

Cultural Heritage and Identity Formation: A Study of Second-Generation Immigrant Children through Parental Perspectives in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper explores how immigrant parents influence the development of their children's identities in Singapore, drawing on qualitative interviews with parents from diverse backgrounds. A key focus is the balance between maintaining ethnic traditions and integrating into Singapore society, along with parents' aspirations for their children's national identity. It is found that immigrant parents play an active role in transmitting heritage cultural values and practices to their children, with a focus on maintaining a connection to their heritage while also promoting societal integration into the host country. This approach is particularly reflected in the parents' discourse about their children's linguistic maintenance and adaptation. This research adds more broadly to the understanding of the immigrant experience and its implications for social cohesion and multiculturalism in Singapore.

Introduction

Singapore, a city-state in Southeast Asia known for its multicultural society, has been deeply shaped by migration, both in the past and present. According to official statistics (Prime Minister's Office, 2024), as of mid-

2024, Singapore's total population stood at 6.04 million, of which *non-residents* (namely, those without citizenship or permanent residency/PR status) accounted for more than 30 per cent. Moreover, even among population categorized as 'resident', a sizable portion had migrant background (such as naturalized citizens). How these immigrants raise their children and influence their education holds significant implications for Singapore's sociocultural landscape and cohesion.

Against this backdrop, this report draws on data collected in a study about immigrant parenting in Singapore (for details see the methodology section below) to present selective findings about *how immigrant parents in Singapore perceive their children's identities and how they contribute to shaping these identities*. Jenkins (2008) defines identity as a concept that includes our self-awareness, our understanding of others, their awareness of us, and our perceptions of their views. In other words, identity connects us to a group, creating a sense of belonging. Exploring the identity formation immigrant children is important in Singapore, given that such individuals represent a growing yet often invisible component of Singapore's youth population. Gaining insight into their identity formation can help policymakers, educators, and the

broader community better support their integration, fostering a more inclusive society. It should be stressed that this study looks at this issue solely from the perspective of the immigrant parents, focusing on their discourse regarding and influence on the immigrant children’s identity formation.

In the rest of this report, the next section provides an account of the data used and the underlying methodology. The findings are then presented, before the paper ends with some brief discussions and a conclusion.

Methodology

This paper draws on data collected in a study—led by the third author—that explores the influence of immigrant parents on the education of their 1.5- and second-generation immigrant children in Singapore (OER 09/20 YPD).ⁱ In the broader study, eligible participants must be foreign-born and had migrated to Singapore as adults. Migrants of Malaysian background were excluded due to their cultural proximity to Singapore, as were parents married to local-born Singaporeans. In

addition, only immigrant parents with at least one child enrolled in mainstream Singapore schools, either at the primary or secondary level, were eligible.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and advertisements on public noticeboards. An online survey was used to collect descriptive demographic data on the participants before proceeding to interviews. In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted one-on-one, usually over the course of two sessions, in the participants’ preferred language: either Mandarin or English. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their original languages. Mandarin transcripts were further translated into English for analysis. All names used in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect participants’ confidentiality. At the time of data analysis, the broader study had interviewed a total of 64 participants (Chinese = 31, Filipino = 12, Indian = 14, Indonesian = 4, Others = 3).

This paper draws on the narratives of six participants from the larger dataset (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Table of participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country	Residential Status	Years in SG	Child’s Age
Saisha	F	40	India	SP	12	14
Lagan	M	43	India	EP	9	10
Jessica	F	47	Philippines	PR	15	18 and 16
Karla	F	47	Philippines	PR	17	11
Anika	F	34	India	PR	13	11 and 5
Amrita	F	38	India	PR	14	9

Findings

The data analysed for this paper reveal immigrant parents' influence on the identity formation of their children on two fronts: *national identity*, and the balance between *cultural transmission and local integration*.

National Identity

Many immigrant parents express a strong desire for their children to see Singapore as home, instilling in them a sense of belonging and loyalty to the country. For parents with sons, this desire often extends to the expectations that their sons will participate in the compulsory National Service (NS), a significant marker of national identity (Kwek, 2019). NS is a mandatory two-year conscription programme for all male Singapore citizens and permanent residents upon reaching the age of 18, requiring them to serve in either the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), the Singapore Police Force (SPF), or the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF). The objective of NS is to ensure the country's security and defence readiness, while instilling discipline, teamwork, and a sense of national duty among conscripts.

One Filipino mother, Jessica, spoke poignantly about the transformative impact of NS on her children: 'after NS, [you] will almost not know your son because they behave differently'. This sentiment underscores the profound influence of societal expectations and institutions on shaping national identity—where one earns their sense of 'belonging' after completing NS. Jessica notes how her son's behaviour changed after NS, observing that he became more disciplined, responsible, and connected to the country. For Jessica, this transformation represents more than just personal growth; it signifies her son's deeper sense of belonging and loyalty to Singapore. His participation in NS fostered a stronger identification with the nation, reinforcing the idea that fulfilling societal obligations solidifies one's place within the national community.

Another parent, Karla, expresses hope that her children will return and contribute to Singapore after studying abroad, illustrating a strong desire to maintain their national identity and cultural ties:

I'd like for them to come back to Singapore... whatever they've learned abroad, there's a very big chance they can make a mark here.

Her emotional attachment to Singapore is evident in her wish for her children to 'give back' to the nation they grew up in and leave a lasting impact. This reflects a deep connection to their host country, even as they gain experiences abroad. Karla highlights the importance of maintaining cultural ties and fostering a sense of national identity in her children, emphasising the value of integrating their international experiences with their roots in Singapore.

Anika, a 34-year-old mother from India, adds another perspective, describing her child's deep connection to Singapore despite not being a legal citizen:

To her, this is home. She was born here and has done all her schooling here. Although legally she's not a citizen, she feels she belongs here.

This statement illustrates how emotional ties and social connections to Singapore can deeply influence immigrant families, often outweighing the importance of legal status in shaping a child's sense of national identity. Anika's approach to her child's identity formation is both intentional and comprehensive. She actively involves her child in local cultural and national events, such as Racial Harmony Day and National Day, thereby reinforcing a sense of belonging. Additionally, she emphasises the importance of understanding Singapore's history and values through educational activities at home, such as reading and discussions. Anika's efforts reflect a broader pattern among immigrant parents who take proactive steps to integrate their

children into the host society.

However, Anika's case also highlights the challenges faced by immigrant families, particularly the complexities surrounding her child's lack of legal citizenship. Despite these barriers, Anika strives to ensure her child feels a sense of belonging in Singapore. By promoting active participation in national events and home-based education about Singapore's history, she seeks to foster her child's connection to the country. This focus on belonging, despite legal limitations, showcases how immigrant parents work to mitigate challenges and create a strong sense of inclusion for their children.

Collectively, these narratives underscore the role of parental aspirations in shaping national identity for immigrant children. Through their efforts, parents aim to nurture a lasting connection between their children and Singapore, reinforcing the country as their homeland despite any legal or societal barriers they may encounter.

Cultural transmission and local integration

While most parents in our study cultivate in their children an identification with Singapore in terms of national identity, when it comes to ethnic and cultural identities, the parents' approach strikes a balance between cultural transmission and local integration. Often, immigrant parents actively incorporate practices from their ethnic cultures into daily life while also adopting Singaporean habits, leading to the creation of a new, blended transnational culture. This is aptly illustrated by Amrita, who emphasises the importance of integrating both cultures into her family's life:

I try to involve my family in local festivities just as much as our traditional ones. It's about creating a bridge between our past and our present

Micah reflects on his child's integration into Singaporean culture, saying:

So, our son also, I think he lived here most of his lifetime, so he doesn't know our roots back there. He was used to this place in Singapore more than us. Also, he knows more about Singapore, like how they do it here.

This quote illustrates the natural integration of Micah's son into Singaporean culture, highlighting how children often adapt to their environment more readily than their parents. Additionally, parents are selective about the cultural practices they wish their children to retain, such as celebrating religious festivals or speaking their native language at home, while encouraging them to adopt local norms like speaking English in public or participating in Singaporean celebrations. This selective retention plays a crucial role in shaping their children's cultural integration and identity, balancing the preservation of heritage with adaptation to the broader society.

Karla further discusses her role in shaping her children's environment and exposures, effectively guiding their cultural assimilation:

In the early stages, you choose, you make the decisions for your child, you guide them, you filter out those that are unnecessary, and you filter out bad habits as well.

Karla emphasises the importance of guiding children through the process of integrating into the host country's culture while maintaining key elements of their heritage. She explains that parents play a crucial role in selecting which cultural practices and behaviours their children should adopt to align with societal norms in Singapore. This involves consciously filtering out practices that may not aid successful integration, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance within the local community. For example, Karla encourages her children to participate in local festivals and customs while also celebrating their cultural traditions at home. This approach ensures that her children are well-versed in the cultural expectations of their environment while retaining a strong connection to their roots.

By balancing the introduction of new cultural elements with the preservation of their ethnic traditions, these parents ensure that their children can navigate multiple cultural identities effectively. The strategic blending of cultures not only facilitates the children's integration into Singaporean society but also helps maintain a unique cultural identity that reflects their heritage and contributes to the diverse tapestry of Singapore's multicultural landscape.

The Role of Language

Immigrant families in Singapore employ various strategies to strike a balance between cultural retention and integration, reflecting their desire to both preserve ethnic heritage and embrace Singapore's cultural ethos. Language remains pivotal in this process, serving as both a medium of cultural maintenance and a practical tool for integration.

Many parents deliberately choose to speak their native language at home to maintain their cultural heritage. An Indian parent, Saisha, shares her experience:

We speak Hindi at home. I suppose my child is okay at speaking it, but of course, they don't get much exposure. They make a lot of spelling and grammar mistakes.

This statement underscores the challenges parents face in maintaining the Hindi language at home. Saisha expresses concern over her children's limited exposure to Hindi and the mistakes they make in spelling and grammar. However, her comment about her child not studying Hindi formally seems contradictory, given that the child takes Hindi as a subject at school. This contradiction likely stems from Saisha's perception that the school curriculum is neither rigorous nor comprehensive enough to be considered formal education in the mother tongue. As a result, while the child does receive some instruction in Hindi, it may not be sufficient to prevent errors in language use.

This issue is common among immigrant

families striving to preserve their native language in a predominantly foreign linguistic environment. In Singapore, for instance, the availability of schools offering Hindi is limited. Given that the majority of the population is Chinese, Chinese is the dominant mother tongue language in many schools. This situation places pressure on non-Chinese speaking families, such as those speaking Hindi, to rely on home-based language education to ensure their children retain their cultural identity. It also highlights the broader challenge of maintaining linguistic diversity in multicultural societies.

Cultural maintenance/transmission through heritage language, however, is accompanied by linguistic pragmatism aimed at local integration. In fact, some non-Chinese parents in our study choose to let their children learn Mandarin as their mother tongue language in school. For example, Lagan, a 43-year-old father from India, describes his family's language routine:

As a language, she took Chinese. So she was learning that, which was cool, we were quite proud that she's learning a tough language [...] she can integrate more with the local society here if she learns Chinese as well for a long term view [...] Hindi we teach her at home.

Lagan's quote reflects the delicate balancing act between preserving their cultural heritage and ensuring their children integrate into Singaporean society. By speaking Hindi at home, Lagan actively fosters his children's connection to their ethnic identity. At the same time, he recognises the need for them to adapt to the dominant culture by learning and using Mandarin and English in school and social settings. This approach enables his children to navigate both cultural settings: they retain their ethnic roots through Hindi while integrating into Singaporean society through proficiency in Mandarin and English. It highlights the ongoing negotiation immigrant families must undertake to preserve cultural values while promoting social and linguistic adaptability.

Furthermore, the incorporation of Singlish, a colloquial form of English unique to Singapore, adds another layer to the linguistic adaptation of immigrant children. Singlish is a creole language that blends English with elements of various Chinese dialects, Malay, and Tamil, reflecting the country's multicultural composition. This linguistic phenomenon plays a significant role in shaping the national identity of immigrant children, serving as a social equaliser and a marker of belonging within their peer groups. By adopting Singlish, immigrant children not only adapt to the local linguistic environment but also signal their integration into Singaporean society, helping them build social connections and a sense of inclusion among their peers.

The use of Singlish by immigrant children signifies their pragmatic attempt to integrate into local culture through linguistic adaptation. Picking up the informal, everyday language of their local peers facilitates social acceptance and integration. For many immigrant families, encouraging their children to embrace Singlish is seen as a way to help them adapt more effectively to their new social environment, enhancing their ability to form friendships and fully participate in school life.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our above investigation into the impact of parental influence on the identity formation of immigrant children in Singapore resonates with established themes in the broader literature on immigration, cultural adaptation, and identity development. The findings reaffirm the multifaceted role of parents, confirming their crucial position as linchpins in the complex interplay of national, cultural, and educational identities (Portes & Rumbaut, 2005). Consistent with existing literature, this research highlights that parents are the primary conduits of cultural heritage, influencing their children both directly through cultural transmission and indirectly by responding to their children's experiences within the educational system and broader society (Zhou, 1997).

In conclusion, through an examination of how immigrant parents shape their second-generation children's national and cultural identities, the findings reveal that parents are pivotal in preserving language, which is integral to cultural heritage. Parents navigate a delicate balance between maintaining their cultural practices and adapting to Singapore's societal norms, underscoring the dynamic process of identity formation in a multicultural context. It is also evident that parental influence and Singapore's cultural and educational environment are central to shaping the identities of immigrant children. The study confirms that parental guidance, combined with societal factors, contributes to the development of a hybrid identity among second-generation immigrants, blending elements of their heritage with their upbringing in Singapore.

In view of the study's findings and conclusions, there are a number of implications for policy and community support. A nuanced understanding of the identity formation challenges specific to immigrant families in Singapore could inform the development of supportive educational policies and inclusive community programmes. For instance, initiatives that align with parents' desires to maintain linguistic heritage—such as the emphasis on language maintenance at home—could support the development of a balanced bicultural identity.

Policy responses that acknowledge the dual identity formation of immigrant children may foster healthier psychological and social outcomes. By integrating culturally sensitive approaches into the school curriculum and encouraging parental involvement in educational and community settings, a supportive framework for identity negotiation can be established. These strategies, informed by the lived experiences of families in this study, can help bridge the gaps between the diverse cultural landscapes that Singapore's immigrant children navigate.

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ⁱ While a second-generation is defined as those born locally in Singapore to first-generation immigrants, 1.5-generation refers to foreign-born children who migrated to Singapore before the age of 12.