

Racial Hegemony and Immigration Policy in Singapore

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ABSTRACT: Although Singapore has one of the highest standards of living in Asia, the city-state suffers from a low birth rate, especially among well-educated ethnic Chinese, and from substantial brain drain as many of its highly skilled young natives emigrate to other industrialized countries. Seeking to compensate for these problems, Singapore's government has responded by encouraging immigration. Because it is not a liberal democracy and views immigration policy as politically sensitive, Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) refuses to publish precise, detailed statistics on temporary and permanent migration into the city state. This paper, therefore, attempts to estimate the proportion of immigrants who belong to the major ethnic groups in Singapore: Chinese, Malay, and Indian. Using official data and making various assumptions, we calculate the number of immigrants by ethnicity over the history of the island state. We conclude that the PAP government continues to use immigration policy to maintain Chinese ethnic hegemony and disadvantage the Malay minority.

Keywords: Singapore; immigration policy; People's Action Party (PAP);

Political and Economic Setting

As one of the four "Asian Tigers",¹ Singapore enjoys a diversified, financial services- and technology-based economy and a first-class infrastructure.² As of 2015, Singapore had a GDP per capita of US\$52,888, making it the most affluent society in East Asia.³ Another reason to focus on Singapore is because its economy employs the highest proportion of immigrant workers in Asia, approximately one quarter of the labor force.⁴ For Singapore's economic prosperity to continue, moreover, the country must continue to import foreign workers to fill "the almost perennial shortages in labor supply in almost all levels of the skills spectrum."⁵

At the upper-end of occupational prestige, highly educated professionals and managers migrate to Singapore to fill positions in finance and international trade. These individuals usually receive "general work permits" or "employment passes" in order to facilitate Singapore's acquisition of "human capital" and knowledge of advanced technology.⁶ At the other end of the skilled continuum, Singaporean natives have also come to depend on various service workers and manual laborers to maintain a comfortable life-style and build their infrastructure. Representative

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¹Kim 1998.

²Lee 2000.

³World Bank 2015.

⁴Wong 1997; Hui 1998.

⁵Wong 1997, quoting Gunasekaran 1996.

⁶Wong 1997; Hui 1998.

occupations include construction and factory workers, domestic helpers, ship hands and dockworkers, sales clerks, and cooks.⁷ These relatively low-skilled workers generally receive the more restrictive “work permits,” which allow them to stay in the country for a few years so long as they remain in the stated job with the same employer.⁸

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The city-state likewise needs immigration to counter the significant emigration of highly skilled Singaporean natives (See Table 1). The last major column in Table 1, comes from the various statistics provided by receiving countries. To calculate the earlier columns by ethnicity, we first sampled every 100th of the 6,235 members of the Facebook group “Overseas Singaporeans!!” (accessed on May 20, 2016)⁹ and assumed ethnic identity based on the individuals’ surname and given name and photograph. This exercise suggested that 74% of overseas Singaporeans are Chinese, 6% Malays, 12% Indians, and 8% “Others”. We performed a parallel analysis of data from the Singaporean subsample of the AsiaBarometer Phase II (2006). Looking at only those Singapore residents with college degrees, we noted how many of each indicated a desire to leave the country if given the chance. Because the data lacks a direct question about ethnicity, we assumed that all Muslims were Malay, all Hindus and Sikhs were Indian, and all Daoist / Buddhist / Christians were Chinese. Our results suggest that 70% of the potential emigrants were Chinese, 16% were Malay, and 14% were Indian. Averaging the Facebook and AsiaBarometer numbers, we assumed that 72% of all emigrants in Table 1 were Chinese, 10% were Malay, 13% were Indian, and 5% were other.

Top destination countries for Singaporean migrants have been in flux over the last several decades. In the 1990s, Singaporean emigrants primarily moved to, in order of importance, Australia, Canada and the United States.¹⁰ By the 2010s, emigrations to Canada had decreased, while many more Singaporean expatriates were leaving the city-state for Great Britain and China.¹¹ Although Singapore does not provide exact figures on its emigrants,¹² the Australian government reports just under 2,000 net Singaporean immigrants for 2009.¹³ Almost 1,400 Singaporeans became permanent residents of Canada in 2008,¹⁴ and in 2009 the Canadian Embassy in Singapore issued 9,000 permanent-resident visas to prospective emigrants.¹⁵ The United States Department of Homeland Security issues 2,737 new F-1/2 and H-4/3/2b/1b visas to Singaporean in 2010.¹⁶ Such statistics raise fears that brain drain will “cream off” the most highly skilled, valuable workers.¹⁷ Indeed, among members of the three major ethnic groups (i.e., the majority Chinese and the

⁷Cheng 1996; Wong 1996; 1997; Hui 1998; Huang and Yeoh 2003.

⁸Wong 1997.

⁹see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2205027027/>

¹⁰Yap 1994.

¹¹Yeoh and Lin 2012.

¹²Low 1994.

¹³Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2010.

¹⁴Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2009.

¹⁵Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2010.

¹⁶Department of Homeland Security 2010.

¹⁷Yap 1994.

minority Malays and Indians), men, the young, the university educated, managers and professionals appear most open to emigrate.¹⁸ Yap finds, for example, that emigrants are almost eight times as likely to be college educated and twice as likely to be professionals.¹⁹ In perhaps the most reliable investigation of the question, Sullivan and Gunasekaran reported that Singaporean emigrants to Australia were most likely to mention the “government” (64.6%) as a push factor for leaving, followed by “Stress/Pressure” (58.2%).²⁰ Similarly, Low cites social factors such as a desire for less “pressured and more open social environment” as likely motivations for emigration.²¹

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

As in other industrialized countries, Singapore’s total fertility rate has gradually decreased to a point well below the crucial replacement level of 2.1 average children per adult woman necessary for continued economic success.²² According to 2007 data, the average ethnic Chinese woman resident gave birth to 1.14 children over her lifetime. Malays and Indians had a higher average birth rate at 1.94 and 1.25 children per woman, respectively.²³

To compensate for this brain drain and low fertility,²⁴ Singapore has adopted an aggressive skills-based immigration policy. In a nutshell, the PAP government wants to bring into the country immigrants who are “useful to Singapore for economic gains as long as they do not bring on costs”²⁵ via welfare or related social services.²⁶ Or as Hui²⁷ puts it,

Special attention and preference have been focused at attracting skilled immigrants from selected countries such as Hong Kong, China and India. This reflects the desire to maximize the benefits associated with the assimilation of the new migrants into the existing social environment.

Despite the political necessity of this policy, the government has noted with concern the rising levels of xenophobia among native Singaporeans.²⁸ So prevalent has this challenge become that one prominent international affairs publication recently claimed that “resentment towards incomers” and “immigration [are] becoming the city-state’s dominant political issues.”²⁹ In his 2006 National Day Rally, for example, Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong remarked,

¹⁸Tan 2005.

¹⁹Yap 1994.

²⁰Sullivan and Gunasekaran 1994.

²¹Low 1994.

²²Skeldon 1992; Neville 1996; Low 2004; Teo and Piper 2009.

²³See also Tables 3.4 and 3.6 in Singapore Department of Statistics 2008a.

²⁴Low 1994; Neville 1996; Margolin 2000; Ng 2005.

²⁵Iyer et al. 2004.

²⁶Bellows 1970; Pang 1992; Wong 1997; Hui 1998; Mauzy 2002; Huang and Yeoh 2003.

²⁷Hui 1998.

²⁸Pattana 2005.

²⁹Economist 2009.

I know that some Singaporean agree with [PAP immigration policy], they have reservations, they worry about the competitions, they are unhappy that immigrants come, here don't do National Service...I understand these concerns...because somebody new coming...[just because they] are different doesn't mean we have to reject them. We have to take a big-hearted approach. So there are things which we can do as a government in order to open our doors and bring immigrants in. But more importantly as a society we as Singaporeans, each one of us, we have to welcome immigrants.³⁰

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Despite the high emigration and low fertility rates of Chinese, the overall proportion of Chinese in the population has been relatively stable since Singapore's founding (see Table 3). In 1957, Chinese represented 75% of the total population, yet by 2010, this percentage remained almost identical at 74%. The figures for Malays, are similarly rigid, varying only one percentage point over these fifty-three years. Indians remain unchanged at 9%, and others have risen from 2% to 3% taking into consideration the massive exodus of expats at independence.

Suspicious

According to the city-state's highest-selling daily paper, "Singapore's brain drain is more of a social and political problem, than an economic one."³¹ This comes at no surprise given the rapid influx of foreigners and local xenophobia³² that has only exacerbated by international headlines citing poor immigrant behavior.³³ In recent years, Singapore's immigration policy has become increasingly politically sensitive making it difficult for the public to gain access to official data, so much so that even the popular website for the International Organization for Migration no longer list Singapore on its map.³⁴

In order to maintain the ethno-political status quo, the PAP government appears to be using ethnically selective immigration policy (i.e., disproportionately large numbers of Chinese and comparatively few Malays) as a way to compensate for low Chinese birthrates, high Malay fertility, and high Chinese emigration.³⁵ Ethnic Chinese are significantly less likely to have children and much more willing to emigrate than are Malays.³⁶ Although the government claims that its immigration policy is rooted primarily in maintaining a skilled workforce, the PAP appears also to be selectively admitting immigrants based on ethnic background. While the percentage of Chinese permanent residents is slightly higher than the corresponding population of all Singaporean residents, the percentage of Malay permanent residents is only about a third of the respective percentage in the general population. In particular, 13.4 percent of everyone who lives

³⁰Lee 2006.

³¹Tan 2012.

³²Beech 2015; BBC 2013.

³³Mahtani 2012; BBC 2013b.

³⁴<https://www.iom.int/migration>

³⁵Chan 1994; Neville 1996; Lam et al. 2002; Kong and Yeoh 2003; Cheng 2005; Piper 2006; Yeoh 2007; Kwok 2007; Yeoh and Yap 2008.

³⁶Fetzer and Millan 2015.

in Singapore are ethnically Malay, yet only 4 percent of immigrants (“permanent residents”) are of this ethnicity. Singapore’s current immigration policy thus resembles the United States’ Quota Act-era efforts to arrest ethnic change and restrict the number of Eastern and Southern European migrants.³⁷

Singapore claims to be a racially harmonious country that does not discriminate against ethnic minorities. In fact, however, the immigration rate may be viewed as way to maintain ethnic Chinese hegemony at the expense of the most disadvantaged ethnic minority, the Malays. If this suspicion is true, such a policy would also be reminiscent of the migration approach of apartheid era South Africa, when the white supremacist regime encouraged further European entries despite a very high unemployment rate.³⁸

Hypotheses

The government will do its best to encourage Chinese immigration, who can come and replenish the brain drain – reduced quantizes of Chinese ethnic majorities – and attempt to restrict the number of ethnic Malays who are admitted. Because ethnic Indians and Europeans (a.k.a. “expatriates”) tend to side with the Chinese majority (*cite*), we would expect more generous admissions policies for Tamil-speakers and racial “others.”

Results

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Table 4 confirms our suspicions that Chinese immigration is helping to fill in these demography gaps left by emigration of ethnic Chinese and the paucity of Chinese newborns. For example, at the 2010 census, 68.3% of the foreign born were ethnically Chinese, whereas a mere 4.3% were Malay. Indian and other immigrants composed 17.1% and 10.3% of the foreign-born population, respectively.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

The first way we tried to estimate the immigration rate by ethnicity was by using the equation ($2010\ Population = 2009\ Population + 2009\ Net\ Immigration + 2009\ Net\ Natural\ Increase$) to solve for the 2009 net immigration rate for a given ethnic group. All other terms in this equation are known from official statistics. When we used this equation of each of the four ethnic groups, we reached the data in Table 5.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In 2009, Singapore admitted 24,118 Chinese immigrants, 9,513 Indians, 7,614 “others”, but only 836 Malays. Figure 1, illustrates the differential immigration rates by percentages, graphically demonstrating the overwhelming preference for Chinese (57%) and bias against Malays (2%). In other words, the rate of immigration by ethnic Chinese in 2009 was 28.6 times higher than that by ethnic Malays.

³⁷Daniels 2002.

³⁸Crush 2008.

FIGURE 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE

Historically (see Figures 2 and 3), both the colonial and early PAP governments showed similar preferences, for ethnically Chinese. In 1947-57, Chinese constituted 48% of the net immigration, while Malays made up 30%. By 1957-1970, the newly independent Lee Kwan Yew government, showed an even stronger affinity for his ethnic cousins with 96% of newcomers being Chinese.

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

Finally, Table 6 calculates the number of immigrants by year relying on data from Tables 3, 2, and 1. For the third column of each ethnic group, we assumed that some Singaporeans were emigrating to the People's Republic of China and the United Kingdom, following Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalization in China and the UK's economic recovery of the 1990's. Beginning in the 2000 census, we therefore assumed that 35%³⁹ of all emigrants were unaccounted for because they resided in China or Great Britain (direct immigrant data are not available for these two countries).

For each of the ethnic groups we calculated the number of immigrants using the equation (*Net Population Increase – Natural Increase – Emigrants = Immigrants*). Employing this method, we obtained the results listed in Table 6.

Overall, the data in Table 6 confirm our earlier analysis. In 2010, for example, the number of Chinese immigrants is fourteen times larger than the figure for Malay newcomers.

Conclusion

As our calculations show,⁴⁰ the PAP's migration policy appears to massively discriminate against the Malay minority in favor of Chinese newcomers by barring entry of the former and encouraging large scale Chinese immigration (and even boost the numbers for ethnic Indians and others).

Proponents on the government's position may argue that Chinese immigrants are better skilled and therefore more sought-after. Others, however, would maintain that this is yet another form of social engineering to maintain the PAP's grip on power and Chinese racial hegemony.⁴¹ In rebuttal, the ruling regime would likely assert that the Malay population should remain low to avoid race riots.

Noting the controversial nature of both the governments policy and populace's response, we find it interesting that the government doesn't want these data publicized.

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³⁹Yeoh and Lin 2012.

⁴⁰As noted above, in the writing of this paper, the authors were handicapped by the lack of available official data. Many assumptions were made.

⁴¹Tremewan 1996.

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Table 1. Emigration number by year into Australia, Canada and the United States

	Chinese				Malay				Indian				Other				Total			
	Australia	Canada	US	Total	Australia	Canada	US	Total	Australia	Canada	US	Total	Australia	Canada	US	Total	Australia	Canada	US	Total
1960	86	24	14	125	12	3	2	17	16	4	3	23	6	2	1	9	120	34	20	174
1970	619	227	197	1,044	86	32	27	145	112	41	36	188	43	16	14	72	860	316	274	1,449
1980	533	266	724	1,523	74	37	101	211	96	48	131	275	37	18	50	106	740	369	1,006	2,115
1990	1,539	806	1,673	4,018	214	112	232	558	278	146	302	725	107	56	116	279	2,137	1,120	2,324	5,581
2000	1,001	1,032	2,133	4,166	139	143	296	579	181	186	385	752	69	72	148	289	1,390	1,433	2,963	5,786
2010	1,881	790	2,686	5,358	261	110	373	744	340	143	485	967	131	55	187	372	2,613	1,097	3,731	7,441

Source: Data drawn from US Department of State; Citizenship and Immigration Canada; Employment and Immigration Canada; Department of Manpower and Immigration, Canada Immigration Division; Department of Immigration and Border Protection, Australian Government; and Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Note: Emigrants to the US consisted of new entries with F-1/2 and H-4/3/2b/1b visas, while Australian and Canadian arrivals were determined by adding permanent residents from each country with a predicted number of temporary workers and accompanied families (using the same ratio of permanent residents to temporary workers as was found in the US). Breakdown by ethnicity was estimated via "Overseas Singaporeans!!" Facebook sampling / AsiaBarometer analysis method.

Table 2. Births, Deaths, and Natural Increase in Singapore by Ethnicity

	Chinese			Malay			Indian			Other		
	Births	Deaths	Natural Increase	Births	Deaths	Natural Increase	Births	Deaths	Natural Increase	Births	Deaths	Natural Increase
1960	44,964	7,469	37,495	10,577	1,757	8,820	5,084	769	4,315	1,150	212	938
1970	34,410	8,281	26,129	7,316	1,437	5,879	3,056	758	2,298	1,150	238	912
1980	30,142	9,750	20,392	6,654	1,505	5,149	2,883	1,010	1,873	1,537	237	1,300
1990	35,296	10,666	24,630	9,943	1,845	8,098	3,975	1,057	2,918	1,928	323	1,605
2000	31,967	11,901	20,066	8,309	2,227	6,082	3,850	1,217	2,633	2,871	348	2,523
2010	23,303	13,349	9,954	5,711	2,535	3,176	4,285	1,282	3,003	4,668	444	4,224

Source: SingStat (Department of Statistics Singapore)

Note: Data were calculated on the year stated from January to December.

Table 3. Population of Singapore by Ethnic Group

	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Other
1957	1,090,596	197,059	129,510	28,764
1970	1,579,866	311,379	145,169	38,093
1980	1,856,237	351,508	154,632	51,568
1990	2,127,900	384,300	194,000	29,600
2000	2,475,743	454,392	240,103	40,584
2010	2,793,980	503,868	348,119	125,754

Source: Census of Population (Department of Statistics Singapore)

Table 4. Foreign-born in Singapore by Ethnic Group

	Chinese		Malay		Indian		Other	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
1957	349,372	67.7	72,671	14.1	79,502	15.4	14,206	2.8
1970	369,447	69.6	79,377	15.0	64,043	12.1	18,016	3.4
1980	366,172	69.5	69,065	13.1	57,967	11.0	33,948	6.4
1990	319,610	77.5	38,239	9.3	48,229	11.7	6,397	1.6
2000	436,756	77.5	35,689	6.3	74,270	13.2	16,714	3.0
2010	587,285	68.3	37,102	4.3	147,200	17.1	88,200	10.3

Source: Census of Population (Department of Statistics Singapore)

Table 5. Calculating Net Migration by Ethnicity in 2009

	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Other
2010 Total Population	2,782,150	501,950	345,800	122,850
2009 Total Population	-2,746,050	-497,550	-333,450	-111,150
2009 Natural Increase	-11,982	-3,564	-2,837	-4,086
2009 Net Migration	24,118	836	9,513	7,614

Source: SingStat (Department of Statistics Singapore)

Table 6. Admission Rates into Singapore by Ethnicity

	Chinese				Malay				Indian				Other			
	Population	(-) Natural Increase	(+) Emigrants	Immigrants	Population	(-) Natural Increase	(+) Emigrants	Immigrants	Population	(-) Natural Increase	(+) Emigrants	Immigrants	Population	(-) Natural Increase	(+) Emigrants	Immigrants
1990	2,127,900	-	-	-	384,300	-	-	-	194,000	-	-	-	29,600	-	-	-
2000	2,475,743	20,066	6,249	20,967	454,392	6,082	869	1,796	240,103	2,533	1,128	3,205	40,584	2,523	434	(991)
2010	2,793,980	9,954	8,037	29,907	503,868	3,176	1,116	2,888	348,119	3,003	1,451	9,249	125,754	4,224	558	4,851

Source: SingStat (Department of Statistics Singapore) and Table 1.

Note: Emigrants were calculated using data in Table 1 multiplied by 150% (to compensate for worldwide undercount).

FIGURE 1. NET IMMIGRATION BY ETHNICITY IN 2009 (SINGSTAT)

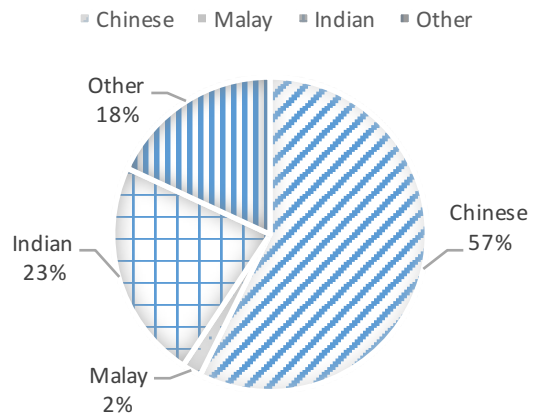


FIGURE 2. NET IMMIGRATION BY ETHNICITY IN 1947 - 1957 (SINGSTAT)

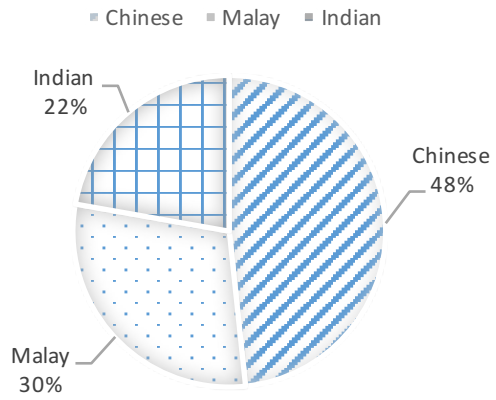


FIGURE 3. NET IMMIGRATION BY ETHNICITY IN 1957 - 1970 (SINGSTAT)

