
“Don’t hate me because I’m a foreigner”: Historical and narrative analyses of Western expatriates’ experiences in Singapore

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Abstract: I examine the impact of foreign talent policy relative to the experiences of Western expatriates in Singapore. I frame the debate by examining the rise and fall in public opinion about Singapore’s foreign talent policy, the resulting ‘negotiated power struggle’ that has arisen between the Singapore government and its citizens stemming from the influx of skilled foreigners since 2005, and the government’s strategic response to the 7,000 multinational corporations (MNCs) that operate in Singapore relative to their global staffing strategies for the next decade, and beyond. Findings illustrate that, despite assumptions to the contrary and while also retaining strong allegiances to their countries of origin, many Western expatriates in Singapore: 1) live ‘locally’ alongside their Singaporean neighbours; 2) appreciate and welcome the functioning of the city state; 3) make deliberate choices to be in, and integrate within, Singapore to contribute to the economic development of the city.

Keywords: expatriates; localisation; Singapore; Western expatriates; foreign talent.

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1 Introduction

For some time, globalisation has been posited as the hallmark of the Asian century, and along with it the ‘global war for talent’ has arisen as its biggest challenge. While it is true

that many Asia-based countries such as China, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore depend on business organisations in the form of multinational corporations (MNCs) to sustain their economic growth through the use of skilled foreign labour (Bashin and Cheng, 2002; Chanda and Sreenivasan, 2006; Huei, 2010; Koh, 2003; Pang, 2006; Skilling, 2009; Xueying, 2013), the fallout from the resulting immigration policies advocating a reliance on skilled foreign talent can be costly socially and economically (see Abella, 2006; Koh, 2003; Li and Teixeira, 2007; Pang, 2006; Soeriaatmadja, 2013). This includes threats to locals' job security arising from increased competition for jobs, resentment at the perceived shift in the government's focus to protecting economic growth at the expense of nurturing its citizens, discriminatory employment practices, increasing emigration, election losses, and even xenophobia. This is especially the case for Singapore where some commentators suggest the government's efforts to develop a local workforce through education and meritocracy has failed, at times, to keep pace with its demand for a knowledge-based workforce (Legget, 2013; Ng, 2011). While recent articles about global talent management, staffing and strategies in Singapore have explored global talent attraction (Bashin and Cheng, 2002; Beaverstock, 2002; Jieyi and Foo, 2013), manpower planning (Legget, 2007; Ng, 2011; Tan, 2005; Wong, 1997) and talent flows (Koh, 2003; Pang, 2006), and other studies have explored Singaporeans' aspirations and success factors related to undertaking international work experiences abroad (Chew and Zhu, 2002; Goby et al., 2002; Wan et al., 2003), no study has yet examined the impact of foreign talent policy in the context of Western expatriates experiences of living and working in Singapore.

In this article, I examine the impact of foreign talent policy relative to the experiences of Western expatriates in Singapore by adapting from Ansoff's modernist approach to strategic management as a guiding framework (Ansoff, 1965, 1979; Moussetis, 2011). First, through historical analysis of a longitudinal collection of newspaper articles in *The Straits Times* and other media over the period 2005–2014, I frame the debate by examining the rise and fall in public opinion about Singapore's foreign talent policy, the resulting 'negotiated power struggle' that has arisen between the Singapore government and its citizens stemming from the influx of skilled foreigners since 2005, and the government's strategic response to the 7,000 MNCs that operate in Singapore relative to their global staffing strategies for the next decade, and beyond. Then, using a combination of literature review and narrative analysis to re-define contemporary expatriation, I explore the lived experience of Western expatriates living and working in Singapore over the period 2002–2014.

The research problems I address are to examine:

- 1 'the public conversation' in Singapore as a driver of change and innovation in relation to its foreign talent policy
- 2 how the debate, as well as changes arising from it, can impact on global staffing decisions for MNCs operating in Singapore.

The study contributes in a number of ways to our understanding of MNCs strategic use and implementation of global staff in general, and more specifically how the conflict and uncertainty surrounding Singapore's national foreign talent policy debate can impact on global staffing strategies for MNCs that operate in the country. First, international companies operating in Singapore, as well as those considering sending expatriate staff to Singapore, will benefit from an understanding of this ongoing public debate to inform

their future global staffing initiatives, policies and strategies. Second, I contribute a unique perspective to extant literature on MNCs’ global staffing strategies (e.g., Collings et al., 2009; Erdener and Torbiorn, 1999; Gong, 2003; Harvey et al., 2001; McPhail et al., 2012), particularly in Asia (Belderbos and Heijltjes, 2005; Kuhlmann and Hutchings, 2010), by adopting the unusual methodological approach of historical analysis of newspaper articles as a means of accessing the ‘the public conversation’ in Singapore. Historical analysis has been a proven method of broader content analysis approaches in other disciplines (e.g., Achugar, 2004; Barranco and Wisler, 1999; Bernhagen and Trani, 2012; Day et al., 2004; Janes, 1958; Lima and Siegel, 1999; Menashe and Siegel, 1998; Scharrer, 2002; Welch et al., 2013; Woodward, 1934). It is also seen as a valid method for making specific inferences about what has happened in the past through the use of records and accounts (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Richardson, 2007), and in this case through the systematic and direct classification of newspaper articles and other documents such as government reports, editorials (online and print), speeches, letters to the editor, and peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles (see Lima and Siegel, 1999 for a similar approach).

A third contribution is to illustrate through a combination of literature review and narrative analysis – in this case as applied to in-depth interviews of four Western expatriates living and working in Singapore – that the profile of foreign talent in Singapore is changing; whereas traditional Western expatriates have been viewed as affluent, 50-something, jet-setting colonialists breezing through Singapore on three-year assignments (e.g., Hipsher, 2008), today’s contemporary expatriate is more likely to be in their 30s or 40s, either single or with a young and growing family, of modest means, and intending to live in Singapore indefinitely. This profile certainly fits at least three of the case studies narrated in this article. Humanising expatriates in this way (see Favell et al., 2006a) has the added advantage of countering some of the false assumptions made about their motives for relocating to Singapore and the modest lifestyles they expect to engage in. Narrative analysis helps to recount the lived experiences of Western expatriates in Singapore through their stories, which further humanises those engaged in global mobility (Favell et al., 2006b; Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Narrative analysis is thus seen as a powerful way to convey social change by giving participants’ a voice through which to retell and relive their experiences (Tsang, 2013). A key feature of narrative analysis in this study is to, again, focus on the unusual, i.e., disconfirming case-based accounts of Western expatriate families living in Singapore that deviates from accepted social norms, i.e., from traditional expatriates of the past (see Tait et al., 2014; McNulty, 2015 for other accounts).

The article begins with a brief background to the foreign talent ‘problem’ in Singapore, followed by a theoretical positioning of the arguments I present. Next, I present an historical analysis of Singapore’s foreign talent policy using a longitudinal collection of newspaper articles in *The Straits Times* and other media over the period 2005–2014, including a discussion of the 2013 ‘Fair Consideration Framework’. This is followed by a narrative analysis of Western expatriates’ lived experiences in Singapore during the period 2002 to 2014 using four case-based in-depth interviews. Here I discuss why Western expatriates live and work in Singapore including the challenges they face. The article concludes with a discussion of the overall findings of the study, its key contributions to extant literature about global staffing more generally, research limitations of the study, and future research directions.

2 Background

The rapid growth in Singapore's immigrant population of both resident and non-resident 'citizens' has, while solving the problem of skills shortages, also created a Singaporean workforce dilemma and brought considerable tension between 'locals' and 'foreigners' (Cooper, 2013). The penultimate driver for this conflict is undoubtedly the Singapore government's controversial 2013 Population White Paper, a 76-page document in which the PAP outlines its plan to grow the Singaporean population to 6.9 million by 2030, largely through immigration and skilled foreign labour (National Population and Talent Division, 2013). In an unprecedented display of early disapproval pre-release of the White Paper, a record two million Singaporeans voted with their feet and delivered to the PAP a stunning loss of six parliamentary seats at the 2011 general election, the smallest margin of votes since independence in 1965 that tripled the number of opposition members in parliament virtually overnight (Song, 2011). Press commentaries suggested the election outcome rested almost entirely on the contentious issue of immigration and foreign labour policy (Adam and Lim, 2011; Chang, 2014).

Living in the midst of this tension is, of course, a segment of the foreign talent population known as 'Western expatriates' – Caucasian non-citizens who live in Singapore with their families to work for MNCs, predominantly as employment pass (EP), permanent employment pass (PEP), EntrePass, or permanent resident (PR) holders. Little is known, however, about the experiences of Western expatriates in Singapore beyond assumptions that:

- a their relocation to Singapore is requested, controlled and managed by MNCs
- b their stay in Singapore is funded by generous relocation packages provided by MNCs
- c they intend to return to their home-country or re-assign elsewhere after a three- or four-year temporary stay.

Recent data show, however, that the historical perception of traditional Western expatriation to Singapore is becoming increasingly outdated (see, for example, ORC Worldwide, 2008; Tait et al., 2014), wherein more expatriates live in Singapore with fewer benefits than in the past (Expatsingapore.com, 2013; Sim, 2010a), often without the employment guarantees that come with working for an MNC (see Nash, 2014; Seow, 2014 for commentaries), and with a much longer-term intent to stay than previously thought (see Thang et al., 2002), particularly for those in bi-cultural marriages with Singaporean citizens.

The 'localisation' of expatriates is an increasing trend worldwide that is likely to impact upon the implementation and success of foreign talent policy in Singapore. Localisation is a practice that integrates an employee into the local market structure of the host location by paying him or her base salary according to the local market rate (Mercer, 2010; Yanadori, 2014). This 'host-based approach' results in ties to an expatriate's nominated home country being scaled back or severed altogether with he or she becoming a local (for the purposes of payroll) in the host-country. Stanley (2009) notes a steady rise in local-plus compensation in Asia as an alternative to the traditional home-country approach. McNulty et al. (2013), in their study of 31 organisation-assigned

expatriates (AEs) in Asia found that, consistent with other surveys (e.g., Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2011; ORC Worldwide, 2004, 2009), host-based compensation was the most common form of remuneration. Localisation has only recently been studied in extant literature and more empirical research is sorely needed, given the prevalence with which localisation is being undertaken in practice (e.g., AIR Inc, 2016; Herod, 2009; Stanley, 2009) and the significant implications arising from localisation for global talent management and global staffing practices in general (McNulty, 2015, 2016; McNulty et al., 2013; Yanadori, 2015). In this study I highlight that the localisation of Western expatriates changes the traditional ‘deal’ upon which Singapore’s foreign talent policy has been developed. In other words, Western expatriates localised in Singapore have different needs to traditional expatriates of the past (e.g., they require employment for their spouse, and affordable housing and schooling), thus the degree to which these needs can be met will likely impact on the potential willingness of Western expatriates to relocate to Singapore and, in turn, the relative success of the country’s foreign talent policy in a tightening local labour market.

3 Theoretical framework

Ansoff’s (1965, 1979) modernist approach to strategic management suggests that, in addition to a focus on micro-economic efficiencies of inputs and outputs, strategic decision making at the top (as it relates to the deployment of resources) is key to ensuring that the corporate vision is enacted and implemented at the bottom. To this end,

- 1 ‘Senior management’ are the most capable individuals to analyse current prospects and strategically plan for the future of an organisation. Using the ‘city as a company’ analogy [Jieyi and Foo, (2013), p.615], this fits well with the perception of Singaporeans’ “tendency to diminish personal responsibility by claiming reliance on the government to troubleshoot every potential issue”, with the government in this case taking on the role of ‘senior management’ to formulate and implement a strategic plan for Singapore’s continued growth and competitiveness.

Two further key elements of Ansoff’s theory are:

- 2 The need for organisational flexibility in updating the strategic plan when unexpected events occur (e.g., the unprecedented voting margin of 40% against the PAP in the 2011 general election, and the Little India riots in 2013).
- 3 Senior management’s unequivocal trust that ‘staff’ will accept and implement the plan without difficulty or resistance.

Again, both elements fit well within the *existing* Singapore economic and social landscape where, for example, *The Straits Times* is utilised (almost daily) by the government to communicate updates of its policies and planning to the broader population (e.g., Tham, 2014a), sure in the knowledge that its citizens appreciate, welcome, and support the initiatives and will be somewhat compliant in accepting them. I nonetheless use the term ‘existing’ landscape on the basis that the government has, since the late 1990’s, been quite vocal about the need for its citizens to “get away from the idea that it is only the people at the top who should be thinking, and the job of everyone else is

to do as told” (Goh, 1997). Ng (2011, p.267) suggests that these types of statements by Singaporean heads of government bring into sharp focus “the degree of sincerity on the part of the government in consulting the citizens in national policies, despite that, some citizens probably felt that the government has already made up its mind on foreign talents long before the people had a chance to air their views or concerns”.

As the events unfolding from the publication of the 2013 Population White Paper show, Singaporeans reaction to a seemingly already-decided policy was swift and decisive, during which *The Straits Times*, and in particular the *Forum* page, was utilised by citizens, residents, expatriates and the government to engage in (what essentially became) a necessary public debate. While Tan (2007, p.293) contends that public debates merely serve “as an unthreatening device for Singaporeans to “let off steam”, preventing a build-up of democratic pressure from exploding the tightly controlled regime”, I would argue that is precisely the point: public debate is better than no debate at all. Through historical and narrative analyses I intend to show the extent to which the ongoing public dialogue in *The Straits Times* between Singapore’s citizens, its government, and the Western expatriates that live within its borders has been effectively utilised to integrate ‘foreign talent’ into Singapore, by:

- a illustrating the government’s capabilities in strategically planning for Singapore’s future
- b demonstrating flexibility through updating Singapore’s strategic plan for skilled foreign talent in light of the unexpected events arising from the 2013 Population White Paper
- c building trust between Singapore’s government, its citizens and the foreign talent it welcomes to it shores that the focus on protecting economic growth is not intended to be at the expense of their well-being (i.e., the three elements of Ansoff’s theory), but to enhance it.

4 Method

Newspaper articles were sourced in print and online from *The Straits Times* and its affiliates, e.g., *The Sunday Times*, *My Paper*, *Singapolitics*. The search criteria limited articles to those published between 2005 and 2014, and only those articles focusing on aspects of Singapore’s foreign talent policy. I sourced and archived articles during this ten-year period while living and working in Singapore as a PR. The decade from which articles were sourced is representative of a time in Singapore’s history when tension about its foreign talent policy was particularly prevalent. Search terms in the headline and main body of articles included *foreign talent*, *expatriate*, *expat*, *foreign labour*, *foreign worker*, *foreigner*, *local*, *talent war*, *immigrant*, *migrant*, *abroad*, *population*, *talent pool*, *unfair* and *xenophobia*. The search resulted in over 500 articles of which 56 articles representing key aspects of the ‘public debate’ and tension arising from Singapore’s foreign talent policy was used for the historical analysis segment of the study. Articles were categorised:

- a by theme according to various aspects of Singapore’s foreign talent policy, e.g., PMETs, EP conditions, the Fair Consideration Framework, speeches by cabinet members, and so on
- b by type, e.g., Forum letter, article, editorial.

Case narratives were chosen from among a small study of Western expatriate dual-career families living in Singapore (n = 21; McNulty and Moeller, 2014), with face-to-face interviews being conducted in 2014. Each case is conceptually representative of a growing segment of Singapore’s foreign talent population that is localised of which recent reports indicate is approaching 50% or more (Air Inc, 2016).

5 Historical analysis: Singapore’s foreign talent policy (2005–2014)

“It has been 50 years since Singapore has been governed by the PAP under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew. Is Singapore better off now than it was 50 years ago? The answer from most baby boomers is that it is worse. Despite all the gains in materialism and wealth in the country, the majority of the aging population is feeling no better than five decades ago. Many are stressed out by the anxieties of the absence of a dignified retirement plan, the affordability of healthcare and the uncertain future for their children ... even more severe repercussions surfaced two decades later resulting in the present huge influx of more than one million “Foreign Talents”, mainly from China and India. Just when the local citizens thought that they have met the worst by working as janitors, food courts cleaners and other low paying jobs, they are now challenged by foreign talents from China and India who are prepared to work for less. This challenge now spread to include regular higher paying jobs like engineers, surveyors, healthcare workers, etc., which are traditionally held by local-born Singaporeans. Companies are openly advertising and recruiting the new foreign talents in preference to the locals. The reason being that companies need to stay competitive and be more profitable ... the entire working environment is working against the local-born Singaporeans. All of a sudden they have become strangers in their own land. The country they have sworn to protect has betrayed them.”

Cheong WL, ExpatSingapore.com¹

The quote above, admittedly controversial, suggests that some Singaporeans have become increasingly ‘fed up’ with the influx of overseas-born citizens and non-resident expatriates migrating to their shores over the past 50 years, largely because many are seen as ‘stealing’ jobs from locals (Cheam and Heng, 2013), getting a ‘free ride’ due to fewer family obligations while abroad (Cheong, 2009), and enjoying the comfort and safety of their country without contributing to its security through national service (Leong, 2012). Consider, for example, that despite the growing dissatisfaction of its citizens (Leong, 2009), Singapore has welcomed skilled foreigners since the early 1970’s as it strove to rapidly progress from an industrial, port city to a regional financial hub and globally renowned knowledge-based economy. The foreign labour force increased four-fold from 1970 to 1999, and doubled again from 686,000 in 2001 to nearly 1.6 million in 2011 (Yeoh and Lin, 2013). Fuelling the growth in skilled foreign talent, especially in the ASEAN region, have been the numerous policies, programs, and initiatives to incentivise foreigners to live, study, and work in Singapore, including the Manpower 21 Plan,

Singapore Talent Recruitment (STAR) committee, Contact Singapore, National Integration Council, Global Schoolhouse project, and International Manpower Program of the Economic Development Board (Wong, 1997).

The increase in skilled foreign workers was understandably viewed by the government as a necessity in order to sustain a regional (and some would argue, global) competitive advantage for a small island-state with no natural resources, while at the same time countering various local issues such as low birth rates and an ageing population (National Population and Talent Division, 2013; Osman-Gani, 2004; Xueying, 2011). As one commentator notes [Heng and Xueying, (2011), p.A42]:

“Population decline is not just about numbers, but also about the age structure of society. Singapore needs innovation to thrive. And innovation is more likely with a growing – and youthful – society.”

To its credit, these efforts have not been for nothing: evidence of the city-state’s rapid rise to legitimacy can be seen in the 7,000 MNCs that operate in Singapore (Contact Singapore, 2010; Kwok and Chan, 2011), its second-place ranking (out of 103) in the annual *Global Talent Competitiveness Index* (INSEAD et al., 2013), its 16th place ranking (out of 162) on the Global Peace Index (Vijayan and Kuan, 2013), and its top five placing as one of the world’s most expensive cities to live in for expatriates (Chia and Foo, 2009; Ho and Wong, 2011; Savills, 2014). As Jieyi and Foo (2013, p.610) suggest,

“The Singapore government believes it can anticipate the ‘ebb and flow’ of global trends, and situates the nation advantageously to ensure the sustainability of the impressive economic growth evident since the 1960s. Moreover, the incumbent ruling party in Singapore, the People’s Action Party (PAP), has marshalled Singapore to deal with this in what is described as the ‘metapragmatics of globalisation’.”

Other commentators further suggest [Skilling, (2009), pp.1–3]:

“In much of Asia, the intensity of the West’s debate on the role of government is hard to fathom. Big government hasn’t returned to Asia; it never left. Long before the current crisis, governments in fast-growing Asian economies such as Malaysia and Singapore routinely endeavoured to shape economic outcomes by developing and implementing industrial policy, managing exchange rates, deploying reserves, and using state-owned assets ... so for many who live or do business in this dynamic region, ideological angst about government’s role in the economy misses the point. In Asia, political and business leaders are far more apt to focus on what works ... As the global economy’s competitive intensity increases, these governments will probably remain actively involved in attracting capital and labour and in developing skills to bolster competitiveness.”

The proof, as they say, is in the numbers: today, the non-resident population of Singapore accounts for nearly 26 per cent of the total population, up from 18.7% in the preceding decade (1991–2000) and representing 1.3 million people out of a total population of 5.1 million (Department of Statistics, 2011). Yet, while it would seem that the drivers of growth and diversification of the workforce in Singapore are well understood politically and economically (e.g., Carr, 2011; Chan, 2011; Tham, 2014a, 2014b), the social benefits arising from the influx of foreign talent to all members of society appear to be less so (e.g., Ang, 2011; Chan, 2013). In a recent editorial, Tan (2011) summed up the feeling well by stating:

“I just feel outnumbered by foreigners. Singapore has changed. Growing up, one had a vague idea of how there were foreigners in our midst, but we led pretty much separate lives. You’d see Caucasians in Holland Village, Japanese at Liang Court, Indonesian Chinese in Orchard Road, but that was about it. If these foreigners lived here, their kids went to schools such as the Singapore American School or United World College. They were in a different world. My father had a few foreign friends he met in the course of his work and they’d visit us, but by and large, my contact with non-Singaporeans was limited. Today, you’d be hard put to not meet a foreigner once you step out of the house. They are everywhere.”

As one would expect, sentiments such as the above have led to a strategic response by the Singapore government to both its citizens and the 7,000 MNCs that operate in the city-state, which is discussed next.

5.1 Fair Consideration Framework 2013

In considering the growing economic power of the Asian continent, and Singapore in particular as a nation-state whose location, infrastructure, English-language proficiency, and stable democracy is highly sought after as a base not only for foreign enterprises and investment but also for foreign ‘talent’ (Martinez, 2014; Ong, 2013), the Singapore government has the unenviable task of navigating the delicate balance between its need for foreign workers and the tension it creates among local citizens who feel their country is being overrun by outsiders (Tan, 2013). The result of this tension is a ‘hire locals first’ agenda that has seen the government implement new policies to reign in the growth of foreign manpower in an attempt to provide a ‘fair shot for locals’ on a playing field that is described by many as a ‘jobs race’ between skilled Singaporeans and foreigners (Beng, 2011; Cheam and Heng, 2013; Ng, 2013b). The government’s response to this tension is a steady and consistent increase in foreign worker levy fees (Low et al., 2011; Chee, 2011; Yahya, 2011), and the introduction of the *Fair Consideration Framework* which requires employers to show that they tried to hire Singaporeans first before resorting to hiring foreign skilled labour (Ministry of Manpower, 2013).

Criteria exempting MNCs from advertising job vacancies on the ‘jobs bank’ prior to submitting applications for EPs include (Ministry of Manpower, 2013):

- a jobs in firms with 25 or fewer employees
- b jobs that pay a fixed monthly salary of S\$12,000 and above
- c jobs to be filled by intra-corporate transferees (ICTs) in line with the World Trade Organization’s General Agreement on Trade in Services (WTO GATS)
- d jobs that are necessary for short-term contingencies (i.e. period of employment in Singapore for not more than one month).

The result of the *Framework* thus far has been a steady decline in the rate of foreign workforce growth in the non-construction sector (at 3.5% growth in 2013, being half the rate in 2012; Ong, 2014), and the slowest population growth in 10 years (for the period 2004–2014) with fewer foreigners being hired overall (Tham, 2014b).

Implications arising from the *Fair Consideration Framework* are significant. First, Tham (2014b) reports that it will take approximately 12 years to add one million people to the Singapore population compared to the ten years it would have taken prior to the government's change in its foreign talent policy. With an increasingly ageing population and workforce demand outstripping supply, this will likely slow down Singapore's economic growth. Second, Heng (2013) reports that, while Singaporeans are perceived as 'strong' and 'talented' by many MNC hiring managers, their lack of international exposure as a key leadership skill (and their seeming reluctance to address it) prevents many from being considered for the professionals, managers and executives (PME) roles that they desire and that their skilled foreigner colleagues are able to secure. As such, despite efforts to instil a 'hire locals first' policy that favours local Singaporeans over skilled foreigners, the reality is that the *Fair Consideration Framework* does not solve a skills shortage at the PME level as much as it gives locals a head start in the job market while delaying the employment of those professionals (i.e., foreigners) with the required skillset for the available jobs. Thus, the trade-off between sustainable economic growth, a relatively high standard of living, and skilled foreigner inflows requires close monitoring.

6 Narrative analysis: Western expatriates' lived experience in Singapore, 2002–2014

"Right now is a funny time to be a foreigner in Singapore. From the crowds clogging up the MRT to the sky-high price of housing, it seems that everywhere I look, people like me are considered part of the problem. Things weren't always this way. At least, that's not how it felt when I arrived from London 2½ years ago. Back then, the anti-foreigner sentiment was little more than a twinkle in a blogger's eye ... Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying Singaporeans have suddenly become cold or xenophobic. And I understand the feeling many have of being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of outsiders. Yet it still stings to see some of the online comments about "FT scum" – a less-than-flattering term for foreign talent. This is a nation grappling with an intense debate about how many newcomers to allow in and what role they should play in society. But as a member of this much-maligned group, I hope people do not rush to embrace a narrative that sidelines all the positives that foreigners have brought. After all, the country does not take in outsiders out of the goodness of its heart. There are no asylum seekers here. Instead, most foreigners come to work hard, contribute to the economy and, yes, make a decent living for themselves ... It may now transpire that the Republic doesn't need to keep recruiting as many migrants and expatriates, particularly those chasing the executive jobs that Singaporeans desire most. That's up to the public and politicians to decide. But as a foreigner, I just hope the debate doesn't become too acrimonious."

J. Cooper, *The Straits Times*, Singapore²

A key goal of this article is to re-define contemporary expatriation for Western expatriates living and working in Singapore, relative to the assumption that this segment of the foreign talent workforce is simultaneously living the 'high life' while reaping financial and professional rewards at locals' expense, thereby resulting in a low degree of integration within, and support for, the Singaporean community at large. The reality,

however, is somewhat different. While it remains a fact that some Western expatriates relocate to Singapore with precisely the intentions as outlined above (and that some always will), recent data show that this trend is rapidly changing (ORC Worldwide, 2008; Pang, 2006).

The quote in the previous section, for example, and which was published in 2009, undoubtedly does not represent the reality for many Western expatriates’ today. Statistics on global mobility trends show that, as far back as 2008, expatriates in Singapore were increasingly compensated on local-plus or localisation terms and conditions, or were engaged in permanent one-way relocations by the MNCs that employed them (ORC Worldwide, 2008; Sim, 2010a; Thang et al., 2002). In fact, a PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) survey found that Singapore is the easiest country to localise foreign talent in Asia.

A local-plus package is one where employees are paid according to the salary levels, structure, and administration guidelines of the host-location, in this case Singapore, as well as being provided with limited ‘expatriate-type’ benefits such as transportation, housing, and dependents’ education in recognition of the employee’s ‘foreign’ status (Stanley, 2009). Localisation, on the other hand, involves an employee resigning from their home country office and being hired by the Singapore office of the same MNC, but for which there is no return (repatriation) to the home-country and no guarantee of company-sponsored re-assignment elsewhere (Yates, 2011). Localisation is effectively a permanent one-way transfer directed by an MNC in which employees operate as ‘locals’ in Singapore (but without citizenship and the benefits it entails). When a permanent transfer is used, Singapore-based compensation and benefits are applied with relatively few, if any, typical expatriate package benefits made available over the long-term (ORC Worldwide, 2004). Employees undertaking a permanent transfer do so as ‘expatriates’, given their non-immigrant status and lack of citizenship in Singapore.

Western expatriates who subsequently localise in Singapore do so in one of two ways. Immediate localisation takes place at the onset of an assignment in the form of a permanent transfer. In delayed localisation, an expatriate commences a traditional international assignment and, typically after a period of between three to five years, then transitions to local terms and conditions (i.e. is ‘localised’) directed by either the employer or employee (ORC Worldwide, 2004). For example, some traditional assignees relocate with full knowledge that localisation will occur after two years in Singapore as pre-determined in their contract whereas others may not be localised until completion of the initial, or subsequent extension(s) of, the assignment which may be five to seven, or even ten, years after it first began (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2012). Delayed localisation may also occur when expatriates do not wish to repatriate or re-assign as directed by an MNC, electing instead to remain in Singapore indefinitely (Yates, 2011). Importantly, there will be cases where neither an MNC nor an expatriate may intend delayed localisation to occur; rather it frequently arises as an assignment progresses, taking into account changes in company strategy or expatriates’ life circumstances as well as other unexpected events (e.g. economic downturns). This may explain why many MNCs tend to deal with localisation on a case-by-case basis, as the following case illustrates.

When Alison and Sean moved to Singapore in 2002 on a full expatriate package with his company, they never imagined that within nine months of arriving Sean would lose his banking job due to an internal organisational restructure and that their 'cushy' one-income expatriate life would be short-lived. Despite being offered a company-funded repatriation package that would have enabled them both to return to Johannesburg and pick up their old life, they decided to forgo the opportunity to move home to instead localise in Singapore, with new jobs they were each able to acquire – Sean with another international bank and Alison with a local music academy – of which Sean's employer provided a 12-month subsidised housing allowance that enabled them to see out the lease on their pricey Orchard Road apartment until a less expensive option could be found once the diplomatic clause could be enacted. At the time they were also successful in applying for, and being granted, Permanent Residency which they had hoped to gain as an employment safety net in the event of further job troubles. Six years on in 2008, with two sons and a daughter adopted from Cambodia, Sean was retrenched for a second time when the bank underwent a merger, while Alison continued to work part-time as a piano teacher. Despite his best efforts during what became known as the 'global financial crisis', Sean remained unemployed for a year before securing a local position with a regional bank. During this time, Alison continued to work part-time at the music school, supplementing their income by providing private lessons to local school students in the evenings and on weekends. By all accounts, the period of unemployment was tough on the family's finances, necessitating that they sell their car, negotiate a cheaper rent with their landlord by forgoing necessary repairs on their apartment, and place their youngest two children in a local pre-school. Today, Sean heads up the Singapore division of the bank, supervising a local staff of 350 employees, while Alison is in the fourth year of running her own music school. As PR holders, they were able to leverage the flexibility that resident status afforded them by starting a new business without incurring the \$50,000 paid up capital requirement. Today, the music school is flourishing with the business funding 60% of the family's living expenses. Sean, on the other hand, has just been offered a one-way permanent transfer with the bank to Hong Kong, but he is reluctant to accept it. Uprooting the family, closing down the business, and giving up their PR status are sacrifices he and Alison are not willing to make. More importantly, the family now considers Singapore their 'home'. But declining the transfer will impact on Sean's promotion opportunities. Meanwhile, Alison has suggested that Sean resign and take up a full-time role at the music school as general manager. It's an appealing option he continues to think about.

In light of the case above, key characteristics specific to the localisation of expatriates require clarification. First, localisation almost always involves replacing (and reducing) an expatriate package (e.g. base salary, incentives, allowances, benefits, perquisites, social security, and retirement plans) with compensation comparable to that offered to local or other locally hired foreign employees in Singapore. The difference between immediate versus delayed localisation is that the latter involves phasing out compensation over a transition or 'wind-back' phase during which remuneration is reduced incrementally over a one to three year period, typically on a 'local-plus' basis to facilitate the transition to local Singaporean status. In the case of Alison and Sean (above), theirs was a mix of immediate localisation with a minimum housing allowing benefit for one year. A second characteristic is that localisation removes the MNC's obligation to repatriate an employee to his/her home country or to re-assign them elsewhere. Third, the localisation of expatriate employees still deems them as 'expatriates' until such time as they assume citizenship (i.e., a Singapore passport). These clarifications are important in light of a somewhat confusing stream of research in the academic literature that has used the term 'localisation' to refer to the "extent to which jobs originally held by expatriates are filled by local employees who are competent to perform the job" [Selmer, (2003), p.43], or "displacing expatriate managers with local talent" [Fryxell et al., (2004), p.269]. This stream of research assumes that 'local employees' are local Singaporeans. In this article, I define 'local employees' as

constituting both local Singaporeans *and* localised expatriates (LOPATS), including those whose status is EP, DP, PEP, EntrePass and PR, i.e. foreign talent that are legally entitled to work and who choose to do so on local terms and conditions.

The point here is that, rather than succumbing to “Companies [that] are openly advertising and recruiting the new foreign talents in preference to the locals”, as argued in the quote above, many Western expatriates in Singapore enter into employment contracts *as locals* rather than as foreigners, despite that their lack of Singaporean citizenship means they are unable to access housing or schooling benefits that are afforded to local Singaporeans (see, for example, Teo, 2011; Vasko, 2011). More importantly, while the opening quote takes specific aim at foreign talent from China and India on the assumption that these expatriates are willing to work for lower wages, the reality, as shown in the case above, is that many Western expatriates are also willing to do so, and often at salary levels lower than those in their respective home countries, taking into account the cost of living in Singapore relative to their take-home salary (Sim, 2010a). This is especially true for non-corporate expatriates such as foreign service diplomats and international school teachers, among others. Why then do Western expatriates choose to relocate to Singapore?

6.1 Why Western expatriates live and work in Singapore

The profile of Western expatriates relocating to Singapore has changed over the past decade, from that of a typically middle-aged married man with two school-aged children on a full package, to single assignees and younger expatriates with growing families on local-plus or localisation (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2013; ORC Worldwide, 2008; Reloc8 Asia Pacific Group, 2007; Vasko, 2011). These changes correspond with the various reasons why Western expatriates choose to relocate to Singapore. Whereas previously expatriates relocated for financial gain (see Dickmann et al., 2008; Hippler, 2009), today this has given way to:

- a a desire, and for some the necessity, to acquire an international skillset as part of their professional development and promotion opportunities
- b building one’s CV with international experience, particularly for middle managers
- c acquiring and developing regional Asia/Asia Pacific expertise, especially for those with regional ties (e.g., in Australia, New Zealand)
- d escaping unemployment in their home-country or seeking political betterment
- e localised professionals who have decided to stay abroad permanently and follow jobs around the globe, often relocating to Singapore from another foreign country
- f job-seekers wishing to maximise a lower tax rate
- g entrepreneurs relocating their business and/or headquarters to Singapore in order to expand into the Asia Pacific region
- h lifestyle, safety and security reasons (Carr et al., 2005; ESCP Europe, 2010; Tams and Arthur, 2007; *The Straits Times*, 2011).

Sebastian and Kate have lived in Singapore for just over a year. As 30-something parents to three children under seven, all born in their native New Zealand from where they have recently relocated, their life looks like that of any other expatriate family in Singapore, with one exception: they own and run their own technology consulting business. The decision to relocate the company's headquarters to Singapore, which made sense on paper in order to move the business closer to many of their Asian clients, has been a massive leap of faith both professionally and personally. On the one hand, securing the EntrePass to legally work in Singapore was simple enough: registering the company with the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority within six months of their application; \$50,000 in paid up capital; and 30% shareholding in the company. But the logistics of employing local Singaporeans as part of the conditions of their employment and adjusting to the higher cost of living that includes pricey international school fees and rental costs for their business office as well as their new home has meant forgoing new 'luxuries' that were once taken for granted: a family car, pets, access to grandparents for babysitting, and annual vacations abroad, to name a few. To compensate, Kate now uses overseas business trips as extended mini-holidays in which the children tag along in order to enjoy vacation time with their parents, while Sebastian has embraced the opportunity to run or cycle to the office in lieu of public transport. They have also employed two full-time live-in domestic helpers to assist with the children as they juggle the demands of full-time dual-careers combined with business travel. Despite the family challenges they now face – most notably in juggling the demands of a large family without the support of relatives – both remain optimistic that the move to Asia will reap long-term rewards for their business that would not have been possible in their home-country. Only time will tell.

The case above highlights that Western expatriates relocating to Singapore are not necessarily a threat to its citizens as much as, in some instances, they can actually help to create jobs for Singaporeans (Chew, 2009), particularly those on EntrePass who are required to hire local Singaporeans as part of the criterion for gaining entry. Furthermore, economic figures show that foreign labour, particularly those on the higher scale of EP category, has not impacted on local wages for PME professionals, with salary levels in this group growing by 14% over the period 2001–2011 (Haoxiang and Hwee, 2011).

From a foreign talent perspective, the necessity to acquire an international skillset and the building of one's CV with international experience as a means of ensuring 'lifetime employability' are particularly salient in the context of Singapore. This is because the prevalence of local-plus compensation among this segment of the foreign talent workforce means that their self-initiated movement across employers is generally higher than for those on full expatriate packages, especially after the initial contract period in the first 2 to 3-years post arrival. In other words, local-plus compensation for Western expatriates in Singapore facilitates higher levels of job mobility across companies because there are fewer sacrifices (perks, benefits, allowances) needing to be made when leaving one employer for another. Further facilitating Western expatriates' job mobility is the simplicity and effectiveness of work visa such as the PEP and EntrePass (Sim, 2010b), as well as government initiatives such as *Contact Singapore* and the *International Manpower Division* (Ministry of Manpower, 2011) that promotes Singapore as an attractive location in which to build and develop one's human capital (see Silvanto et al., 2014). By design, these initiatives enable Western expatriates to reject the 'one-assignment-and-repatriate' approach and instead adopt a 'global career' perspective by stringing together foreign work experiences into meaningful sequences that meet their long-term personal and professional aspirations (see McNulty and Vance, 2017). The building of 'career capital' (Cappellen and Janssens, 2010) coupled with the development of a 'free agent' mentality within an international labour market that values their contribution (McNulty and Inkson, 2013) is thus one of the main drivers for

Western expatriates to live and work in Singapore, particularly over the medium to long term, as the following case illustrates.

Natalie is a 20-something Doctoral graduate with a PhD in psychology who came to Singapore originally from Australia where, before graduating, she was able to secure a full-time tenure-track faculty position with one of Singapore’s most renowned private education institutes (PEIs). Having moved abroad to work, Natalie began her academic career on an EP, organised by her new employer in advance of her arrival. Although locally employed in Singapore, she was provided with a small housing allowance for the first three months to help her transition, along with ongoing medical insurance and CFP contributions. After the initial three-year contract with the university ended, Natalie decided against repatriation in favour of remaining in Singapore to find a new job – facilitated, in part, by her successful application for a Personal Employment Pass (PEP) along with her exemplary tertiary qualifications. Her next full-time job involved counselling work at a British International School where she was able to use her strong background in psychology to train and mentor staff and students. Being fully localised in Singapore, Natalie shared an apartment with two other single teachers, sharing taxi rides to and from the campus each day and chipping in to pay for a part-time maid. Today, three years on, Natalie is newly married to a British man who also lives in Singapore and they are expecting their first child. After the baby is born, Natalie intends to return to work in her own counselling practice. Already she has developed a business plan, with the intention of applying for an EntrePass and employing local Singaporean staff.

6.2 Challenges faced by Western expatriates in Singapore

In spite of these reasons, many Western expatriates relocate to Singapore with less job security than they might have been afforded, or might have expected, in the past (see Nash, 2014; Seow, 2014). For example, a Western expatriate entering Singapore today on a local-plus or localised contract with an EP, PEP or EntrePass cannot rely on an existing employer to fund their repatriation or to arrange re-assignment in the event of them losing their job; instead, the assignee has 30 days, 180 days and one-year respectively to find a new employment sponsor (through their own efforts) or face the prospect of leaving Singapore for good. In effect, this is the trade-off that all Western expatriates make as they simultaneously build international competencies on an open international labour market such as in Singapore.

Furthermore, as the above cases illustrate, many localised and local-plus expatriates in Singapore live in a country that is considered one of the most expensive in the world for expatriates relative to local living costs (Chan and Toh, 2011; Ho and Wong, 2011; Savills, 2014), but who do so without the comfort of government subsidies for housing and education for their children. This could be one explanation as to why, for example, in a 2012 report expatriates in Singapore rated their experience compared to other countries as the best overall, ranking first in ‘expat economics’ and fourth in ‘expat experience’, but in 2013 these numbers dropped to 9th and 6th respectively (HSBC Bank International, 2012, 2013).

For other Western expatriates, including those on full compensation packages, there are often different hardships to contend with. For example, in a recent study, McNulty (2014a, 2014b) interviewed (as part of a larger study on non-traditional expatriates) three Western expatriates whose marriages ended in divorce while they were living in Singapore as foreigners. In all cases, there are children involved, with the three families now residing in Singapore in the care of a single parent – two (originally from the US and UK) on a permanent basis with the single parent in each family having taken up Singaporean Citizenship and Permanent Residency respectively (each with two children

under 10), and the third (from the US) as a Dependent Pass holder (with five children from ages 4 to 14) currently awaiting family court mediation to resolve custody and divorce proceedings in order to return to the US permanently. For other Western expatriates, hardships include split family arrangements where the working partner travels from the 'home' base in Singapore throughout the rest of Asia and is separated from family members for days, if not weeks, at a time. These arrangements are part of the criterion necessary for developing international competencies and building one's CV with international experience, but which undoubtedly cause considerable hardship on the families left behind (particularly those on local-plus or localisation) that must cope with a unique form of single-parenting in an unfamiliar setting such as Singapore, and often without the perks and benefits that traditional expatriates enjoy. The point in highlighting these cases is to illustrate that some Western expatriates in Singapore are not that different from the local Singaporeans among whom they work, live, and socialise. Indeed, as in 'normal' society, Western expatriates face the same challenges and problems as Singaporean citizens, albeit while living in an unfamiliar setting. Yet, the voices of Western expatriates in Singapore are rarely heard, nor are their stories known outside of the confines of the tightly knit 'expatriate grapevine'.

Notably, while Singaporeans may perceive the lack of integration of Western expatriates' as arising from a 'living it large' mentality and at locals' expense, this misperception undoubtedly arises from what is seen and assumed while walking through areas such as Tanglin Mall or Holland Village – 'expat enclaves' that do not, as the above cases show, represent the reality of the many Western expatriates' lived experience in Singapore. The reality, then, is that the system in which expatriates live and work is not set up for their inclusiveness or integration. Instead, one could argue that the Ministry of Manpower engages in a form of selective inclusiveness by enticing foreign talent to its shores without the explicit goal of short- or medium-term integration, particularly from a cost of living perspective. Indeed, despite the careful planning of multicultural identities that has been a hallmark of the success of public residential estates and the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) electoral system, which, in the former, requires the racial background of tenants to be proportionate to the national ethnic distribution, and in the latter requires at least one electoral seat to belong to an ethnic minority (Beng, 2010; Noor and Leong, 2013), Western expatriates are given only one option to integrate in Singapore – the exclusive, elite, and expensive private condominium enclave, i.e., a bubble in which only other expatriates live. As noted by Yeoh (2006, p.26) in her commentary about bifurcated labour in Singapore,

“these differential politics of inclusion and exclusion lock transmigrants into two structurally determined sectors of society and the economy, with, currently, no possibility of interpenetration.”

The introduction of the *Fair Consideration Framework* then, while achieving its goal of reducing foreigner inflows (Tham, 2014b), has, by default, also impacted on the local employment of foreign talent currently residing in Singapore. In other words, long-term Western expatriates holding EP, PEP or PR status, and particularly those on local-plus or localised salary packages, can find it challenging to secure local jobs in a market that currently favours a 'hire local's first' or 'Singaporeans first' approach. The Western spouses of foreigners employed by MNCs are particularly vulnerable whereby many relocate to Singapore with the intention of securing local employment only to find that, in the current market, their efforts are hampered by a system that seems interested only in

the potential contribution of their partner, but not their own. While efforts to overcome these subtle forms of discrimination are commendable, and seen for example in jobs programs run by the *Career Resources Centre for Expatriates* and the *ANZA Professional Series*, the barriers to professional work imposed upon Western spouses only adds to the challenges many already face in re-defining their professional identity, purpose and status as a result of relocating abroad for their partner’s career (McNulty, 2012; Permits Foundation, 2009).

When Kristina arrived in Singapore 15 years ago, newly married and with no intention of returning back to her native Brazil, she had every intention of enjoying her new life as an ‘expat wife’ having given up corporate work as a lawyer to relocate to Singapore with her spouse. With some luck, she thought that might quickly turn into being an ‘expat mum’ as well which, on her husband’s big salary, would mean international schools and home leave, among other benefits. But as the years in Singapore went by, and she and her husband found it difficult to have children, the realisation that Kristina would need to return to work became obvious, not just for financial reasons, but to give her something else to focus on other than the endless (and unsuccessful) fertility treatments. Despite every intention of picking up a local job as a legal assistant, Kristina nonetheless floundered in her job search for nearly two years with rejection after rejection. The overwhelming problem, she found, was not that she was over-qualified, but that she looked and spoke like an ‘expat wife’ – white, Western, female, transient, and ‘rich’ – the very image that many local employers did not want to deal with. Despondent, and somewhat puzzled by the reaction, Kristina applied for, and was granted, permanent residency in the hope that it would help how local employers perceived her job application. To her surprise, PR status neither made little difference, nor did home ownership of a private condominium in Woodlands to signify the ‘putting down of roots’. By now defiant, and still childless, Kristina made the decision to enter into self-employment by leaving the legal profession altogether and pursuing her life’s dream of starting a photographic business specialising in corporate headshots. With a small business loan and a well thought through business plan, her studio is thriving. Unsurprisingly, more than 50% of her clients are local Singaporean businesses!

7 Discussion

The aim of this study has been to examine the impact of foreign talent policy relative to the experiences of Western expatriates in Singapore. Through historical analysis of a longitudinal collection of newspaper articles in *The Straits Times* and other media over the period 2005–2014, and a combination of literature review and narrative analysis to explore the lived experience of Western expatriates living and working in Singapore over a similar period, I have attempted to frame the debate from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. Findings from the study illustrate that, despite assumptions to the contrary and while also retaining strong allegiances to their countries of origin, many Western expatriates in Singapore:

- 1 do not live the ‘high life’ but instead live ‘locally’ alongside their Singaporean neighbours
- 2 appreciate and welcome the functionings of the city state
- 3 make deliberate choices to be in, and integrate within, Singapore to contribute to the economic development of the city and the region as a whole.

A key theme that will enhance the debate about foreign talent policy is for Singaporeans to be cognisant of the sacrifices and challenges that many Western expatriates make by living and working in Singapore, including their motives for relocating to Singapore and what they hope to gain. Further, how long Western expatriates intend to stay in Singapore in terms of investing their professional and personal lives depends to a large extent on cost of living factors and local employment opportunities, particularly for spouses and those on local-plus and localisation.

The challenges faced by Western expatriates, and in particular their spouses, are, in actuality, no different to the same challenges faced by all people thinking about living and working abroad, including Singaporeans. This includes concerns about retirement and pension benefits (CPF), adequate schooling options for one's children, the potential loss of a second income, and distance from elderly parents. Indeed, the challenge of working abroad is highlighted in a number of *Forum* letters illustrating that Singaporeans are either unwilling to go abroad (Loh, 2013), or for those that do, are unable to secure jobs with MNCs upon their return (Kwok, 2013). For example, in a recent commentary, McNulty's (2013) *Forum* letter sought to bring the foreign talent policy issue to light by arguing that Singaporeans cannot have their cake and eat it too. In other words, while on the one hand Singaporeans are right to be concerned about foreign talent 'stealing their jobs', she argued that one plausible way to solve the problem is for Singaporeans to acquire the skillset that MNCs require thereby making themselves competitive in the MNC job market. By "not offering employers an alternative to foreign candidates" through the acquisition of international competencies, the argument was based on a simple case of supply and demand – if Singaporeans desire the PME jobs that MNCs offer then they must acquire the PME skillset, in much the same way as 'foreign talent' are doing by living and working in Singapore. In other words, without an effort on the part of more Singaporeans to go abroad and to actively acquire the international competencies that MNCs in Singapore desire among their workforce (i.e., international competencies that will build their CV and progress their career once they return home), Singapore simply cannot afford to "shut its doors to foreigners" (Toh, 2014).

At issue here is the definition of 'foreign talent'. For example, McNulty's letter was criticised by other *Forum* writers for identifying "international competencies ... more relevant to senior leadership roles, which are likely to command monthly salaries higher than \$12,000, and hence are not subject to the framework" because the *Fair Consideration Framework* is intended to "raise awareness about discriminatory hiring against Singaporeans for 'mass market' PME jobs ... that pay less than \$12,000 a month" (Ng, 2013a). Yet, on the basis that EP holders can be granted the right to work in Singapore on salaries as low as \$3,300 per month (Ministry of Manpower, 2014), and that logically MNCs will hire EP holders (particularly on local-plus and localisation) at salaries lower than \$12,000 a month *because* they have the international competencies they are seeking, the writer's point seems moot. In light of the above, who, then, constitutes the 'foreign talent whose jobs Singaporeans desire? And who, in turn, does and does not benefit from enhancements to Singapore's foreign talent policy? In other words, more careful delineation of the 'foreign worker' and 'foreign talent' categories is required to progress the debate.

A further issue also warrants attention, namely, the subtle forms of xenophobia directed at Western expatriates whose articles about Singapore's foreign talent policy are published in *The Straits Times*. For example, McNulty's identity as a Western expatriate writer was used by one anonymous online commentator to berate her for mislabelling

Singaporeans “as being less competitive because they are unwilling to work overseas to gain ‘international competencies” (Kwok, 2013), when in fact the argument she presented was based on two prior articles written by local Singaporeans (see Toh and Yong, 2013; Loh, 2013) labeling their own citizens in this manner, of which one directly quoted Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (Foo, 2013). Another expatriate writer, a Straits Times journalist publishing an editorial about foreign talent policy (see Cooper, 2013), was similarly taken to task by anonymous commentators for being *a tad selfish* and *arrogant*, and told that *the noose is tightening*, with one commentator suggesting to the author,

“You may like to know that notwithstanding the burning resentment within us Singaporeans against this foreign influx, we do not publicly display our contempt for people like you. In other places, perhaps even in yours, foreigners would have been spat at or assaulted. Consider yourself lucky to be in Singapore, but don’t push it too far, J.”

Another said,

“If you are going to whine, then do so in your own country. Don’t come here and lament about how much ‘hatred’ you are experiencing. Singaporeans are, by and large, very tolerant people. We are not known for being ‘emotionless’ for nothing. So stop accusing us of bigotry when it’s far from the truth.”

The point in highlighting the above online excerpts is to illustrate that the voice of Western expatriates, as one segment representing the foreign talent cohort, is all but silent on this topic (see Brooks, 2009; Mason, 2011 for recent exceptions). Likewise, when their voice (and that of other foreigners) *is* publicly heard, it is not well tolerated (e.g., Loh and Leong, 2009), as Toh (2011) and Yap (2011) point out in their *Forum* letters. But in the broader public debate about this issue, Western expatriates are key stakeholders likely to be affected by foreign talent policy enhancements whose views and perspectives, if given the chance, might actually help to shape the policy agenda to all stakeholders’ mutual benefit. It is also worth noting that the *Forum* section of *The Straits Times* may not represent the best medium by which Western expatriates might engage in public debate on this topic, given that the *Forum* page is designed to publish “succinct and punchy letters over lengthy deliberation” [Richardson, (2007), p.152]. Such brevity dictates that as many letters as possible are published in order to hear “as many opinions as possible, but that the discussion then has a tendency to fall within the bounds of thinkable thought thereby making it difficult to put forward a radical or even an unconventional standpoint” (p.153).

The study reported in this article contributes to extant literature about global staffing in general (e.g., Collings et al., 2009; Erdener and Torbiorn, 1999; McPhail et al., 2012) by examining foreign talent policy tensions in the context of one country, i.e., Singapore. By examining the ‘public conversation’ about foreign talent policy in Singapore, I have shed light on how the debate about foreign talent can impact on global staffing decisions for MNCs operating in Singapore, i.e., that not all foreign talent are welcome and that there may be tension in the workplace between expatriates and locals. The unique perspective provided by historical analysis of newspaper articles over a ten-year period in Singapore’s recent history (2005–2014) illustrates the ebb and flow of public opinion about foreign talent policy and disagreements about the policy that appear to be widespread across a broad segment of Singapore’s citizenry. Additionally, in-depth interviews of four Western expatriates living and working in Singapore highlights that the profile of foreign talent in Singapore is changing, thus challenging the many false

assumptions that expatriates come to Singapore to ‘steal locals’ jobs’ and to ‘get rich quick’ at the expense of local Singaporean’s livelihood. These lived experience perspectives contribute to a much broader debate in the field of expatriate studies, which has recently focused on the changing meaning(s) of the word ‘expatriate’ (see McNulty and Brewster, 2017) and the extent to which expatriates’ profile is changing from traditional conceptualisations of the past (see Gedro, 2010; Harrison and Michailova, 2012; McNulty and Hutchings, 2016). It includes global staffing research that has recently explored more contemporary forms of expatriation as alternatives to the traditional global staffing strategies used in recent decades that has been heavily focused on utilising AEs (see Collings et al., 2007). Some of these newer and more contemporary types of expatriates evident in the case-based accounts provided here include the trend towards: self-initiated expatriates (SIEs; Suutari and Brewster, 2000); LOPATs and locally hired foreigners (McNulty and Brewster, 2017); permanent (one-way) transferees (Tait et al., 2014); and even ‘expat-preneurs’ (expatriate entrepreneurs; Vance et al., 2016).

The above notwithstanding, a key contribution of the study is the adoption of an historical analysis method to emphasise that much of the dialogue and debate about Singapore’s foreign talent policy has not been confined only to the Singapore parliament and the boardrooms of the *Ministry of Manpower* and *Economic Development Board* whose function it is to develop workforce policy. Rather, a lively and intelligent public conversation has been ongoing for at least the past decade in *The Straits Times*, owned and operated by the publicly-listed Singapore Press Holdings group (SPH), with a local readership of 1.43 million. Notably, the government uses various newspapers under the SPH brand, including its flagship publication *The Straits Times*, on a near-daily basis to communicate its ideas, initiatives, policies, strategies, and successes to the wider Singaporean population, as well as to address its perceived missteps and, if needed, to quell any disquiet. An important part of this dialogue is:

- a *The Straits Times* Online Discussion Board where readers can post comments to articles with one such article in 2009, for example, generating no fewer than 61 online pages of comments in response to the Prime Minister’s announcement about slowing the intake of immigrants (Chia, 2009).
- b The *Forum* section, where letters to the editor from broad sections of the community including government and ministerial officers are published on a wide range of topics (see, for example, Khim, 2014; Ming, 2013).

These platforms provide clear acknowledgement that both the citizens of Singapore and its government view the growing issue surrounding ‘foreign labour’ as one that needs to be addressed by all members of society.

8 Research limitations and future directions

From a methodological standpoint, historical analysis of newspaper reports has limitations (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). First, journalists’ reporting of issues is undoubtedly influenced by the social contexts in which the events occur. Thus, there is no

way to test that reporters’ (or *Forum* writers’) interpretations are correct. Second, words and phrases used in newspaper reports can change their meaning over time. For this reason, I confined the analysis of newspaper articles to a ten-year period (2005–2014) during which the language and discourse surrounding foreign talent policy has remained somewhat consistent (if not confusing in some areas, e.g., defining ‘PME’), thereby reducing ambiguity and scepticism of the findings (Perakyla, 2008).

Like historical analysis, narrative analysis also has limitations. First, because its focus is on the individual, it relies heavily on participants’ subjective recall of events and incidents that may not be accurate; instead, stories may suffer from gaps in memory and a focus on subsets of one’s experience as opposed to the totality of it (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, narrative storytelling may infer causality where none exists, i.e., the participants’ sequencing of events in a story may not accurately reflect cause and effect outcomes (Crites, 1986). To overcome these limitations, in-depth interviews were utilised in which me, as the specialised researcher, engaged in highly collaborative sessions with the participants to delve deeply into their stories for the purposes of clarification, understanding, and accuracy (Riessman, 1993; Stake, 2003). The above notwithstanding, I adopted narrative analysis on the basis that much of the dialogue and debate about Singapore’s foreign talent policy does not include the voice of a large segment of the foreign talent population that are directly affected by it, namely Western expatriates. Thus, by examining the lived experiences of Western expatriates’, and in particular participants’ whose working lives are more closely aligned to those of their Singaporean neighbours (as LOPATS) than the traditional expatriate profile of the past would suggest, it is hoped that the ongoing debate about foreign talent policy can be enhanced by a truer depiction of ‘stories from the front line’.

Future research about foreign talent policy in Singapore is needed to extend the ideas introduced in this article. Studies that explore the integration of localised Western expatriates would enhance our understanding of the factors that ensure successful adaptation into Singapore society for expatriates intending to stay indefinitely (i.e., for those relocating to Singapore on open-ended contracts of no fixed duration). Further, are long-term stayers more or less productive and do they contribute more or less to the Singaporean economy than traditional Western expatriates on fixed-term (typically three-year) assignments? Similarly, research that explores the motivations of Western expatriates’ decision to relocate to Singapore on, or transition to, local terms and conditions and to engage in a lifestyle that is not dissimilar to local norms and customs may help to break down the ‘us versus them’ barrier among locals. Singaporeans’ acceptance of Western expatriates’ role in the Singapore economy may be subsequently enhanced. Empirical research is needed to determine the numbers of localised versus traditional Western expatriates in Singapore, their housing and education needs, whether the trend towards localisation is increasing and at what rate (see Mercer, 2010), and whether localisation helps or detracts from MNCs’ global talent attraction efforts. More research is also needed to examine the impact of Singapore’s changing foreign talent policy on the MNCs that operate there. Specifically, to what extent has the tightening of immigration labour laws impeded MNCs’ talent attraction strategies when staffing their Singaporean operations? Moreover, has the public debate about Singapore’s foreign talent policy enhanced or impeded the country’s nation branding efforts related to positioning itself as a global and dynamic “capital choice for the world”? [Carr, (2011), p.A34].

9 Conclusions

The issue of foreign talent policy in Singapore is undeniably a politically, economically and socially sensitive topic affecting multiple stakeholders that includes the Singapore government and its ruling party the PAP, Singaporean citizens, PRs, and ‘foreign talent’ living and working in Singapore as EP, PEP, DP and EntrePass holders. Three recent events unprecedented in Singapore’s short history speak to a growing discontent among its citizens, all with the potential to de-rail the economic progress that has sustained Singapore’s success for more than five decades:

- 1 The Little India riots of 2013 including the resulting xenophobia towards foreigners by local Singaporeans (Chan, 2013).
- 2 The self-imposed exile to Australia in 2014 of Mr. Anton Casey, a British expatriate, along with his Singaporean-born wife and child, following a social media backlash from Singaporeans in response to his unsavoury public comments on Facebook about the country’s ‘poor people’ (Chow, 2014; Mortlock, 2014)
- 3 The unprecedented PAP election losses in 2011 (Adam and Lim, 2011; Song, 2011).

Alongside these concerns is the obvious need for the government to pacify rising concern in the wider regional and global business community, in which Singapore situates itself as a first world economic Asia power-house, that economic profitability and foreign labour continue, and will continue, to be both welcome and supported (see Quek, 2013).

While some commentators argue that dissatisfaction with the influx of foreign talent could stem from ‘an attribution error on the part of Singaporeans’ due to their ‘inertia’ in proactively involving themselves to solve the economic and social problems that bother them [Jieyi and Foo, (2013), p.616], there may be other drivers for Singaporeans’ discontent, specifically the openness of the government’s policies towards temporary migration and immigration (*The Straits Times*, 2013), and the modernisation and democratisation of the economic and political landscape in Singapore. Implications arising from these challenges are undoubtedly immense, with ramifications for economic, political and social harmony likely to be forthcoming over the next decade, and possibly beyond, as the following quote illustrates:

“Foreign talent is envied and silently cursed for having a nice apartment and car. Yet without their help, we would have less to fight over. Today, we have grown into a city-state attractive to many who want to live, work and study here. If we open our hearts and minds to the possibility of having the best playground in the world, we must also be open to the foreigners who want to come and play with us. Forget the argument that the presence of foreigners might change our identity. We should not pander to the idea that a uniform identity is needed for the nation to survive. Instead, our identity will always be a working canvas, changing and evolving. That is our real identity. We are a land of immigrants after all. Our identity will evolve. We cannot afford to pack up the canvas and stop adding colours to our evolving identity. Instead, we need to enlarge the canvas and add more colours. The sooner we understand that, the stronger and more successful we will be.”

K. Wisdom, *The Straits Times*, Singapore³

The practicalities of human capital nonetheless demands that no matter how well the Singapore government may have trained its workforce in job, leadership, and PME skills (see Osman-Gani, 2004), there will always be skills gaps for which foreign talent is a necessary solution. Furthermore, changes in immigration and foreign talent policy will undoubtedly have implications for MNCs that operate in Singapore, many of whom rely on skilled foreigners such as Western expatriates as pivotal to their global staffing strategy.

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Notes

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