

Transient Mobility and Middle Class Identity:
Media and Migration in Australia
and Singapore

Catherine Gomes

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palgrave
macmillan

Catherine Gomes
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia

ISBN 978-981-10-1638-7 ISBN 978-981-10-1639-4 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-1639-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016946996

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. Singapore

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #22-06/08 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

PREFACE

My interest in transient migrants in Australia and Singapore stems from my own history and experience as a Singapore-born transient migrant in Australia and from my observations teaching and talking to the hundreds of international students I encountered in my classes. My first experience as a transient migrant took place in my late teens when I became an international student. After finishing my undergraduate degree in Perth, I returned to Singapore to work and to keep my mother company following the death of my father. My plan at the time was to live in Singapore for a year before becoming transient again as an international student; the study bug had bitten me and I was determined to do a PhD somewhere! However, due to family reasons I stayed in Singapore for a few more years, working in the civil service and completing a Masters degree at a local university instead.

Still, the aspiration for transience had arrived and I finally managed to save enough money to embark on a doctoral program in Melbourne. After completing my PhD, I was fortunate enough to be offered a yearly but renewable lectureship at another university where I became another type of transient subject—the temporary skilled worker. This aura of temporariness of place became permanent once I received my Australian permanent residence and became a continuing member of faculty. While I may be able to interchangeably call both Australia and Singapore home, I am still confronted by my own ideas of identity. I am unable to identify completely with Singaporeans yet have difficulty finding commonality with Asians who were born in or grew up in Australia.

Not being able to identify with Singapore society and the Asian-Australian community may simply be a result of differing experiences. The longer I am away from Singapore, the more I am alienated from the everyday experiences of my Singaporean counterparts. Although I voraciously read Singaporean news on a daily basis, this will never replace directly experiencing the everyday issues which confront Singaporeans. Likewise, while I am sympathetic to Asian-Australian concerns, I will always be a 'new' migrant since I first came to Australia as an international student entering university. Hence issues of schoolyard racism and institutional racism which my Asian-Australian friends experienced simply because they are Asian were not experiences I could easily identify with.

Complicating my connection to ethnic Chinese-dominated Singaporean society is the fact that I am Eurasian and thus have a hybridised ethnic cultural identity. Growing up in Singapore I longed to be Chinese, since I believed that would allow me to feel a sense of belonging amongst my peers. Because I clearly do not look Chinese or, for that matter, Malay or Indian, the other two more obvious official ethnic groups in Singapore, I am often mistaken for a non-Singaporean. Singapore, as I point out in this book, is a magnet for foreigners working in skilled and unskilled occupations and, increasingly, a hub for international education. There have been a number of times when I have been mistaken for either a Filipina or an Indonesian foreign domestic worker because of the way I look.

Needless to say, issues of identity have always intrigued me. From talking to the international students in my classes it became apparent that identity is not always a clear-cut notion for them either, as they attempt to make sense of who they are and who they might be becoming due to their mobility. Mobility, in other words, creates spaces where identities become flexible and adaptable. With this in mind, I embarked on a book that is aimed at discovering the evolving cultural and social identities of transient migrants and their related networks in a comparative study of Australia and Singapore. The choice of Australia and Singapore as my case studies goes beyond being rooted in my continuing personal and professional relationship with both countries and is, I hope, the start of a wider attempt to unpack the developing complexities individuals encounter as transnational and temporary mobility becomes a way of life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research documented in this book would not have been possible without an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Award (DECRA) fellowship and funding from RMIT University. I am indebted to Basil Alzougool, Amber Lim, George Moratidis and Joshua Wong, who earnestly helped at various times with both my fieldwork and the large amounts of data I was juggling. I am also thankful to Shanton Chang, who has become a dearly valued friend as well as collaborator, and to Jonathan Tan, co-author of the chapter ‘Christianity: A Culture of Transnational Mobility’ for bringing his extensive knowledge of Christianity to the fore. So much thanks and appreciation go out to my editors at Palgrave Macmillan and Springer, Sara Crowley Vigneau, Connie Li and Nina Li, for having faith in this project and for providing incredible support in bringing my words to print. I would like to thank the production team at Springer Nature, Palgrave Macmillan and SPi Global for proofreading and copyediting my work. Much thanks goes out to Kirpal Singh and the Wee Kim Wee Centre at the Singapore Management University for hosting me as a visiting research fellow while I conducted fieldwork in Singapore. I am also grateful to David Murcott, Frank Smith, Jonathan O’Donnell, Tania Lewis, Jo Tacchi, Larissa Hjorth, Chris Hudson, Supriya Singh, Sharon Smith, Mary Ann Seow, Cathy Greenfield, Sharyn Taylor, Marsha Berry, Roland Burke, Nikita Vanderbyl, Nadia Rhook, Tracey Banivanua-Mar, Susan Leong, Peidong Yang, Ly Tran, Michiel Baas, Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, Fran Martin, Betty Leask, Fazal Rizvi and Gracia Liu-Farrer and Dora Constantinidis for all the assistance, support, mentoring and friendship I received before and during my fellowship resulting in this book.

Thank you ISANA for allowing me to present my research in its various forms and for the thought-provoking comments and encouragement.

Heartfelt thanks are also due to Carol Newlands for taking care of our little Sally whenever I had to travel interstate and overseas in connection to this project, and I am eternally grateful to Andrew Newlands for his love and unwavering patience during the entire period I took to research, analyse and document my findings. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank all respondents who took the time to talk to me, fill in surveys and document their everyday lives. Without you, this book would never have become a reality.

Some of the ideas presented in this book first saw the light of day in previous publications including ‘Negotiating everyday life in Australia: unpacking the parallel society inhabited by Asian international students through their social networks and entertainment media use’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, no. 18, pp. 515–536; ‘Where to Next after Graduation?: International Students in Australia and their Aspirations for Transnational Mobility’, *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 41-58 and ‘Christianity as a Culture of Mobility: A Case Study of Asian Transient Migrants in Singapore’, *KritikaKultura: A Refereed Electronic Journal of Literary/Cultural and Language Studies*, first published 21 September 2015, <http://journals.ateneo.edu/ojs/index.php/kk/article/view/KK2015.02512/2277>.

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