

Malaysian Migration to Singapore: Pathways, Mechanisms and Status

Yi-Jian Ho*

International Institute of Strategic Studies

Adam D. Tyson**1

The University of Leeds

Abstract: The Malaysian brain drain and migration trends have become highly salient problems and the focus of numerous academic research projects and government policy studies. Building on the comparative approach to migration developed by Schiller and Caglar (2009), this paper argues that Malaysian migration discourse tends to focus on the highly skilled while overshadowing other forms of Malaysian migration. For instance, migrants are not simply Chinese-Malaysian, but rather there are multiple intersectionalities of migrants according to ethnicity, gender, age and class that must be considered. This paper also suggests that migration is insufficiently explained by conventional push and pull factors, which apply differently to different individuals and must incorporate mechanisms of migration. Finally, this paper attempts to demonstrate the increasing complexity of migration and the brain drain by contrasting the case of ASEAN scholars in Singapore with Malaysian low-skilled labour in Singapore.

Keywords: ASEAN scholars, brain drain, Malaysia, migration, Singapore

JEL classification: F22, I25, J15, J24

1. Introduction

One of the most salient issues in Malaysia today is the migration of highly-skilled individuals, particularly those bound for Singapore, and the corresponding lack of skilled personnel in key sectors of the Malaysian economy. From 1995 onwards, the brain drain has been identified as increasingly problematic by the Malaysian government, leading to the establishment of the Returning Scientist Programme (1995), then its later incarnation, the Returning Expert Programme (2001) and finally Brain Gain Malaysia (2006), all of which are regarded as producing unsatisfactory results.² Although there are disagreements over the precise economic impact of migration and brain drain, talent migration easily grabs news headlines and is portrayed as a serious limiting factor for economic development, having

* International Institute of Strategic Studies- Asia, 9 Raffles Place, #53-02 Republic Plaza, Singapore 598139. Email: jian@iiss.org or ho.yijian@gmail.com

** School of Politics and International Studies, The University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom.
Email: a.d.tyson@leeds.ac.uk

¹ We wish to thank Konrad Adenauer Stiftung–Malaysia for supporting this research project. However, the views expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors.

² The Returning Expert Programme, now administered by Talent Corporation, approved 263 returnees by 2010, while the Returning Scientist Programme attracted 93 scientists over three years. The latter programme was prematurely terminated (Kok 2010). A former politician, Dr Toh Kin Woon, has criticised the policies for being ineffective (Boo 2011).

detrimental impacts on productivity generally and highly specialised sectors such as biosciences and semiconductor fabrication, specifically. The Malaysian government led by Prime Minister Najib Razak remains on high alert, and has included the brain drain dilemma in its major initiatives such as the New Economic Model and the Economic Transformation Plan. Similarly, the National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC 2010) of Malaysia, established in 2009, recognises the need for specialised talent to drive economic growth and to lift Malaysia out of its middle income trap by 2020.³ In 2010 the Najib administration set up Talent Corporation to further stymie the loss of capable individuals and to attract foreign talent to fill professional gaps in critical economic sectors. Thus, talent emigration (and immigration) tends to take precedence over other forms of migration in Malaysia because of perceptions of state dependence on talented professionals, and assumed impacts on overall economic progress.

Arguably, the policy focus on brain drain and the mobility of talent has led to the narrowing of the concept of migration in Malaysia. It seems that other forms of migration are dealt with only at the individual level, being approached in terms of individual choice, and it is assumed that an individual is better off after migration, is able to find employment in the host country and thus ceases to contribute to the home economy. Mainstream accounts of the brain drain (from the government and policy think tanks) also tend to entertain ethnic stereotypes, with most Chinese-Malaysian migrants thought to be ‘naturally’ attracted to Singapore. Singapore is in fact the number one destination for all Malaysians, with an estimated 386,000 residents of Malaysian birth classified as either naturalised Singaporean citizens or holders of permanent resident status, and anywhere from 500,000 to one million Malaysians holding temporary work permits in Singapore (Singapore Census 2011).⁴ While many of these migrants take up senior (highly-skilled) positions in Singapore, there are also many employed in manufacturing and the service industry. It is useful to bear in mind the disparate ways in which Malaysians relocate to Singapore, as well as differentials such as the ethno-cultural and economic backgrounds of inbound Malaysians, which are linked to increasingly fragmented identities as migrants strive for success abroad while maintaining personal links to Malaysia.

From observations made between 2010 and 2011, it is clear that the Singaporean government often struggles to balance shifting economic imperatives (the need for migrant labour) with public order and security. While there are large migrant communities in Singapore, there are no corresponding labour organisations, although two notable non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work with Singaporean officials to highlight cases of migrant worker exploitation, vulnerability and poor living conditions.⁵ Organised migrant labour is likely to be associated with the preservation of existing migrant identities (unified

³ Vision 2020 was launched in February 1991 as part of former Prime Minister Mahathir’s grand narrative of modernity and industrialisation, and was to be achieved by advancements in technology and science as well as cultural and moral progress (Goh 2002: 51).

⁴ Persons holding work permits and employment passes are considered part of the non-resident population. The Singapore Census 2011 gives the figure for the non-resident population of Singapore at 1,305,000 and the total resident population at 3,771,000. Thus, residents of Malaysian birth make up just over 10 per cent of the total resident population. No authoritative figure of Malaysians in the non-resident population is given.

⁵ These two organisations are Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), established in 2003, and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), established 2004 (Lyons 2009).

by a distant homeland) and also the formation of new identities and new demands for entitlements and protections while abroad. Therefore given Singapore's strong historical, cultural, economic and social linkages with Malaysia, it is imperative for policymakers to truly understand the dynamics of bilateral migration between the two countries. This paper proceeds to argue that to properly understand Malaysia's status as a sending and receiving country requires an appreciation of its shifting development strategy in which different economic imperatives require a different character of labour and thus, different sorts of migrants. When juxtaposed with the imperatives of Singapore's political economy, one can see how the state intervenes to enact mechanisms to entice Malaysians to migrate to Singapore. In the process, different pathways incorporate Malaysians of all backgrounds into Singapore, which in turn has an impact on identity formation and sense of place during intra-regional migration, for which general push and pull frameworks have insufficient explanatory power.⁶

2. Appending Push-Pull Explanations

Push and pull factors are arguably derived from dissatisfaction with one's present location and (mis)perceptions of golden opportunities and affluence elsewhere. Strategies to manage the flow and movement of people can be examined using, among others, a political economy approach, which Freeman and Kessler (2008) have done in the context of migration. In their schema, policymakers are brokers who manage organised interest groups such as labour unions and employer federations, and who lobby for business-friendly (and often exploitative) immigration policies. Malaysians and other guest workers will certainly encounter Singapore's system of tripartism, a national strategy to maximise relations between business, labour and the state (MoM 2010).

Schiller and Caglar's (2009: 181) innovative approach to migration is a reaction against the 'persistence of the ethnic lens' and the study of transnational communities rather than social fields. Drawing synergies between human geography and political economy, the authors posit that cities rely on migrants in a specific economic role, which in turn affects the character of the city at local, regional and global levels, possibly rejuvenating a flagging economy. Migrants, rather than simply being recipients of the host country's social benefits and economic opportunities, are often depicted as taking an agentive role in sustaining and re-energising their host country's economy. Therefore, in addition to the high politics of intergovernmental relations, institutions, regulatory regimes, demographic trends and push-pull factors, it is important to examine the actual relationship between migrant and host communities in specific settings (place) and at specific moments in time. These relations are dynamic, changing in response to the needs and conditions of the host society, as well as the expectations and experiences of the migrant communities.

Lam *et al.* (2002) approach gender and family identity through the specific lens of Chinese-Malaysian migrants to Singapore, framing their migratory motivations within Hirshmann's (1983) ideological paradigm, and therefore the category of 'exit' is associated

⁶ Push factors are defined here as the conditions and perceptions that convince Malaysian migrants to leave, whereas pull factors are the circumstances that effectively attract Malaysians to locales such as Singapore (Fouberg *et al.* 2009).

with highly-skilled, upper-class professionals who primarily have economic self-interests in mind. Recognition is given to Tan's (1997) work, which shows that migrant groups do not break completely with identifications of 'home,' but rather their experiences lead to a thickening of multi-stranded social and economic relations spanning across borders. By definition, however, the study of Lam *et al.* (2002) excludes non-Chinese migrants of Malaysian origin, giving little attention to Malay and Indian migrants, as well as working class Chinese-Malaysians from Johor, Ipoh or even Sabah and Sarawak.

Kaur (2006) gives an excellent account of pre-independence migration and a clear enumeration of government policy with regard to migration between Singapore and Malaysia, although the focus is on labour migration, classified into three broad economic categories: unskilled or semi-skilled workers, skilled migrants, and unauthorised or illegal migrants. This framework excludes border commuters such as those from Johor Bahru, who travel across guarded national boundaries every day, as well as temporary labour and residency in Singapore, non-economic migration from Malaysia to Singapore, and gendered migration.

For the purposes of this paper, more attention will be paid to the multiple pathways of migration: how a particular Malaysian might arrive (mechanism), stay and engage in Singaporean society (identities, incorporation, social and legal status), and the corresponding government policies to encourage or discourage migration. In the case of Singapore and Malaysia, there are a plethora of pathways deserving of greater scrutiny. These include foreign student migration, intermarriage migration to Singapore, commuting the Johor Causeway, and labour migration from West Malaysia and East Malaysia (which should be considered separately). This paper will focus on key trends such as the liberalisation and internationalisation of university education, scholarships and mobility (enabling Malaysian graduates to work and live in Singapore), which employs a framework proposed by Schiller and Caglar (2009) and is more meaningful than a generic push-pull analysis. This approach liberates us from phrasing the question in terms of (dis)loyalty to the state: a person might migrate through these mechanisms and yet remain fiercely loyal to the home country. It also allows us to discuss the status of Malaysians in Singapore, including the manner of their arrival, the vulnerabilities they face, and different levels of social integration achieved while remaining cognizant of differences between Malaysians. Prior to an analysis of the higher education mechanism for migration between Malaysia and Singapore, some relevant background and history is required.

3. A Brief History of Economics and Migration in Singapore

In the context of Singapore's state-driven economic project, we can denote three different periods with specific economic imperatives. The first period, 1959–1965, is known as the early import-substitution industrialisation phase of Singapore's political economy, during which port facilities were developed and restrictions on the movement and migration of people were imposed in order to curb unemployment (Tremewan 1994). The next phase, 1965–1978, is marked by a transition to export orientation, the expansion of manufacturing and the beginning of labour shortages (both skilled and unskilled). By 1969 Singapore was the busiest port in the Commonwealth, and in the relentlessly competitive global market, national firms were found at times to be lacking in expertise to drive industrialisation on such a large scale, and therefore labour and migration became pressing policy issues (Kng

et al. 1988). As a result, the inflow of unskilled labour, mainly from Malaysia, was allowed to meet specific demands, and along with the influx of foreign capital investments, the government encouraged skilled expatriates to settle in Singapore (Akkemik 2009).

Consistent with the developmental state model, the government strategically intervened in certain industries, encouraging foreign investment and attempting to create a suitable labour environment (Preston 2007: 131). This was also a mixed model as the government had some liberal economic tendencies, where full foreign ownership of companies and factories was permitted and massive amounts of foreign direct investment were pouring in. After a dramatic recession in 1985, Singapore's leadership embraced technological innovation as the primary mechanism to restore productivity (Tremewan 1994: 37). In the new millennium, Singapore has continued along the post-industrial path, marked by the knowledge-based economy, financial services, biotechnology, high culture and the arts.

Migrants have taken an active role in the political economy of Singapore from the early post-independence period to contemporary times.⁷ At the policy level, Singapore has a history of migration that closely links the city-state to the rest of Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia. Following twenty-three complex months of merger with Malaysia (1963–1965), Singapore seceded from the Federation and had to quickly establish territorial sovereignty and bureaucratic control over immigration along the Malaysian border. One of the legacies of this period was the deliberate societal project of balancing the ethnic and religious composition of the city-state (Tetzlaff 2007: 104). Following the separation of Singapore and Malaysia, the key pathways of incorporation were education, marriage, network migration (including familial ties and corporate linkages), recruitment in the public sector, and the rise of employment agencies.

From the procedural perspective, seven core types of migrant passes were created, which are still valid today, only with more subcategories. The core seven are: (1) an employment pass, (2) a dependant pass, (3) a visit pass, (4) a student pass, (5) a transit pass, (6) a special pass, and finally, (7) a landing pass. At the start, the employment pass could only be issued to a person drawing a minimum monthly salary of 1,200 Singapore dollars (SGD), although this could be waived on a case-by-case discretionary basis. The employment pass was associated with white collar professionals, while the government created the work permit pass for blue collar labour with lower salary projections. The minimum monthly salary for the employment pass has been revised periodically, increasing to SGD 1,500 in 1984, SGD 2,000 in 1998 and SGD 2,800 in 2011. Working class Malaysians do not hold equal status with Malaysians arriving through other pathways. The working pass system has evolved to categorise migrant labour in several legal categories with a tiered schedule of rights, with unskilled labour at the bottom and highly paid professionals at the top. In 1973, for instance, foreign work permit holders had to work for at least five years, and then seek approval from the ministry before marrying Singaporeans (*Straits Times* 1973). A company was restricted in the number of employees holding a work permit, but for highly skilled

⁷ Singapore was a dependency of Bengal until 1826 when the Straits Settlements were amalgamated, and was then incorporated as a British crown colony from 1867–1941. For a highly readable general history of Singapore, see Turnbull (1977).

employment pass holders, there was no such limit, nor any marriage restrictions (*Straits Times* 1978).

During the 1970s and 1980s, Malaysian labour was concentrated in the electronics, shipbuilding and service industries, although the official number of Malaysian workers in Singapore steadily declined. Bangladeshi, Filipino, Indian, Indonesian, Sri Lankan and Thai workers were frequently recruited to meet persistent labour shortages. According to reports, there were 100,000 Malaysian workers in Singapore in 1978, 55,000 in 1985, and approximately 30,000 in 1989 (*The Straits Times* 1980, 1985; Lin 1989). This appears to be in line with the official policy of reducing the inflow of specific categories of Malaysian labourers.

By contrast, the Singapore government was very liberal in hiring talented foreigners into government service during the 1980s, as evidenced by the willingness of the Public Service Commission to routinely offer top Malaysian students a full education, granted that they accept a lengthy bond (sometimes as many as thirteen years) or consider citizenship. In 1984, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow, said that talented foreigners 'whose culture, traditions and customs are compatible' would be given permanent residence six months after they found work, and citizenship after five years, whereas it previously took ten years (Hwa 1984). While foreigners do not serve in ministries, statutory boards are generally more liberal. In the 1980s, there existed a government programme which also offered subsidised rental of older Housing Development Board (HDB) apartments to Malaysians, which created a tremendous incentive for skilled Malaysians to stay in Singapore, although this was discontinued by the 1990s. Interviewees also reported that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Singapore government was actively recruiting new foreign graduates from foreign universities to staff their universities and statutory boards, offering very attractive remuneration packages. In 1984, there were already 25,000 foreigners in Singapore holding the employment pass. By 2000, Singapore had a total of 612,200 foreign workers, equivalent to 29.2 per cent of the total workforce, with an estimated 500,000 unskilled or low-skilled workers.

The most recent figures from the 2010 census indicate that the total population of Singapore is 5,076,700, and place the number of Permanent Residents at 541,000 and non-residents at 1,305,000 (or 25.7 per cent of the total population). Overall, as indicated in Table 1 below, the proportion of Singaporean residents of Malaysian origin has increased through the years.

Table 1. Population indicators

| Item | 1981 | 1991 | 2001 | 2010 |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Singapore population | 2,533,000 | 3,135,000 | 4,138,000 | 5,076,700 |
| Malaysia population (WB 2010) | 14,106,332 | 18,597,308 | 23,771,376 | 27,000,000 |
| Malaysian residents in Singapore (UN 2010) | 120,104 | 194,929 | 303,828 | 386,000 |

The preference for recruiting Malaysians seems to have gradually declined as Singaporean authorities established their own scholars and professionals using preferential systems, although the city-state is always in competition for global talent and continues to struggle to retain its image as the talent capital of Southeast Asia.⁸ As it stands, the number of employment pass holders continues to surge, from 115,000 in 2009 to 142,000 in 2010 (MoM 2011). Holders of class S work permits (for medium-skilled labourers) have more than doubled between 2007 and 2010. Given these trends, the following subsection delves into some specific mechanisms of Malaysian migration to Singapore that have been under-appreciated in recent studies.

4. Mechanisms and Moments of Migration

The multiple intersectionalities of Malaysian migrants to Singapore can be examined according to ethnicity, gender, age and class, as well as the mechanisms and moments of their migration. Of particular interest are the pathways that enable particular individuals or groups to arrive in Singapore, the shifting identities that result from prolonged engagement with Singaporean society and the corresponding adaptations in government policies in response to new economic imperatives. This subsection examines the migratorial patterns of university scholarship recipients, as well as changing trends in migration. It also indicates the attractiveness of Singapore as an end destination for highly educated students.

Although it is beyond the scope of this research paper, another area deserving greater scrutiny is the latest trend in marriage migration to Singapore. Marriage and the ease of child-bearing is a large part of the calculation of migration and relocation, as marriage laws and maternal benefits are different in Singapore and Malaysia, in addition to perceptions of an overall improvement in economic opportunities. Cross-border marriages are also a means of moving up the socio-economic ladder. Future research projects could track how individual marriage migrants from Malaysia to Singapore formulate strategies to maximise their socio-economic status, weighing the trade-offs against historic policy movements towards and away from marriage migrants. Further research is also warranted in the area of the Malaysia-Singapore Causeway, 'only one mile of water' that separates two countries, as Lee Kuan Yew put it (Purushotam 1998: 63). Border commuters who work in Singapore but primarily live in Johor Bahru pose a problem for an orthodox understanding of migrants, as they attempt to have the best of both Malaysia's cheaper cost of living and Singapore's higher purchasing power, and are typically ambiguous about their intention to migrate. Nevertheless, education is one of the clearest mechanisms for migration and will thus be the focus of the remainder of this subsection.

While Malaysians consistently gain admittance into a variety of Singaporean universities and institutions, including polytechnics, technical and vocational schools, this subsection will focus on the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) scholarship as a mechanism which allows for continual labour migration into Singapore.

⁸ Part of Singapore's Manpower 21 Plan, launched in 1999, is the vision to become a 'talent capital' in order to drive economic change (Rahman 2010: 202). The government has since launched Talent Capital Singapore, the details of which are available at <http://www.talentcapital.sg/>.

The ASEAN scholarship was first offered by the Singapore government under the Ministry of Education in 1969 to ASEAN nationals to study in Singapore at the pre-university A-level (Advanced level, a prerequisite for university, first used in the United Kingdom). The programme has since been extended to the Ordinary (O)-level (known as the Secondary One and Secondary Three Scholarships), where students may apply for entry at the first and third year of secondary school in Singapore, as well as to university under the ASEAN undergraduate scholarship. The offer of an ASEAN scholarship coincided with a lack of capacity in higher education in Malaysia. With the implementation of affirmative action *bumiputera* developmental policies in the 1970s, universities were unable to offer enough places to an increasing number of university applicants by the 1980s (Selvaratnam 1988).⁹ Indeed, it is widely held that Malaysia's post-1969 political and economic restructuring led to ethnocentric policies and social fragmentation, creating an impetus for intellectuals, professionals and many Chinese-Malaysians to emigrate (Embong 2001: 61).

After its first few years of operation, the Public Service Commission (now the Public Service Division) took over the management of ASEAN scholarship in 1972, which coincided with their mandate to recruit foreign talent for areas with a shortage of qualified local candidates. In the mid-1990s, the pre-university scholarship was transferred back to the Ministry of Education, possibly signalling a shift of priorities from being a mechanism for recruitment of 'foreign talent' into a maturing bureaucracy, to a more general mechanism for attracting students and well-educated migrants to study in Singapore. The ASEAN scholarship is widely promoted through advertisements placed in various local newspapers in ASEAN countries. Candidates apply and are selected to sit for entry exams held in their home countries, and may be selected for further interview. Successful recipients of scholarships are then placed in a designated institution. As a result, Malaysian students of excellent standing have opportunities to study at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore Management University, and the Singapore University of Technology and Design.¹⁰

At all levels of scholarship, there is no contractual bond for the student to work for the government or remain in Singapore; however, the Tuition Grant Scheme associated with the undergraduate scholarship requires scholars to work in Singapore for at least three years under any organisation or on a self-employed basis. Both the subsidy scheme and the scholarship allow the receiving scholar an effective 100 per cent subsidisation of his or her university tuition fees. Similarly, at secondary or pre-university level, the ASEAN scholarship gives the recipient a 100 per cent waiver of schooling fees as well as other benefits such as accommodation, a small allowance, and one return flight (for non-Malaysian students). The resulting status of Malaysian ASEAN scholars is relatively privileged. While studying, they are entered into the top secondary schools and junior colleges in Singapore. After graduation, it is reasonably easy for ASEAN scholars to take up permanent residency with the associated schedule of benefits. Even without permanent residency, an ASEAN scholar

⁹ The term *bumiputera* literally means 'sons of the soil' and refers to Malays and indigenous ethnic groups in Peninsular and East Malaysia, although more often than not the term is implicitly used to refer to the Malays only (Tong 2008: 50).

¹⁰ Further details are available at the Ministry of Education website: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/scholarships/asean/>.

can also take up the employment pass as graduate wages can easily achieve the stipulated salary threshold.

Education also has a dimension of social incorporation. It offers students a chance to intermingle with their Singaporean counterparts, connecting them to social networks in Singapore. In NTU and NUS, for instance, foreign students typically reside in halls, and these residential locations are allocated based on student society activity. One ASEAN scholar from Malaysia interviewed for this paper remarked that, since her formative years of adulthood have been spent in Singapore, it would be difficult to return to Malaysia, where the pace of life is different and, even in cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur, there is a different kind of 'street smartness' required (interview in Singapore, October 2010). Similarly, a Malaysian couple interviewed in Singapore, who recently gave up their citizenship, remarked that they could not imagine their Singapore-born daughter (currently enrolled in university) being unable to function in Malaysia, but that, as with most Malaysian students, it would be preferable to find employment in Singapore (interview in Singapore, October 2010).

To complement these findings, an online questionnaire of 99 ASEAN scholars in Singapore was conducted in August 2011. Scholars are defined here as those who were once recipients of any combination of the three ASEAN scholarships. 95 out of the sample of 99 were Malaysian citizens. Of these 95, 61 Malaysians remain in Singapore with 44 having obtained permanent residency, 8 are holding employment passes, 5 have achieved naturalised citizenship, and 3 are enrolled in postgraduate studies (thus retaining their student passes). Given that the average age of respondents is 30 years, it is likely that more will choose to apply for Singaporean citizenship in the future, as they enter professions or different phases of family planning. Only 12 respondents had returned to Malaysia at the time of the survey, citing reasons such as being unable to continue their studies, being offered a job in Malaysia, or being unable to find a job in Singapore. When asked about plans to return to Malaysia, 65 per cent of those surveyed were either undecided or answered a straight 'no'.

Ultimately, for a programme that has a relatively unrestrictive bond, the questionnaire suggests that the majority of ASEAN scholars do end up residing and working in Singapore for a relatively long period, which suggests a relatively privileged status. For scholars who return to Malaysia, they average 6.83 years in Singapore, having first arrived at the age of 17.7 years. For those residing in Singapore, they average almost twice that (12.2 years), although these are not consecutive as some have resided elsewhere for brief periods, indicating that these are young, highly mobile and skilled persons competing in a global marketplace.

5. Variance in Skilled Migration

In contrast to the ASEAN scholars, Malaysians who arrive in Singapore as working class labourers, whether unskilled or skilled, do not enjoy the same sort of open welcome and sense of permanency. Unskilled labourers, typically resigned to 'dirty, dangerous and demeaning' jobs, have been linked to crime, the spread of contagious diseases and other social costs (Low 2002: 100-102). In the absence of a direct family linkage, this 'class' of economic migrant tends to deal with a vast network of transnational agents and local fixers. There are two main mechanisms for working class labour migration: labour recruitment agencies and interpersonal networks. Professional recruitment agencies play a crucial role

as facilitators of emigration, responding to rapidly changing demographics, socio-economic circumstances and country-specific needs (Yui 2009: 271). Having established talent pools and registries of prospective employees throughout the Pacific Asia, recruitment agencies create one of the major regional pathways of migration to Singapore. From an economic standpoint, they are well-positioned to provide cheap and fast solutions to labour shortages, whether chronic or acute. Interpersonal networks, by contrast, serve to reduce the risks associated with travelling to an unfamiliar locale, helping facilitate the process of transition by securing opportunities for employment, housing and other relocation needs.

In the interests of 'social and political harmony' Singapore has developed a finely tuned, 'obsessive ethnic equation' in an attempt to control migration flows (Low 2002: 101). Having consulted the news archives, however, it is clear that working class labour in Singapore has always been varied despite the government's best efforts. From a survey of 408 Malaysian migrant workers in 1985, for instance, it was found that nearly half were Chinese-Malaysian, and as many as 40 per cent were ethnic Malays (Sieh 1988). Ranked according to state of origin, the majority (25 per cent) of Malaysians originated from Johor and are engaged mostly in the manufacturing industry, followed by Kelantanese (20 per cent) engaged as unskilled construction workers, and finally Perakians (mainly Indian-Malaysians) engaged in the shipbuilding industry. Sieh (1988) found that most workers in Singapore were transient, following rural seasonal migration patterns where labourers migrate to cities between agricultural seasons. Furthermore, reports indicated that it was common for migrants to enter Singapore on a social pass in order to search for work (Abu Bakar and Yunus 1984). Singaporean contractors would then apply for block permits (costing SGD 5 per day) for labourers being paid less than SGD 1,000 per month.

The employment pass system was reformed in 1998 with the introduction of class P, Q and R assigned according to monthly fixed salary and the nature of employment. Further reforms in 2004 introduced class S for medium-skilled workers. For each class of work permit, there are subcategories (P1, P2, Q1, Q2, R1 and R2) used by the Ministry of Manpower to further refine the status and skills set of the foreign worker (Rahman and Fee 2005: 65). With the new divisions of the P, Q, R and S system, the government is able to carefully calibrate the amount of benefits a worker is eligible to receive. There is a differentiated structure of foreign worker levy in Singapore that has the potential to discriminate against unskilled workers (Low 2002: 101). The latest figures are detailed in Table 2.

Within working class (R) Malaysians, there exists status differentials. Data released from the High Commission of Malaysia in Singapore reveals significant inequalities between Peninsular Malaysians and East Malaysians. Indicators typically include remuneration, working conditions, and perceptions of inequality and discrimination. In 2008, for instance, there were disproportionately high numbers of East Malaysians lodging labour complaints. Trends revealed that the majority of East Malaysians in Singapore are temporary migrants who migrate through employment agencies recruiting from villages with the lure of comparatively higher wages. Table 3 details the number of Malaysian workers in Singapore seeking assistance, organised according to state. Data was provided by the Labour Section of the High Commission of Malaysia.

Temporary migrants who arrive through employment agencies are also typically vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment. While East Malaysians might not have serious language problems or barriers, they are migrating to a relatively unknown geographic location

Table 2. Ministry of Manpower foreign work permit levy, 2012

| Permit Type | Salary range per month | Applicant | Restrictions | Benefits |
|-------------|----------------------------|---|---|---|
| P1 P2 | Above 8,000 Above 4,500 | Professional, Managerial, Executive or Specialist jobs | Food stall licensees cannot employ foreign workers on employment pass | Can apply for long term visit pass for parents, parents-in-law, unmarried daughters above 21, handicapped children above 21, step-children under 21 |
| Q1 | Above 3,000 | | | Can apply for dependant's pass for spouse and unmarried children under 21 |
| S | Above 2,000 | Mid-level skilled workers (i.e. technicians and retail) | Must pay an S-pass levy; the workforce of company cannot comprise more than 25% of S pass holders | Can only bring in family on dependant's pass if salary is above 2,800 |
| R | Below 2,000 | Skilled & semi-skilled workers; domestic helpers receive special variants | Must pay the foreign worker levy which scales from 180 to 450 per day, according to sector and percentage in company, ensure acceptable housing, and cannot exceed a calculated quota | |

Table 3. Labour complaints lodged at the Malaysian High Commission

| State | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 (Jan-Oct) |
|--------------|------|------|----------------|
| Sarawak | 549 | 385 | 164 |
| Sabah | 682 | 362 | 148 |
| Johor | 122 | 93 | 77 |
| Kuala Lumpur | 13 | 7 | 5 |
| Labuan | 8 | 4 | 0 |
| Kelantan | 20 | 22 | 11 |
| Perak | 38 | 12 | 16 |
| Other states | 135 | 81 | 73 |
| Total | 1543 | 975 | 494 |

(Singapore as a high-tech, Talent Capital), with few (if any) local contacts and a lack of understanding of their legal rights. Economically, they are also vulnerable as employment agencies typically take a large percentage of their monthly earnings for a fixed period of time. Many complaint cases involve the confiscation of passports by the employment agencies. If new migrants are unable to retrieve a confiscated passport, they will likely be deported to Johor Bahru, where they are forced to find work to earn passage back to East Malaysia (*Free Malaysia Today* 2010).

The status of working class migrant labourers remains vulnerable and excluded, and their unemployment is externalised to their home country. In relative terms, East Malaysians tend to have a slightly elevated position when compared to other temporary migrants from countries such as Myanmar or Bangladesh. This is because, as of 1993, Singaporean employers are not required to pay an upfront security deposit for Malaysian workers, which can amount to as much as SGD 5000 per worker, a hefty sum for small- and medium-sized enterprises (*The Straits Times* 1993). This gives Malaysian workers a slight advantage as they can arrive under a social visit pass before securing a job, and may easily convert back, facilitating their stay. An employer with a work permit can apply for a work permit for a Malaysian worker who is already in Singapore under a work permit for a different firm.

The Malaysian High Commission reports that national authorities have managed to gain access to the villages that workers typically originate from in order to educate them about their rights. This has led to reductions in complaints, grievances and violations, highlighting the importance of tackling mechanisms of migration. In Singapore, complimentary efforts include a Ministry of Manpower directive to enforce ethical practices within employment agencies based in Singapore. More needs to be done, of course, as East Malaysians are not as strongly incorporated into Singaporean society, given that authorities continue to view them as a semi-permanent solution to labour shortages in the under-skilled sector.

6. Conclusion

The overall picture of Malaysians in Singapore is a fragmented one. In contrast to Little India for South Asians or the Golden Mile Plaza for Thais, they have no geographic centralisation. Highly-skilled Malaysian professionals holding senior positions in Singaporean firms (the brain drain) fall into typical gentrified patterns of living. Other Malaysians hope to achieve sufficient economic status to remain in Singapore and find Housing Development Board accommodation, otherwise they must utilise the border commute at the Johor Causeway. Given the shared history and proximity of Malaysia and Singapore, there are few linguistic barriers, especially if the migrants are Chinese-Malaysians. Despite many positive indicators, problems remain with regard to working class migrants from East Malaysia.

The mechanisms described in this paper are by no means the only pathways available to Malaysians, but they help provide a nuanced examination of the ways people move in and out of Singapore. Push-and-pull factors are important but ultimately inadequate explanatory tools for an analysis of migratory patterns because they do not include the barriers the state puts up or lowers preferentially at specific moments in time, nor the status of individual migrants within society. Mainstream research tends to aggregate migrants as a whole, when what is really needed is to disaggregate them in a specific context (such as

Malaysia and Singapore). Mechanisms of migration allow us to conceptualise migration as more than just talent or foreign labour, but also as multiple streams differentiated by factors such as class, ethnicity, geographic origin and translocation, placing actors within a larger political economic structure actively created or passively induced by the government.

Not all mechanisms were examined in this paper. Illegal migration and employment in Singapore, corporate transfers from Malaysia, and marriage migration – while they do not make up a majority of Malaysian migrants to Singapore – are relevant as they illustrate problems not only with immigration but the differences in domestic policy between Malaysia and Singapore. As regional competition within ASEAN intensifies, the extent to which migratorial patterns and specific pathways impact upon political economy, development and growth will need to be continually monitored. Recently, there has been increased pressure on the Singapore government to begin limiting the number of migrants, especially those from the People's Republic of China. Malaysia and Singapore both have experience with authoritarian rule and believe in technology (smart card identification and biometrics) as a solution to securing territorial borders and controlling the flow of people (Sadiq 2009: 192). As in many countries, anti-immigrant sentiment remains high in Singaporean society, and debates over employment pass criteria continue to resurface. One might expect this to discourage Malaysians from arriving in Singapore, but mechanisms and pathways for migration (particularly the ASEAN scholarship) essentially remain the same, while shifting economic imperatives ensure that the brain cycle (drain, share and gain) will continue. Political, social and policy changes seem not to dramatically affect working class Malaysians. The status and flow of labourers remains responsive to acute economic downturns, albeit their transient nature suits the rapidity of a typical Singaporean recovery. The innovations driven by competition between Malaysia's Talent Corporation and Talent Capital Singapore may play an important role in the economic transformation of both countries, although their relative efficacy deserves greater scrutiny.

Finally, this paper attempted to demonstrate the utility of assessing the mechanisms of migration and the subsequent status of migrants while remaining cognizant of the multiple pathways of migration and their differences. To understand the comparative flow of migration from Malaysia to Singapore, it is important to examine the pressures of and responsiveness to migrant labour in order to determine whether the respective governments will legislate against these flows, and whether they truly have the capacity to enforce restrictions. By surveying Singapore's overall migration situation and contextualising Malaysia's part in it, this paper shows that while political economy and government policy can determine the mechanisms that enable and regulate the flow of migrants, the status of migrants can change independent of their mechanisms for arrival, which in turn can become a brain drain or policy dilemma if not solved within a reasonable time frame.

References

- Abu Bakar, S. and N.H. Yunus. 1984. 60,000 Kelantanese work in Singapore. *The New Straits Times*, 5 August 1984.
- Akkemik, K.A. 2009. *Industrial Development in East Asia: A Comparative Look at Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore*. Singapore: World Scientific.
- Boo, S-L. 2011. Drop 'Cold War' immigration policies, says Ex-Minister. *The Malaysian Insider*, 19 September 2011.

- Embong, A.R. 2001. The culture and practice of pluralism in postcolonial Malaysia. In *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. R. W. Hefner, pp. 59–85. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Free Malaysia Today. 2010. Falling prey in the Lion City. *Free Malaysia Today*, 15 March 2010.
- Fouberg, E.H., A.B. Murphy and H.J. de.Blij. 2009. *Human Geography: People, Place, and Culture*. 9th Ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Freeman, G.P. and A.E. Kessler. 2008. Political economy and migration policy. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* **34(4)**: 655–678.
- Goh, B-L. 2002. *Modern Dreams: An Inquiry into Power, Cultural Production, and the Cityscape in Contemporary Urban Penang, Malaysia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program.
- Hirschman, C. 1983. Labour markets and ethnic inequality in Peninsular Malaysia, 1970. *The Journal of Developing Areas* **18**: 1–20.
- Hwa, H.B. 1984. Welcome if you have the talent. *The Straits Times*, 29 January 1984, p. 1.
- Kaur, A. 2006. *International Migration in Malaysia and Singapore since the 1880s: State Policies, Migration Trends and Governance of Migration*. New England, NSW: The University of New England Asia Centre.
- Kng, C.M., L. Low and T.M. Heng. 1988. *Industrial Restructuring in Singapore*. Singapore: Chopmen Publishers.
- Kok, C. 2010. Our loss is another country's gain. *The Star*, 6 February 2010.
- Lam, T., B.S.A. Yeoh and L. Law. 2002. Sustaining families transnationally: Chinese-Malaysians in Singapore. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* **11(1)**: 1–11.
- Lin, P. 1989. Study for Labour Attaché in Singapore by 1989. *The Straits Times*, 12 October 1989, p. 17.
- Low, L. 2002. The political economy of migrant worker policy in Singapore. *Asia Pacific Business Review* **8(4)**: 95–118.
- Lyons, L. 2009. Transcending the border: transnational imperatives in Singapore's migrant worker rights movement. *Critical Asian Studies* **41(1)**: 89–112.
- MoM. 2010. *Tripartism in Singapore*. Singapore: Ministry of Manpower.
- MoM. 2011. Committee of Supply, Parliamentary Speech 1 by Mr Gan Kim Yong, Minister of Manpower, 9 March 2011. Singapore: Ministry of Manpower, Available at: <http://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/Pages/SpeechesDetail.aspx?listid=315>
- NEAC. 2010. *New Economic Model for Malaysia*. Putrajaya: National Economic Advisory Council.
- Preston, P. 2007. *Singapore in the Global System: Relationship, Structure and Change*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Purushotam, N. 1998. *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Rahman, Md M. and L.K. Fee. 2005. Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore: the view from inside. *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* **20(1)**: 63–89.
- Rahman, N.A. 2010. Managing labour flows: foreign talent, foreign workers and domestic help. In *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ed. T. Chong, pp. 199–216. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Sadiq, K. 2009. *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schiller, N.G. and A. Caglar. 2009. Towards a comparative theory of locality in migration studies: migrant incorporation and city scale. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* **35(2)**: 177–202.
- Selvaratnam, V. 1988. Ethnicity, inequality, and higher education in Malaysia. *Comparative Education Review* **32(2)**: 173–196.
- Sieh, M.L. 1988. Malaysian workers in Singapore. *The Singapore Economic Review* **33(1)**: 101–111.
- Singapore Census. 2011. The Singapore Census of Population, 2010. Government of Singapore. Available at: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2010acr.pdf>.
- Straits Times*. 1973. Don't be hasty. *Straits Times*, 26 June 1973.

- Straits Times*. 1978. Malaysians and Singapore workers treated equally. *Straits Times*, 3 April 1978, p. 10.
- Tan, C-B. 1997. Chinese identities in Malaysia. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* **25(2)**: 103–116.
- Tetzlaff, T. 2007. Singapore: The one-night stand with the law. In *Law and the City*, ed. A. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, pp. 97–112. Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish.
- The Straits Times*. 1980. Malaysia not hit by the drift of its workers. *The Straits Times*, 5 September 1980, p. 12.
- The Straits Times*. 1985. Workers in Singapore wooed to return home. *The Straits Times*, 1 June 1985, p. 10.
- The Straits Times*. 1993. \$5,000 bond now for non-Malaysian workers. *The Straits Times*, 6 February 1993, p. 22.
- Tong, T.K. 2008. From fragmented identities to post-identity: Lin Xingqian's poetics of diaspora. In *Overcoming Passion for Race in Malaysia Cultural Studies*, ed. D.C.L. Lim, pp. 49–61. Leiden: Brill.
- Tremewan, C. 1994. *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Turnbull, C.M. 1977. *A History of Singapore, 1819–1975*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- United Nations (UN). 2010. Global Migration Database. New York: United Nations.
- World Bank (WB). 2010. World Development Indicators. Washington: World Bank.
- Yui, Y. 2009. The role of recruitment agencies for Japanese working women in Singapore. In *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity, Trans-regionalism*, ed. D. Heng and S. Muhd K. Aljunied, pp. 269–282. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.