immigrants are directly competing for finite benefits such as housing facilities, places in schools, and employment opportunities – the argument being that locals should benefit from such opportunities first. In resolving such differences, Ho argues for the need for all parties to engage openly with underlying social prejudices and to move beyond mere tolerance toward attitudes of mutual positive respect.

The impact of immigration cuts even closer to home when the sizeable number of foreign domestic workers employed in Singaporean households is considered. Although foreign domestic workers fall under the category of temporary non-residents, with more and more women tasked with the responsibility of being economically productive in the modern workplace while also encouraged to produce more children to halt the slide in the population replacement rate, Singaporean families are finding it a necessity to employ domestic help to run their households, look after their children, and also increasingly care for their elderly relatives. Hence, these temporary foreign domestic workers appear to be increasingly a permanent solution in many Singaporean households. Theresa Devasahayam examines the
impact of immigration on the average household in Singapore by exploring
the boundaries drawn in homes in managing the “otherness” of foreign
domestic workers. As of December 2013, the country had about 214,500
migrant women employed as foreign domestic workers in households. For
Devasahayam, the home is also marked by the social frictions of being
a migrant society, with reinforcements of boundaries between “us” and
“them” underpinning the state’s own preferred “demographic regime.”

On a macro level, the integration of immigrants within the multicultural
ethos that frames the country’s overarching social order is not an easy task.
Singapore officially adopts a form of “hard multiculturalism” where group
differences are institutionally recognized and protected.32 This, as Mathew
Mathews and Danielle Hong contend, becomes the social terrain in which
immigrants have to navigate in order to integrate with Singaporeans. The
idea of multiculturalism is central to Singapore – put in practice through
the institutionalization of racial categories over its citizens. This “hard
multiculturalism” has to now cater to the diversification that the country is
seeing as a result of its immigration policy. As Mathews and Hong pinpoint
in their chapter, how the commonly practised idea of multiculturalism in
Singapore intersects with increasingly diverse immigrant communities
is becoming a matter of some concern for the government, given that a
number of social frictions have occurred between local-born Singaporeans
and foreign nationals. As Mathews and Hong observe, while the country’s
multi-racial profiles and policies may be tacitly understood and even ap-
preciated up to a certain point by immigrants, the reality of living together
day after day is another matter altogether. Whether “hard multiculturalism”
can assist in acclimatizing both local-born Singaporeans and immigrants
to each other is an issue that needs further thought.

Further, while the country relentlessly continues to pursue its economic
objective of building and sustaining a viable knowledge-based economy,
questions regarding social cohesion and mobility continue to be keenly
debated. The fault line between local-born Singaporeans on the one side
and new citizens and PRs on the other seems to manifest itself in the
inability of either group to arrive at an agreement on what the sine qua
non of integration is. Hence, while local-born Singaporeans view national

32 For a discussion on the various approaches to managing a polity’s multicultural condition
– including hard multiculturalism – see Norman Vasu, “(En)countering Terrorism: Multicultural-
the employment of hard multiculturalism as a policy to manage ethnic differences in Singapore,
see for example, Norman Vasu, “Locating S Rajaratnam’s Multiculturalism,” in S. Rajaratnam on
service (NS) and proficiency in English to be important, this view is not necessarily shared by all new citizens or PRs. While it is easy to point to the fact that first-generation citizens and PRs do not have to undergo NS and therefore are not likely to place as much importance in it as male local-born Singaporeans who are required by law to perform NS, this misses the point when it comes to the integration process. As noted in the chapter by Leong Chan-Hoong, this dissonance fuels and “underscores the consternation and angst in the relationship” between Singaporeans and newly naturalized citizens or PRs owing to what is seen to be an unequal burden being carried by the former. To bridge the divide, Leong proposes integration strategies be recalibrated to include the two “flashpoints” of NS obligations and proficiency in English. The importance of NS obligations should be reinforced and made known to newly naturalized citizens and PRs. In this regard, realigning immigration policies that prioritize the granting of citizen and PR status to applicants with family members who have taken up the obligations of NS or are NS-liable would serve to underscore the importance of such service to the country. Leong further recommends that the Singapore Armed Forces increase their public engagement and outreach exercises in order to share the relevance of NS in the overall national defence of Singapore to new citizens and PRs. Similarly, the importance of English as a tool of communication for Singaporeans should be impressed upon newcomers; this would enable them to acquire the right attitude towards the need to become proficient in English.

While the above may serve to alleviate the divide between Singaporeans and newly naturalized citizens and PRs, what are the national security implications of allowing foreigners (i.e. PRs) to serve in the country’s armed forces? The revelation in parliament in 2011 that nearly a third of PRs eligible to perform national service renounced their residency status before they reached enlistment age has fed into the dissonance described by Leong, stirring up the debate that such PRs are “freeloaders” who are basically in the country to enjoy the benefits but refuse to take up the onerous obligations of armed service to defend it. In their chapter, Ho Shu Huang and Yolanda Chin analyze the logic of requiring foreigners to be conscripted by exploring the tension between a reliance on those whose allegiance to the country is uncertain at best and the demands that whoever benefits from the state should share the burden of its defence. The history of enlisting PRs was traced back to a time when those under such a status were stateless following Singapore’s abrupt separation from Malaysia in 1965. During this period, PRs were in effect “Singaporeans-in-waiting,” with the expectation that serving NS would improve their eligibility for citizenship. Today’s PRs are inherently different:
they are citizens of another country whose parents have come to Singapore more often than not for employment purposes. Hence, it is quite possible that contemporary PRs do not have the same motivation to perform NS as the PRs of yesteryears. However, the scheme for second-generation male PRs based upon the idea of benefit-burden sharing adds to the uneasy relationship between local-born citizens and PRs. Admittedly, there are no easy solutions as Ho and Chin conclude; it is but one of the many interdependent elements that form Singapore’s complex immigration conundrum.

A question of “what is good for Singapore overall”

In 2010, Singapore’s Economic Strategies Committee signalled a change in orientation. The 2010 Report, while acknowledging past strengths, nevertheless stated the need to “do things differently.”33 This included growing the capabilities and expertise to take advantage of opportunities and to remain relevant with a “more slowly expanding workforce.”34 This shift is arguably in part a result of the realization that what has sustained the country economically in the past may no longer be conducive in sustaining the nation as a whole in the future.

The challenge of sustaining a nation-state in a period of increasing globalization is one that many Asia-Pacific countries are grappling with, according to Castles.35 Labour migration policies are often driven by short-term considerations of economic profits to the detriment of long-term social and political implications. Guided by the anticipation that migrants will stay for only a short term or that their presence would not bring about social change, governments mainly fall back on three social mechanisms in managing what Castles terms “the controllability of difference”: assimilation, multiculturalism, and differential exclusion. For Castles, assimilation refers to governmental efforts to ensure that migrants take on the cultural practices of the local community, with the assumption that “the immigrants’ descendent will be indistinguishable from the rest of the population.”36

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid, 10.
Multiculturalism applies in diverse, heterogeneous societies; it seeks to control differences through social mechanisms that “maintain the idea of a primary belonging to one society under one nation-state.” On the other end of the spectrum, differential exclusion connotes the acceptance of immigrants as workers under strict employment and social conditions; this mechanism is purely transactional in nature.

Singapore has long understood the need to control social differences. Key policies have been in place since the country’s independence in 1965 to manage and maintain social harmony and public order amongst the mostly immigrant population at that time. In a parliamentary sitting in 1967, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew explained this need:

... we are confronted, as a young migrant community, with the problem of continuing a tolerant, meaningful society for some two million people, nearly all of whom cannot trace their links with the Republic for more than 150 years. For when Stamford Raffles landed here in February 1819, there were only 120 Malays and 30 Chinese, and there cannot be very many of us here who can trace our ancestors to those 120 Malays and 30 Chinese. Multi-racialism in a permissive, tolerant society becomes an imperative for us and those societies like us, which, for one reason or another, have taken into one geographic whole large components of people with diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

The result of this has been strong institutional structures – through existing legislation and public policies – in place that have seen the young migrant society grow into today’s multicultural Singapore.

In this sense, the city-state has adapted its own version of the mechanisms in incorporating immigrants. While under no illusions that new immigrants would take on the culture and social practices of the local population, there was nevertheless the assumption that the second generation of immigrants would assimilate, through being educated in national schools and taking up the obligation of national service for males. This approach – one that is transformational in nature – is reserved for those who possess the requisite criteria for permanent residency and ultimately citizenship. Assimilation here would infer that the immigrants learn and take on the cultural practices of the society. However, being a multicultural society, the

37 Ibid, 11.
38 Ibid, 11.
question remains as to which cultural practices are to be adopted by the new immigrants? Or do they form their own version of the “Singaporean identity”? If so, how will the country’s “hard multiculturalism” approach assimilate such “new” identities?

Concerns over the ability of local-born Singaporeans and foreigners to adjust to each other’s presence do not extend to those considered as migrant workers – this category of foreigners are managed by way of differential exclusion. Transactional in nature, this mechanism sees the majority of migrants allowed into the country to work on a temporary basis under a work permit scheme for those deemed to be semi or low skilled. They are, as Castles puts it, welcomed as “workers, but not as settlers; as individuals, but not as families or communities; as temporary sojourners, but not as long term residents.”

The temporary nature of this category of foreigners has meant that they are not considered a significant factor in managing the country’s migrant society, a fact that is often stressed by the government.

However, despite the temporary nature of their stay in the country, there appears to be a general acceptance across the board that low-skilled foreign workers will continue to be needed to supplement the local workforce. The numbers support this (see Table 1). Of the 1.39 million non-resident population in Singapore as of June 2011, 60 percent are work permit holders (low-skilled workers), a majority consisting of construction and domestic workers.

A 2012 report by the National Population and Talent Division on manpower needs for healthcare, construction, and foreign domestic workers projected that there will be a continual need to supplement these areas with foreign recruitment. How would a “structural dependence” on the presence of temporary workers affect the ability of local-born citizens to come to terms with the constant presence of foreigners in their midst?

40 Stephen Castles, “Migrant Settlement, Transnational Communities and State Strategies in the Asia Pacific Region.”
41 Parliamentary Written Answer, 28 February 2012 downloaded from the National Talent and Population Division website at http://www.nptd.gov.sg/content/dam/nptd/Parliamentary%20reply%20on%2028%20Feb%202012%20on%20breakdown%20of%20non-resident%20population%20.pdf.
43 Stephen Castles, “Migrant Settlement, Transnational Communities and State Strategies in the Asia Pacific Region.”
Table 1  Percentage Breakdown of Non-Resident Population (as of June 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Residents</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment Pass Holders</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S Pass Holders</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Permit Holders (including foreign domestic workers)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependents of Singapore Citizens, Permanent Residents and Work Pass Holders</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Students</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Singapore Parliament Reports (Hansard)

Singapore’s journey as a migrant society: What lies ahead?

Despite all the grim issues arising, there is a silver lining behind the heated debates and tensions that have emerged so far. This is the fact that the immigration debate has, as Singh puts it in his chapter here, invigorated the “politics of nation building and national identity.” All too often referred to as a paternalistic state with a politically disinterested population, the country is now seeing greater ownership of issues that affect its future. Recent calls for national dialogues over the immigration conundrum are serving as platforms for increased citizen participation in issues that matter for the country. This was highlighted by the prime minister in his 2012 National Rally Speech:

We have to set a clear direction. We cannot just be blown off course or drift with the tides onto the rocks. So I asked Heng Swee Keat [Minister for Education] to lead a national conversation on Our Singapore to define what sort of country we want and how we can achieve it. So please join in this national effort, think seriously about our future, contribute your ideas, work together to make it happen.

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44 See chapter three of this volume.
45 Singapore has often been referred to by the Western media as a “nanny state” with a paternalistic government. See Henri Ghesquiere, Singapore’s Success: Engineering Economic Growth (Singapore: Thomson Learning, 2007), 119.
46 Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Rally 2012.
As it turns out, the framing of the national conversation – referred to as “Our Singapore Conversation” (OSC) – has taken on a broad perspective, seeking to find consensus over the country’s values, concerns, and ultimately its future objectives.\(^\text{47}\) The immigration imperative has, it would seem, led to some progression in Singapore’s nation-building efforts. However, it remains unclear as to how this informs the direction of the country in engaging with its immigrant population. A survey conducted at the end of the OSC found that “more Singaporeans prefer reducing the inflow of foreigners even if it translated to slower growth and jobs.”\(^\text{48}\) This appears to be squarely at odds with the economic-driven immigration agenda that has been the cornerstone of Singapore’s economic vitality so far. While it is too early to be able to foretell the direction the country will take in negotiating a policy that has been economically beneficial but has at the same time caused much social insecurity, the following chapters in this volume will explore in detail the socio-political landscape of Singapore’s journey as a migrant society that had led to such negative sentiments from its people.


Not many will dispute the fact that immigration has played an important part in transforming Singapore. While many have written about immigration’s impact on Singapore’s economy, a discussion on the social changes brought about by immigration, especially in terms of the scale experienced in the past ten years, has largely been absent. In response, this volume offers a multidisciplinary set of views on the social and political consequences of taking on large numbers of immigrants for Singapore. Contributions from the fields of demography, political science, sociology, human geography, cultural studies, security studies and public policy facilitate a deeper understanding of complex social issues involving, for example, societal dilemmas, trade-offs and reactions to immigration policies.

*Immigration in Singapore* is written for a diverse audience such as academics, policy-makers and students of migration studies. In addition, it is hoped the volume will provide valuable insights for Singaporeans who are interested in making sense of the rapid changes taking place in their society as result of immigration.

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