The formation of the international immigrant society in modern Singapore

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Abstract:
In exploring the formation of the international immigrant society in modern Singapore, we delve into the intertwining factors that have shaped its unique social structure. We begin by examining the historical context, tracing the waves of migration that have influenced the nation’s identity. We then consider the effects of Singapore’s immigration policies and how they’ve opened avenues for diversity. Moving forward, we dissect the influences of multiculturalism, which are visibly ingrained in everyday life in Singapore. Lastly, we examine the economic drivers that make the city-state attractive to immigrants. Throughout our analysis, we highlight the key roles of the government’s promotion of multiculturalism and its strategy to attract talent, affirming these as major contributors to the richness of Singaporean society...

Keywords: Modern Singapore, International Immigrant Society, Immigration Policies, Multiculturalism, Economic Factors

1 Introduction

1.1 A brief overview of Singapore as an international immigrant society
In setting the stage for our discussion, grasping an overview of Singapore’s status as an international immigrant society is crucial. Known for its diverse blend of cultures, languages, and religions, Singapore is a testament to the rich tapestry woven by waves of immigrants over the years. From its inception as a British trading post to its present-day status as a global hub, Singapore has continuously drawn in people from all corners of the world, transforming it into a melting pot of varied heritages and traditions. We aim to delve into the formation of this intricate social structure and unravel its underlying factors.

1.2 Purpose of the study
We aim to shed light on the intricate interplay of historical, political, cultural, and economic factors that have led to the formation of Singapore’s international immigrant society. In doing so, we intend to provide an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted nature of Singapore’s societal structure. By examining this microcosm of global migration, we hope to generate insights that apply to broader discussions around immigration, diversity, and multiculturalism.

2 Historical Background of Immigration in Singapore

2.1 Overview of migration waves
Tracing Singapore’s history, we note several key migration waves that shaped its social fabric. In the early 19th century, when Sir Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a British trading post, an influx of Chinese, Malay, and Indian migrants arrived[1]. This mix laid the foundation for a multi-ethnic society. During the 20th century, turbulent world events like World War II and the post-war reconstruction saw further diverse groups seeking refuge and work in Singapore[2]. More recently, the country’s rapid economic growth from the 1970s attracted skilled professionals worldwide, with a foreign workforce constituting nearly 30% of the total population by 2019. Each wave added a layer to modern Singapore’s multicultural quilt [3].

2.2 Impact on Singapore’s Identity
Through the lens of history, we can appreciate how immigration waves have impacted Singapore’s identity. The multicultural essence of Singapore is reflected in its four official languages, English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. In 1964, to curb racial tensions, the government introduced the Ethnic Integration Policy for public housing, promoting a balanced ethnic mix[4]. The annual observance of Racial Harmony Day, first celebrated in 1997, further underscores Singapore’s commitment to peace among diverse races. The fact that, as of 2020, foreigners accounted for about 40% of Singapore’s total population speaks volumes about its multicultural ethos[5]. Singapore embodies a harmonious blend of cultures, from cuisines to traditions, making it a truly global city.
3 Singapore’s Immigration Policies

3.1 Examination of key policies

We delve into Singapore’s key immigration policies, which play a significant role in its multicultural identity. Following its independence, Singapore adopted policies to encourage foreign talent and investment.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Issue Date</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Talent</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>National Population Plan</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>The government unveiled a plan to increase the population of Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents to between 4 million and 5.5 million. This was done by encouraging higher birth rates and maintaining a liberal immigration policy to attract skilled immigrants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign Manpower Policy</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>This policy aimed to control foreign workers’ quality, not quantity. It included higher levies and stricter educational requirements for foreign workers.</td>
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<td>Singapore Talent Recruitment</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Singapore aggressively attracted foreign talent through various schemes like the Professional Visit Pass, EntrePass for entrepreneurs, and various schemes for artists, musicians, and other talents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population White Paper</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>The government projected that Singapore would have a population of 6.9 million by 2030, with immigrants continuing to play a crucial role in the population structure and economy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair Consideration Framework</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Introduced to ensure fair hiring practices, this policy requires companies to consider Singaporeans fairly for job opportunities before hiring Employment Pass (EP) holders.</td>
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The Employment Pass Scheme, initiated in the 1960s, is a notable example of facilitating the employment of foreign professionals. The Global Investor Programme launched in the 1990s targeted affluent investors[6]. The introduction of the Fair Consideration Framework in 2014 marked a significant policy shift, ensuring fair employment practices while maintaining Singapore’s appeal to foreign professionals. The EntrePass, designed to attract foreign entrepreneurs, has further diversified the immigrant composition[7]. Notably, the number of Employment Pass holders has risen over the years, reaching 200,000 in 2020. The strategic application of such policies has helped mold Singapore’s unique multicultural society and contributed to its economic success.

3.2 Influence on diversity and demographic structure

The influence of these policies on Singapore’s diversity and demographic structure has been profound. Attracting a range of skilled professionals, entrepreneurs, and investors from around the globe, these policies have significantly increased the foreign workforce, which stood at about 1.3 million in 2020[8]. Singapore’s demographic landscape has evolved to include diverse nationalities, each contributing unique cultural traditions. Moreover, these policies have also played a role in age and gender diversity, with a balanced proportion of both genders and a relatively young immigrant population[9]. Public housing policies like the Ethnic Integration Policy, which ensures a balanced ethnic mix in public housing estates, have also had an important impact on social integration. As a result, Singapore’s demographic structure has evolved into a harmonious blend of cultures, enriching its international immigrant society.

4 Influence of Multiculturalism

4.1 Description of multiculturalism in Singapore’s society

In discussing the multiculturalism prevalent in Singapore’s society, we must recognize its unique composition. This cosmopolitan city-state proudly hosts an array of ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultural practices. The ethnic mosaic comprises mainly Chinese (74.4%), Malays (13.5%), Indians (9.0%), and other ethnic groups (3.2%) as per the 2020 census[10].
Multilingualism is a key feature, with English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil being official languages. This linguistic diversity is echoed in everyday interactions and the education system, where children are taught in English while also learning their respective mother tongues. Religious diversity is another essential aspect. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, and Hinduism, among others, coexist peacefully[11]. You can find Buddhist temples, Christian churches, Islamic mosques, and Hindu temples often in close proximity, symbolizing religious tolerance. Cultural diversity is celebrated, with national holidays for ethnic festivals like Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Hari Raya, and Christmas. It’s also reflected in the culinary scene, where Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Western influences merge to offer a compelling gastronomic experience[12]. Finally, we acknowledge the government’s role in maintaining ethnic harmony. The Ethnic Integration Policy in public housing, home to over 80% of Singaporeans, ensures balanced ethnic representation, promoting social cohesion.

Singapore’s multiculturalism is a dynamic, harmonious, and integral to its societal fabric. It vividly illustrates the international immigrant society’s impact, creating a unique ‘Rojak’ culture – a local salad metaphor symbolizing Singapore’s diversity.

4.2 Government promotion and acceptance

Singapore’s government plays an active role in promoting multiculturalism and fostering acceptance among its diverse population. This commitment is evident in various national policies and initiatives.

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<tr>
<td>National Integration Council</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>This body formulates strategies to integrate newcomers while strengthening the national identity. It works on fostering interaction between local residents and immigrants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racial Harmony Day</td>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrated annually, it marks the importance of preserving harmony across different ethnic groups and promotes mutual understanding and respect.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bilingual Education Policy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Since its independence, Singapore has adopted a bilingual education policy, ensuring students learn English and one of the three mother tongues (Chinese, Malay, or Tamil). This policy acknowledges cultural roots and promotes interethnic understanding.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP)</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Implemented in this policy ensures a balanced ethnic mix in public housing, promoting social cohesion and racial harmony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Values (1991)</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Five shared values were introduced to foster national identity and cohesion: Nation before community and society above self; Family as the basic unit of society; Regard for every person; Community support and respect for the individual; Consensus instead of contention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintenance of the Religious Harmony Act</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>This law prevents and counteracts religiously charged actions that may upset religious harmony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Integration Fund</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>This fund supports ground-up initiatives promoting social cohesion and integration.</td>
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For instance, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, enacted in 1990, prohibits religious leaders from causing ill will between different religious groups, ensuring a harmonious religious landscape. Singapore’s education system, too, promotes multicultural understanding. The curriculum includes Moral Education and Social Studies,
teaching students about different cultures and values. Moreover, the bilingual policy requires students to learn English (the administrative language) and their mother tongue (Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil), maintaining linguistic diversity. The Ethnic Integration Policy, implemented in 1989, ensures a balanced ethnic mix in public housing estates. This promotes social integration among different races and fosters a sense of shared identity. As of 2020, about 80% of Singapore’s residents live in these public housing units. Cultural celebrations are another avenue for promoting diversity[13]. Nationwide celebrations for Chinese New Year, Hari Raya, Deepavali, and Christmas encourage cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Media also plays its part. Local television channels broadcast in the four official languages, and newspapers like ‘Berita Harian,’ ‘Lianhe Zaobao,’ and ‘Tamil Murasu’ cater to the different linguistic communities. Furthermore, the government actively encourages foreign talent and investment through its immigration policies, contributing to the growth of an international immigrant society[14]. These initiatives reflect the government’s proactive approach to fostering multicultural harmony and acceptance, underpinning the dynamic, inclusive society that Singapore is today.

5 Economic Drivers of Immigration

5.1 Analysis of economic factors attracting immigrants

In analyzing the economic factors attracting immigrants to Singapore, we must first recognize its robust economy. As one of the Four Asian Tigers, Singapore has experienced rapid economic development, boasting a GDP of SGD 491.06 billion in 2022. First, Singapore’s strategic location at the crossroads of major shipping routes and its world-class infrastructure has made it an international trade and finance hub. The World Bank has repeatedly ranked Singapore as the easiest place to do business, attracting foreign investors and entrepreneurs. Next, the government’s pro-business policies, such as low corporate tax rates (17% as of 2022), strong protection for intellectual property rights, and lack of corruption, make Singapore attractive for multinational corporations. Many have established their regional headquarters here, creating job opportunities and attracting talent from around the globe. In addition, Singapore’s high living standards, exemplified by its excellent public services, education, healthcare, and safety, appeal to skilled immigrants seeking a high quality of life. According to Mercer’s 2022 Quality of Living Ranking, Singapore was the top Asian city. Moreover, the demand for labor in specific sectors such as construction, domestic work, and services has led to a substantial inflow of less-skilled migrants, constituting a significant part of the immigrant population. Finally, the country’s stable political environment provides certainty for both individuals and businesses, contributing to its attractiveness as an immigration destination.

Combining these economic factors has made Singapore a magnet for immigrants, shaping its identity as an international immigrant society.

5.2 Role in shaping Singapore’s society

As discussed previously, the economic factors attracting immigrants to Singapore have played a significant role in shaping society. They have led to a heterogeneous mix of immigrants, each contributing uniquely to the cultural, economic, and social landscape. Economically, immigrants have been a driving force in Singapore’s growth. Skilled professionals contribute to knowledge-based industries like finance, technology, and healthcare, bolstering Singapore’s status as a global city. For example, as of 2021, 38% of employees in the financial and insurance sector were foreigners. Simultaneously, less-skilled migrant workers support sectors like construction and domestic services, helping to build Singapore’s physical and social infrastructure. Culturally, immigrants have contributed to Singapore’s multicultural identity. They bring diverse traditions, food, languages, and practices, enriching Singapore’s cultural fabric. Celebrations like the Pongal Festival from South India or the Lantern Festival from China have become part of Singapore’s cultural calendar. Socially, a diverse immigrant population has helped foster a cosmopolitan society. It has led to a society where multiculturalism is a norm, underpinned by policies promoting racial harmony and mutual respect among different communities. Yet, it poses challenges, such as social integration and potential tension between locals and immigrants. In 2020, the Singapore government launched the Singapore Together movement to foster a stronger, more inclusive society where every member contributes to and benefits from the nation’s progress.

The economic factors attracting immigrants have shaped Singapore’s society in profound ways, creating a vibrant, multicultural, and global city. The continued management of this diversity is essential for Singapore’s future growth and cohesion.

6 Government Strategies

6.1 Policies for attracting talent

Singapore has implemented a series of strategic policies to attract talent from all over the world. A central one is the Employment Pass scheme, a work visa for foreign
professionals, managers, executives, and technicians (PMETs). As of 2021, over 22% of the Singaporean workforce comprises foreign PMETs.

The government also offers grants and incentives to encourage foreign entrepreneurs and startups to establish businesses in Singapore. For instance, the Startup SG Founder scheme provides mentorship and startup capital grant of up to SGD 50,000 to first-time entrepreneurs. Further, Singapore’s immigration policies are designed to attract and retain global talent. The Global Investor Program (GIP), for instance, offers Permanent Resident (PR) status to entrepreneurs and investors who invest a minimum of SGD 2.5 million in a new business or expansion of an existing business. Moreover, Singapore is home to world-class universities like the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). They attract international students through scholarships and research opportunities, with around 30% of their student population being international as of 2022. Moreover, the SkillsFuture program, launched in 2015, is a nationwide initiative to support lifelong learning and skills mastery among Singaporeans. Although primarily for citizens, the program also benefits foreigners, supporting the development of a highly-skilled and adaptable workforce. Finally, Singapore has an advantageous tax regime with low personal and corporate taxes, which are significant pull factors for foreign professionals and businesses. These policies showcase Singapore’s proactive approach to attracting international talent, reinforcing its reputation as a global city and enhancing its competitiveness in the international landscape.

6.2 Impact on societal diversity

The active solicitation of international talent has undeniably enriched Singapore’s societal diversity. Singapore’s cosmopolitan nature is manifested in its ethnic mix, with the population comprising Chinese, Malays, Indians, and many other ethnic groups. In fact, as of the 2020 census, almost 40% of Singapore’s resident population was foreign-born. This rich tapestry of cultures is evident in various aspects of Singaporean life, such as food, festivals, and language. For example, the variety of food available in Singapore is a testament to its multiculturalism, with local food heavily influenced by Chinese, Indian, Malay, and Western cuisines. Likewise, diverse cultural festivals like Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali, and Christmas are celebrated with equal enthusiasm. It demonstrates the city-state’s commitment to ensuring every community feels at home, promoting social cohesion and harmony.

Furthermore, the multilingualism policy, with four official languages - English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil - reinforces the multicultural identity of Singapore. Such diversity contributes to a vibrant and inclusive society and makes Singapore an attractive place for immigrants from various ethnic backgrounds, thereby perpetuating the cycle of diversity. Thus, Singapore’s policies in attracting international talent have shaped its economy and societal fabric, contributing to a multicultural, multilingual, and inclusive society.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Recap of key findings

In our journey through the history and evolution of modern Singapore, we’ve observed that the formation of this international immigrant society is a multifaceted process. The migration waves starting from the 19th century have left a strong imprint, with ethnic Chinese, Malays, Indians, and various other ethnic groups cohabiting and contributing to a rich cultural tapestry. The Singaporean government’s forward-thinking policies, from the Employment Pass Scheme to the Global Investor Programme, have played pivotal roles in attracting diverse talent and investments. As a result, as of 2020, non-residents constituted about 29% of the population. The economic prosperity of Singapore, offering a high standard of living and extensive career opportunities, has been a strong magnet for global talent, with around 1.3 million foreign workers making up the workforce in 2020. This combination of cultural, political, and economic factors has crafted Singapore’s vibrant, multicultural society today.

7.2 Final thoughts on the formation of Singapore’s international immigrant society

Reflecting on the formation of Singapore’s international immigrant society, we witness the city-state’s unique journey. Singapore’s history, marked by diverse migration waves, inclusive policies, and strong economic growth, has transformed it into a vibrant multicultural hub. From its four official languages and diverse religious practices to its ‘Rojak’ culture, the societal landscape of Singapore is a testament to its rich immigrant heritage. Government policies promoting racial harmony and ensuring social cohesion, along with initiatives to attract global talent, have further reinforced this cultural mix. As of 2020, Singapore was home to over 180,000 Employment Pass holders, showcasing its attractiveness to international professionals. Ultimately, the blend of cultures, ethnicities, and experiences has shaped Singapore into a dynamic, multicultural society - an epitome of a
successful international immigrant society. This journey, we believe, offers valuable insights for other multicultural cities navigating their path in our increasingly globalized world.

References