Read upcoming issues @
https://hsseonline.nie.edu.sg/

An Institute of

NIE
NATIONAL
INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
SINGAPORE

NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY
SINGAPORE

HSSE Online

Contents

Guest Editorial

One of the focal issues in the secondary Social Studies (SS) syllabus in Singapore is diversity and identity in the context of globalisation. Specifically, immigration is highlighted as a major contributor to Singapore's present diversities, and students of SS are expected to appreciate the causes and consequences of immigration, as well as the trade-offs involved. Within the school walls, Singapore's student populations are also becoming more diverse than before, with more youth hailing from immigrant households, local-foreign marriages, and mixed-race marriage backgrounds, even though these diversities may not always be obvious on the surface.

Given these realities, it is imperative that both SS students and educators are more informed about how immigrant diversities intersect with education. This special issue of the HSSE Online seeks to make a modest contribution to this agenda. In this issue, we put the spotlight on immigrant families in Singapore, covering interconnecting themes such as home, identity formation, socio-cultural integration and education. This collection of five papers (including three "research articles" and two "findings reports") examines how immigrant families negotiate their place in Singapore, highlighting the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to adapt to their new socio-cultural environment.

The first research article by XinTong Chen provides an interesting exploration of young mainland Chinese student migrants in Singapore, examining how their childhood education migration experiences have influenced their perceptions of home. Chen argues that young student migrants' complex transnational networks have reshaped the geographies of their home, making it increasingly mobile and relational. However, she challenges the prevailing literature that suggests transmigrants' home can be created anywhere, emphasising the continued significance of physical place in shaping migrants' sense of home. Importantly, Chen's article foregrounds children's voices in the adult-centric migration literature, recognising their active agency in navigating transnational lives.

The remaining four papers of the issue stem from a Ministry of Education (MOE)-funded research study on immigrant parenting in Singapore (OER 09/20 YPD), led by Dr Peidong Yang. Four NTU undergraduate students (Britney Ong, Tammy Eng, Ariel Chua, and Kitty Loh) worked on Dr Yang's project data under the university's Undergraduate Research Experience on Campus (URECA) scheme. These four young researchers were given the necessary research training (such as coding qualitative data; thematic analysis; research writing) before they were granted access to the qualitative interview data of the project. They were mostly free to scope their analysis, and the ensuing four papers reflect their respective analytical perspectives. As all four student-researchers worked under the close supervision of Dr Yang and his research associate Lee Tat Chow, the latter two are listed as co-authors of all four papers.

The research article by Ong, Chow and Yang looks at immigrant parents' perspectives on Singapore's mother-tongue language (MTL) education. Among other things, the paper emphasises the importance of MTL education in maintaining cultural ties and fostering social integration, while also highlighting the unique challenges immigrant parents face in ensuring their children's proficiency in MTL. The research paper by Eng, Chow, and Yang examines the challenges faced by immigrant parents in navigating and shaping their children's education in Singapore. Besides unpacking some key challenges faced by immigrant parents, the paper also reveals the resourcefulness of immigrant parents and the strategies they employ to navigate and mitigate these difficulties.

The next two papers in the issue are characterised as "findings report" due to their primarily empirical nature. (Engagement with scholarly literature is not an objective here.) The paper by Chua, Chow and Yang reports preliminary and partial findings on immigrant parents' discourses surrounding various forms of schooling or education systems. It demonstrates how such discourses inform and are intertwined with the immigrant parents' articulations of their parenting ideologies and educational philosophies. The paper by Loh, Chow, and Yang explores how immigrant parents influence the development of their children's identities in Singapore, particularly concerning the delicate balance between maintaining ethnic traditions and integrating into Singapore society. 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.

Taken together, this issue brings to the fore the lived experiences of immigrant families in Singapore. The featured papers enrich our understanding of how these families – parents and children alike – navigate Singapore's socio-cultural and educational landscape, while also highlighting their agency in devising strategies to cope with the challenges that arise from their migration status. It is hoped that these papers will offer useful empirical materials and insights in aiding students and teachers of Social Studies to better appreciate the intersections of migration, education, diversity, and identity.

Peidong Yang, XinTong Chen

Singapore
Editors, *HSSE Online*

October 2024

Negotiating a sense of home: mainland Chinese student migrants' childhood education migration experiences in Singapore

XinTong CHEN

University College London, UK
Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

Abstract

As part of the rise in international student mobility, more children are venturing abroad for pre-tertiary education. These children are often embedded in the transnational social field, forging deep and ongoing familial, social-economic, and political connections across borders. Yet, to date, there have been limited explorations of young student migrants' experiences of home during their educational sojourn. In this context, this paper draws on in-depth interviews and photo elicitation with 18 mainland Chinese student migrants who migrated to Singapore during childhood to explore how construction of home intertwines with educational mobility. I argue that student migrants' complex transnational network has reshaped the geographies of their home, making it increasingly mobile and pluri-local. Their home is also associated with a set of meaningful relationships. However, this does not imply that they can produce a sense of home anywhere and everywhere. Emphasising the continuing salience of the physical qualities of a place in shaping one's sense of home, I explore how student migrants' home is simultaneously mobile, relational, and rooted materially.

Introduction

Since the 2000s, the number of mainland Chinese children and young people venturing abroad for pre-tertiary education has surged, with some as young as ten years old (Center for China & Globalization, 2016). These students are usually accompanied by their mothers and head towards Western English-speaking destinations (Tsong & Liu, 2008; Waters, 2012). However, scholars have observed that Singapore has become an increasingly popular destination for pre-tertiary students particularly those from middle-income families (Liu-Farrer, 2022; Waters & Brooks, 2021). This trend has been attributed to Singapore's liberalised student visa scheme enabling young students to pursue pre-tertiary education in Singapore with their female guardian's (mother or grandmother) company[1]. Coupled with Singapore's geographical proximity to China, migration is thus made more feasible (Huang & Yeoh, 2005).

Many of these Chinese students are transmigrants who have forged deep and ongoing cross-border social-economic and political connections (Gargano, 2009). As transmigrants 'construct and reconstitute their simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society', one can no longer assume that their sense of home is tied to a bounded

locality (Glick-Schiller et al., 1995, p. 48). Therefore, considerable effort has been expended by migration scholars to redefine notions of home that were previously conceived around territorial fixity (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002). While extant studies usually focus on adult transmigrants, more recent geographical research is refining ideas of home by considering migrant children and young people's (MCYP) perspectives (McDonnell, 2021). However, within MCYP scholarship, explicit discussion on the concept of home among student migrants who migrated to a foreign country during their formative years is lacking (Mazzucato & van Geel, 2022). The extant literature has thus far examined 1.5 or second-generation migrants whose families migrated for non-educational reasons (Boland, 2020; Ní Laoire et al., 2016). In international student mobility (ISM) scholarship, young student migrants' experiences of home in their study destination are under-investigated (for exception see Prazeres, 2018). Previous research primarily focuses on student migrants' role in their families' capital accumulation strategy and their experiences with transnational split household arrangements (Waters, 2005; Waters & Wang, 2023).

Hence, this paper joins scholars like Huang and Yeoh (2011) and Waters (2015) in their call to make young student migrants' transnational lives more visible in literature. Specifically, it aims to surface how these students negotiate meanings of home during their educational sojourn. As Waters and Leung (2013, p. 607) have observed, 'international students have been perceived as interesting and remarkable precisely because they are temporarily 'out of place', away from and yet constantly evoking 'home''. This paper therefore will demonstrate how young student migrants offer a unique vantage point to further our understanding on children's geographies of home and the ways in which they intersect with education mobility.

Based on interviews with 18 mainland Chinese students who migrated to Singapore before 12 years old, this study explores how student migrants construct a sense of home in three main ways. First, I extend Nowicka's (2007) relational understanding of home, presenting student migrants' sense of home as embedded in friendship and familial ties. Here, I further unpack which family member(s) and why they are more influential to the student migrants when they construct home around social ties. Second, I examine how student migrants' sense of home is mobile and multi-scalar, stretching from their house to nation-state(s). Third, I contribute to the ongoing debate over the extant migration literature's tendency to overemphasise home's mobility and relationality. I argue that student migrants' sense of home is shaped by a combination of home's *physical*, *mobile* and *relational* dimensions.

The next section offers a literature review outlining the conceptual development of the notion of home in migration research. This is followed by the methodology section before I present the research findings. Finally, I conclude by highlighting this paper's contributions to the migration literature.

Home and Transnational Mobilities

Transnational migration literature has long documented transmigrants' physical mobility across borders, the causes and the socio-economic outcomes of their dual embeddedness in home and host societies (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). However, living a transnational life is also an affective and transformative experience for the transmigrants. Scholars thus called for an embodied understanding of

transnationalism by exploring migrants' lived experiences and complex emotions engendered during transnational movement (Dunn, 2010; Wolf, 1997). Central to this academic project to understand transmigrants' lives is the discussion on themes such as ideas of home.

For much of the twentieth century, home was conceptualised as a 'a safe and still place to leave and return to (whether house, village, region or nation)' (Rapport & Dawson, 1998, p. 6). Home is often regarded as a significant place where its presumed stability, singularity and boundedness allow one to develop a firm sense of place-attachment, belonging and identity (Easthope, 2004). In contemporary research, however, scholars challenge the sense that home is fixed and sedentary. The theoretical discussion has shifted towards the 'threshold-crossing capacity of home', where home's boundaries are permeable, allowing people to foster connections with one another and places across time and space (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011, p. 518).

This debate is particularly prominent in research examining the meaning of home for transmigrants. Rapport and Dawson (1998) argue that as migrants engage in extensive transnational activities, leaving one's country-of-origin is no longer a process of uprooting and disconnection from home and homeland (Basch et al., 1994; Glick-Schiller et al., 1995). Limiting their attachment to one particular place and calling it home also becomes impossible and unnecessary (Constable, 1999). In this regard, Al-Ali and Koser (2002) propose that notions of home be reconceptualised in terms of mobility, fluidity, and multiplicity. The place-based understanding of home as a stable point of origin is hence destabilised as focus shifts to the multi-dimensional, flexible and mobile geographies of home routed through migrants' complex transnational networks (Blunt & Dowling,

2006, 2022; Fouron, 2003).

Several geographers have explored how transmigrants cultivate a mobile sense of home. For example, in her research on South Asian migrants' display of material culture in their homes in London, Tolia-Kelly showed that these migrants transferred feelings of home into their material possessions by imbuing them with 'embodied memories of past landscapes and relationships with pre-migratory lives' (2004, p. 685; 2006). In this manner, home becomes portable, reproducible, and mobile (Boccagni, 2022). It stretches beyond one's physical dwelling, spans across transnational space, and binds one to their past and present life (Blunt, 2005). Similarly exploring the mobile geographies of home, Nowicka (2007) found that transmigrants can identify with multiple homes by organising their sense of home around relationships, like their family and friends. By attaching a sense of familiarity to these relationship networks and moving together with them, mobile individuals create a sense of home anywhere and everywhere (ibid). Home is, therefore, fluid and unfixed (Allen, 2008). This resembles Doreen Massey's (1992) understanding of home as 'open; constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it' (p. 14).

Nevertheless, in migration literature where the relational view of home is discussed, few scholars unpack the complexities of family relations. They seldom treat migrants' relationships with individual family members as distinct and assume all family members are equally important in shaping migrants' sense of home (Lam & Yeoh, 2004). In contrast, this research investigates which specific family member(s), if any, and why they are more influential to the transmigrants when they construct their sense of home in terms of their familial ties.

Furthermore, recent scholarship on the migration-home nexus has cautioned against extant literature's tendency to overemphasise home's mobility and relationality (Boccagni, 2017). They highlight the continued salience of a place's 'contextual physicality' in shaping migrant's sense of home (Boccagni, 2022, p. 151). Butcher (2010) argues that while positioning home as a set of relationships freed it from being associated with a fixed location, migrants, even those with thick transnational networks, need not feel at home everywhere and anywhere. Instead, they may want to ground their sense of home to a specific material place due to that place's 'imagined and concrete' characteristics (ibid, p. 23). Indeed, Liu (2014) found that Chinese transmigrants in New Zealand, while constructing ideas of home fluidly and relationally, anchor their sense of home to a specific location, New Zealand, due to their attraction towards its social-political characteristics. In this sense, home is simultaneously fluid, relational and materially rooted (Wiles, 2008). Therefore, Ralph and Staheli (2011) stress that these aspects of home must be seen as 'enmeshed and working together, without marginalising either of these qualities' (p. 525).

Adopting this perspective, this research explores how home's physical, mobile, and relational dimensions intersect and influence transmigrants', like the mainland Chinese student migrants' perceptions of home. The following section will discuss the methodology employed for this research.

Research Methodology

The data for this paper is primarily drawn from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 individuals who migrated from mainland China to Singapore before 12 years old to pursue their education in Singapore public school. The interviews were conducted between July and September 2023, originally for the purpose of an undergraduate thesis exploring mainland Chinese students' childhood education migration experiences in Singapore. The extant literature has focused mainly on tertiary students' experiences (Yang, 2014a; 2014b; 2016; 2017); this study examines those who experienced education mobilities during childhood[2] (Waters & Brooks, 2022).

The participants were recruited through snowball sampling, where I first contacted suitable individuals within my social circle. Subsequent recruitments were sustained through initial contact's recommendation. Since this research aims to capture individuals' lived experiences rather than to achieve representativity, the small sample size and sampling strategy were reasonable (Dworkin, 2012). Nonetheless, measures were taken to improve sample diversity by attending to participants' gender, age of migration and place of origin. In total, 6 males and 12 females, aged 21 to 25, were recruited. The participants originated from various Chinese cities and their age of migration ranged from 4 to 12 years old. All but one participant arrived in Singapore with at least one parent, though mostly with their mothers. Almost all participants who once held a student visa proceeded to obtain Singapore's permanent residency (PR), and many eventually became Singapore citizens at the point of the interview. Participants' citizenship and visa status affect their rights for indefinite leave to remain in Singapore and China and were thought to influence their perceptions of home. This turned out to be the case, as discussed later. The following table summarises the participant profile and participants were pseudonymised to protect their anonymity.

Table 1: Profile of interviewees

Pseudonym	Gender (F/M)	Current Age (Age of migration)	Hometown	Who moved together	Citizenship/ Visa status *
Kyla	F	21 (6)	Wuxi	Mother	SG
Hongwei	M	23 (10)	Foshan	Mother and sister	PRC
Molly	F	23 (10)	Zhuhai	Mother	SG
Autumn	F	22 (9)	Jilin	Parents	SG
Tiffaney	F	22 (8)	Liaoning	Mother	PRC/SG PR/ Applying SG
Bonnie	F	23 (10)	Guangzhou	Mother	PRC/ SG PR
Elly	F	22 (10)	Shanghai	Parents	PRC/SG PR
Winnie	F	21 (10)	Weihai	Mother	SG
Ze Kai	M	24 (10)	Wuhan	Mother	SG
Zixin	F	21 (10)	Putian	Parents and Siblings	SG
Zoey	F	21 (11)	Xian	Alone	PRC/ SG PR/ Applying SG
Will	M	25 (8)	Wuhan	Mother	SG
Yu	M	23 (12)	Chengdu	Parents	SG
Matthew	M	24 (8)	Beijing	Parents	SG
Mengmeng	F	22 (4)	Changchun	Parents	SG
Laurin	F	22 (7)	Fuzhou	Mother	PRC/ SG PR/ Applying SG
Tom	M	22 (10)	Yunnan	Mother (Left at 16)	SG
Rui	F	22 (11)	Wuxi	Mother and sibling	SG

*__SG__: Singapore Citizenship | __PRC__: China Citizenship | __SG PR__: Singapore Permanent Resident | __Applying SG__: Applying for Singapore Citizenship

Interviews generally lasted between 40 to 70 minutes. During the interview, I employed a grounded approach where participants first defined the idea of home in their own words, and I generated follow-up questions based on their interpretations. This approach helped me privilege participants' narratives and avoid imposing my opinions on them. After all, the definition of home is highly subjective. The interview language was in a mixture of English and Mandarin. Responses in Mandarin were later translated and transcribed into English for thematic analysis with Nvivo.

In addition, photo elicitation – the incorporation of photographs during

interviews, was conducted. I adopted a participant-driven approach (Bates et al., 2017) where participants were invited to find a maximum of three photographs they thought best represented their perceptions of home. Conscious of confidentiality and privacy, participants were reminded to select appropriate photographs that did not reveal any faces. During the interview, participants were asked to share their rationale behind choosing the photograph(s) and their interpretations of the photograph(s) in relation to their definition of home. Photo elicitation enriches in-depth interviews as photographs are powerful in evoking memories, which is particularly useful for this study that requires participants to reflect upon their childhood migration experiences (Copes et al., 2018). Photo elicitation also helped participants consider their understanding of home which could have been taken-for-granted (Harper, 1986).

Finally, as a mainland Chinese student migrant who moved to Singapore at age 7, I was situated in a privileged position as an insider. I shared many similar childhood experiences with participants, and this helped me better empathise with their 'cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts' which was crucial for yielding rich responses (Chavez, 2008, p. 481). However, I recognise that my familiarity with the research community can pose challenges to untangling assumptions during the research process (Greene, 2014). Moreover, as Chhabra (2020) points out, one cannot assume that insiders have full knowledge of the research group's experiences as they might have 'distinctive personal and social features coupled with multi-layered identities' (p. 308). Thus, I was committed to reflexivity during data collection and analysis. I actively reflected upon my migratory experiences, biases and positionality so my insiderness benefits rather than hinders the research.

The following section will discuss how student migrants construct a sense of home in three themes that emerged during data analysis.

Home as social relation

In analysing the data, I wanted to understand how young student migrants define home, and if and how their childhood educational mobility shapes the way in which they construct home's meanings. I asked them to describe what home meant to them and many did not associate home with a fixed locality. They rejected a bounded imaginary of home and instead articulated a relational and emotional-laden view of home. Tiffaney presented a photograph of herself and her friends (see Figure 1) and explains: '[Home] is not about the country or geographical location, but the people that you are with [like her friends] that makes a place feel home'. Similarly, Zoey described her home as where her family is. Both Zoey and Tiffaney's accounts mirror Lam and Yeoh's (2004) observations of Malaysian-Chinese transmigrants in Singapore who construct home primarily through their social ties.

Figure 1: A picture of Tiffaney and her two closest friends. Her friends and spending time with them makes Tiffaney feels at home.

Furthermore, Zixin's account of her

migration experience with her parents and brothers adds another layer of complexity to the relational understanding of home:

> It [Home] feels the same to me, like when I was like 10 years old. Cause everybody is like moving together. It's not like I went to Singapore alone.

Unlike many other participants who migrated either alone or with their mothers, Zixin moved to Singapore with her entire family. As such, Zixin's family life did not change drastically, and she could continue cultivating a sense of home based on the togetherness of her family. In this sense, transnational migration did not engender ideas of leaving home or becoming uprooted (Ahmed et al., 2003). Instead, Zixin can feel at home regardless of where she goes so long as she is with her family. This echoes Nowicka's (2007, p. 69) observations of transnational individuals who define their home as 'a set of relationships' where its significance lies beyond the home's physical location or qualities.

Kinship and friendship have been suggested as significant to student migrants' understanding of home due to the emotional tenor embedded within these ties, specifically, the feeling of safety and familiarity commonly associated with home (Tuan, 2004). Winnie, for example, feels at home with her extended family as she saw these people as dependable, and they are her pillars of support. Only when Winnie is surrounded by these family members can she 'feel safe and protected', and as she emphasised, she can 'don't really need to think about anything else [and be] just like a child in the family'. Several others shared Winnie's sentiment where they derive a sense of safety and support from their tight-knit relationships with their kins, through which they can feel at home.

However, while family and friends are important, they do not contribute equally to the informants' feelings of home. For some, home is a relational space organised exclusively around their mothers. Zekai, who migrated with his mother, first defined home as where his family is located, but he quickly corrected his definition:

> Even though we have a house in China, and some other parts of my family are in China, but I am closer to my mum and I kind of think home is just where mum is.

In Zekai's account, physical dwelling and his extended family (including his father) are relatively unimportant compared to his mother in shaping his sense of home. Kyla, who also migrated with her mother, explained that home is associated with her mother as:

> I came to Singapore with her [mother] and my dad just drops by every now and then from China.

Both Zekai and Kyla's mother-centred ideas of home, I argue, stems from their experience with transnational split family arrangement, a strategy adopted by many young East Asian student migrants' families to secure better educational prospect for their children (Waters, 2005). Most informants were accompanied by their mother to study in Singapore at a young age and were separated from their fathers who continued to work in mainland China to finance their education. While all student migrants I spoke to, who grew up in such family arrangement, maintained regular contact with their fathers through video calls, they only saw their fathers in person once or twice a year during school holidays.

The absence of the informants' fathers contrasts sharply with the everyday presence of their mothers. As Kyla noted:

> my mum is the one who cooks for me, settle everything and basically keeps me alive. Not that my dad is not important, I still love him but he was pretty much non-existent in my daily life.

For Kyla, the mundane, everyday caregiving tasks performed by her mother are vital for constructing a sense of stability in her everyday experience of home (Ratnam, 2018). With her mother's support, she could thus overcome the disruptions of migration and re-establish a sense of home.

Overall, as young student migrants navigate their new life in Singapore, they rely primarily on meaningful social and familial relations to construct a sense of home. It is through their interactions with these relations, especially with their mothers, that created the safe, familiar, and stable environment where they can feel at home during their educational sojourn.

Home as mobile and transnational

Following the discussion in the previous section, this section argues that student migrants' home, as a set of meaningful relationships, is also mobile and stretches across boundaries. This is observed in Zekai, who commented that his home would not be a static one. Home will shift and evolve as he goes through life experiences, such as his mother's return migration and starting his own family in the future:

> If she [mother] is in Singapore, home is in Singapore. If she is in China, home is in China. But in the end, if I have my own family, I think home will just be where my family members are.

Here, Zekai's conception of home resonates with Boccagni's (2017, p. 34) that transmigrants' sense of home is an 'open-ended social process'. Home is malleable and need not anchor at the same place over time. Furthermore, Mazzucato and van Geel (2022) claim that migration places young migrants within the transnational social field where they forge connections with multiple locations and subsequently create a sense of home 'here' and 'there'. Bonnie drew attention to this multiplicity of homes:

> They [China and Singapore] are like my first home and second home […] It's [Singapore] more like a second home because I made a lot of friends in Singapore.

On the one hand, Bonnie is attached to her home of origin due to a strong familial network. This sense of home is sustained after migration as she engages in transnational activities such as spending time with her relatives in China during school holidays and keeping herself in touch with Chinese trends, so she has common topics with her relatives. These transnational practices help her maintain familial connections that strengthen her sense of home in her home society. On the other hand, as she experiences schooling in Singapore, her social network within Singapore densifies and engenders a sense of familiarity that makes Singapore home-like as well (Wu & Wilkes, 2017). Bonnie's home is thus not restricted to a single site. Her home stretches across space in two countries, resonating with Massey's (1992) understanding of home as a place that is 'open; constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it' (p. 14).

Interestingly, Yu, who recognises home's plurality and shares Bonnie's attachment to Singapore, does not consider

the whole of China his other home. Instead, he saw his home, apart from Singapore, as Chengdu, a city in southwestern China where his grandparents live. Autumn, on the other hand, does not attach feelings of home to Singapore as a national entity but to her flat in Singapore, where she lives with her parents and conducts daily routines (see Figure 2). Here, Autumn, Yu and Bonnie demonstrate the multi-scalarity of home. It can be felt over a range of scales simultaneously, from house, city to country. Hence, as student migrants' establish and sustain transnational social ties, home is stretched across multiple scales, locations and becomes transnationalised (Blunt & Dowling, 2022).

Figure 2: Autumn's flat in Singapore.

Grounding a sense of home

While several studies highlighted that transmigrants' views of home are relational, mobile and multiple (Nowicka, 2007; Ahmed et al., 2003; Al-Ali & Koser, 2003), other scholars have cautioned against an overemphasis of these characteristics of home to the extreme where a sense of home can be produced anywhere without considering home's physical dimensions (Wiles, 2008; Butcher, 2010). My findings reveal an interconnection between the physical, relational and mobile aspects of home. While most informants conceptualised their ideas of home fluidly and relationally at the start of the interview, it became apparent as the interview

progressed that their home did eventually ground to a specific material place. Rui first defined home as 'somewhere where you have your social relations'. However, since most of her social ties are now in Singapore, she 'feel[s] more comfortable calling Singapore home'. Despite Rui's sense of home being geographically independent and relational, Singapore is the physical site of social ties which serves as the basis for manifesting and materialising their sense of home (Liu, 2014). The physical aspect of home thus ties in with its relational dimension when student migrants construct their understanding of home.

Besides being a central site for social ties, Singapore's tangible qualities such as economic prosperity and liveability also contribute to anchoring student migrants' sense of home in the city-state, albeit more pragmatically. Will claimed that he feels more at home in Singapore after considering the 'more realistic, more societal perspectives as to how the society is well going, how it is suitable for living and the kinds of privileges and advantages you have living in this country'. Several others shared Will's sentiments where they described feeling increasingly rooted in Singapore because:

> Tom: [Singapore] gives me more opportunities lah […] in terms of finding a local job.

> Mengmeng: [Singapore] is a very safe and a very fair environment. That everyone gets equal opportunity to work towards […] in my hometown, that isn't the case.

> Zekai: I do think Singapore is a more free country in the sense that I have more freedom and I feel more comfortable. In China, you know, like Instagram, google, all these is ban[ned]. You have to use VPN. I think this is a

big turnoff.

For these student migrants, a crucial aspect of perceiving Singapore as 'home' was the comparison between the positive perceptions of Singapore's socio-economic and political environment and the perceived negativity of living in China. They believed that Singapore offers them the opportunity to live comfortably, be free and thrive, all of which they felt could not be fully experienced in their country of origin. The student migrants' rationales for situating a sense of home in Singapore thus reveal the continued salience of 'the characteristics, imagined and concrete, of a place' in influencing one's home feelings (Butcher, 2010, p. 23). I argue that Singapore's socio-economic and political features underscore these student migrants' feelings of home as these features were what attracted their families to choose Singapore as a study destination in the first place (Collins et al., 2014). Evidently, Singapore has lived up to their expectations. As student migrants enjoy and become accustomed to Singapore's positive environment, they begin to view Singapore as not just a temporary study destination but as their ideal home to live in.

However, it is important to recognise that the tangible qualities which contributed to Will and others' grounding of Singapore as their ideal home, are only possible due to their position in Singapore's bifurcated immigration system. As student visa holders, informants are categorised as 'high-skilled foreign talent' who are eligible to apply for PR and subsequently, citizenship, to reside in Singapore indefinitely (Yap, 2015; Yang, 2014c). PR or citizenship application is not possible for low-skilled migrants on short-term work permits (see Yeoh, 2006). While Zhan and Zhou (2020) in their recent assessment of Singapore's immigration regime pointed out that it has become increasingly difficult for high-skilled immigrants to settle permanently in Singapore, with pathways to PR and citizenship significantly narrowed since 2010, nearly all my informants have successfully obtained Singapore PR and/or citizenship. The secure residency condition (PR/citizen) provides student migrants a sense of permanence, which then makes it possible for them to situate their sense of home in Singapore (Boccagni, 2017). In this sense, student migrants' ability to ground their sense of home in Singapore needs to be understood in the context of wider immigration and settlement policy that regulates their life.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how young mainland Chinese student migrants' construction of home intertwines with their childhood educational mobility in Singapore. By focusing on students' childhood mobility experiences, this paper responds to calls from children's geographers and migration scholars to incorporate the perspectives of MCYP, like young student migrants, into the predominantly adult-centric migration research, recognising children's active agency in migration (Huang and Yeoh, 2011). In doing so, this research also moves away from the extant ISM literature's capital-centric accounts of education migration. Instead, it sheds light on the lived experiences of student migrants' transnational childhood and contributes to advancing our understanding of how home is created and experienced in migration.

The findings reveal that student migrants' transnational networks have reshaped the geographies of their home, making it increasingly mobile and plurilocal. This fluid view of home is not devoid of meaning; rather, it is infused with significance, revolving around student

migrants' friends and family, especially their mothers. I have shown that student migrants' mother-centric ideas of home stem from their experience with transnational split family arrangement. These students migrated to Singapore with their mothers for education and were separated from their fathers, who continued to work in China. I argue that as student migrants navigate their new life in Singapore, their mothers become a critical source of familiarity and stability, supporting them in re-establishing a sense of home abroad.

My research also reveals that while the meanings of home have become more flexible and relationally defined, the physical dimension of home remains salient in grounding student migrants' sense of home. The findings illustrate that students choose to situate a sense of home in Singapore because they are attracted to its socio-economic and political environment, which they perceive as more ideal than that of their home society. The finding is consistent with recent debates on the migration-home nexus, which caution against an overemphasis on home's mobility and relationality, and instead, remain attentive to a place's 'contextual physicality' in shaping migrant's sense of home (Boccagni, 2022, p. 151). Oftentimes, transmigrants' understanding of home is constructed out of the interactions between home's physical, relational and mobile dimensions.

Finally, I highlight the need to recognise student migrants' position within Singapore's bifurcated immigration regime. Their ability to obtain a relatively secure residency status has shaped their capacity to develop a sense of home in the city-state. Thus, migrants' narratives and experiences of home need to be analysed in relation to the wider migration regime that regulates their lives. Overall, by giving voice to

young Chinese student migrants and being attentive to how they perceive home, this paper has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of transnational educational mobilities and children's geographies of home.

Notes

[1] A Student's Pass is available to a foreign child/young person who is enrolled full-time in an educational institution (ICA, 2023a). Prior to July 2024, only the mother or grandmother of a Student's Pass holder could be granted a Long-Term Visit Pass to accompany the child/young person during their studies in Singapore (ICA, 2023b). However, currently, a male guardian of a child studying in Singapore on a Student's Pass may apply for a Long-Term Visit Pass (ICA, 2024).

[2] While there is a lack of consensus on the age definition of children, 'childhood' is defined as the period before a child turns 12-years-old in this paper.

References

Ahmed, S., Castada, C., Fortier, A.-M., & Sheller, M. (2003). *Uprootings/regroundings: Questions of home and migration*. Oxford: Berg.

Al-Ali, N., & Koser, K. (2002). *New Approaches to Migration?: Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*. London: Routledge.

Allen, S. (2008). Finding Home: Challenges Faced by Geographically Mobile Families*. *Family Relations*, *57*(1), 84–99.

Basch, L., Glick Schiller, N., & Szanton Blanc, C. (1994). *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and*

Deterritorialized Nation-States. London: Routledge.

Bates, E. A., McCann, J. J., Kaye, L. K., & Taylor, J. C. (2017). "Beyond words": A researcher's guide to using photo elicitation in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *14*(4), 459–481.

Blunt, A. (2005). Cultural geography: Cultural geographies of home. *Progress in Human Geography*, *29*(4), 505–515.

Blunt, A., & Dowling, R. (2022). Home, Migration, and Diaspora. In A. Blunt & R. Dowling (Eds.), *Home* (2nd ed., pp. 247–308). London: Routledge.

Blunt, A., & Dowling, R. M. (2006). *Home*. London: Routledge.

Boccagni, P. (2017). *Migration and the search for home: Mapping domestic space in migrants' everyday lives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Boccagni, P. (2022). Homing: A category for research on space appropriation and 'home-oriented' mobilities. *Mobilities*, *17*(4), 585–601.

Boland, C. (2020). Hybrid identity and practices to negotiate belonging: Madrid's Muslim youth of migrant origin. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *8*(1), 26.

Butcher, M. (2010). From 'fish out of water' to 'fitting in': The challenge of re-placing home in a mobile world. *Population, Space and Place*, *16*(1), 23–36.

Center for China & Globalization. (2016). *Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2016) No.5*. Retrieved from: http://www.ccg.org.cn/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CCG%E6%8A%A5%E5%91%8A%EF%BC%9A%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%95%99%E5%AD%A6%E5%8F%91%E5%B1%95%E6%8A%A5%E5%91%8A%EF%BC%8820 16%EF%BC%89.pdf

Chavez, C. (2008). Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality. *The Qualitative Report*, *13*(3), 474–494.

Chhabra, G. (2020). Insider, Outsider or an In-Betweener? Epistemological Reflections of a Legally Blind Researcher on Conducting Cross-National Disability Research. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, *22*(1), 307–317.

Collins, F. L., Sidhu, R., Lewis, N., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2014). Mobility and desire: International students and Asian regionalism in aspirational Singapore. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *35*(5), 661–676.

Constable, N. (1999). At Home but Not at Home: Filipina Narratives of Ambivalent Returns. *Cultural Anthropology*, *14*(2), 203–228.

Copes, H., Tchoula, W., Brookman, F., & Ragland, J. (2018). Photo-Elicitation Interviews with Vulnerable Populations: Practical and Ethical Considerations. *Deviant Behavior*, *39*(4), 475–494.

Dunn, K. (2010). Embodied transnationalism: Bodies in transnational spaces. *Population, Space and Place*, *16*(1), 1–9.

Dworkin, S. L. (2012). Sample Size Policy for Qualitative Studies Using In-Depth Interviews. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *41*(6), 1319–1320.

Easthope, H. (2004). A place called home. *Housing, Theory and Society*, *21*(3), 128–138.

Ehrkamp, P., & Leitner, H. (2006). Rethinking Immigration and Citizenship: New Spaces of Migrant Transnationalism and Belonging. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, *38*(9), 1591–1597.

Fouron, G. E. (2003). Haitian Immigrants in the United States. In B. S. A. Yeoh, M. W. Charney, & T. C. Kiong (Eds.), *Approaching Transnationalisms: Studies on Transnational Societies, Multicultural Contacts, and Imaginings of Home* (pp. 205–250). Boston: Springer US.

Gargano, T. (2009). (Re)conceptualizing International Student Mobility: The Potential of Transnational Social Fields. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *13*(3), 331–346.

Glick-Schiller, N., Basch, L., & Blanc, C. S. (1995). From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *68*(1), 48–63.

Glick-Schiller, N., Basch, L., & Blanc-Szanton, C. (1992). Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *645*(1), 1–24.

Greene, M. (2014). On the Inside Looking In: Methodological Insights and Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Insider Research. *The Qualitative Report*, *19*(29), 1-13.

Harper, D. (1986). Meaning and Work: A Study in Photo Elicitation. *Current Sociology*, *34*(3), 24–46.

Huang, S., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2005). Transnational families and their children's education: China's 'study mothers' in Singapore. *Global Networks*, *5*(4), 379–400.

Huang, S., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2011). Navigating the terrains of transnational education: Children of Chinese 'study mothers' in Singapore. *Geoforum*, *42*(3), 394–403.

ICA. (2023a). *Becoming a Student's Pass Holder*. Retrieved from: https://www.ica.gov.sg/reside/STP/apply

ICA. (2023b). *Mother or Grandmother of a Child or Grandchild Studying in Singapore on a Student's Pass*. Retrieved from: https://www.ica.gov.sg/reside/LTVP/apply /mother-or-grandmother-of-a-child-or-grandchild-studying-in-singapore-on-a-student's-pass

ICA. (2024) *Parent or Grandparent of a Child or Grandchild Studying in Singapore on a Student's Pass.* Retrieved from: https://www.ica.gov.sg/reside/LTVP/apply /parent-or-grandparent-of-a-child-or-grandchild-studying-in-singapore-on-a-students-pass

Lam, T., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2004). Negotiating 'home' and 'national identity': Chinese-Malaysian transmigrants in Singapore. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, *45*(2), 141–164.

Levitt, P., & Jaworsky, B. N. (2007). Transnational Migration Studies: Past Developments and Future Trends. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *33*(1), 129–156.

Liu, L. S. (2014). A search for a place to call home: Negotiation of home, identity and senses of belonging among new

migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to New Zealand. *Emotion, Space and Society*, *10*, 18–26.

Liu-Farrer, G. (2022). International students as transnational migrants. In B. S. A. Yeoh & F. L. Collins (Eds.), *Handbook on Transnationalism* (pp. 294–309). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Massey, D. (1992). A place called home? *New Formations*, *1992*(17), 3–15.

Mazzucato, V., & van Geel, J. (2022). Transnational young people: Growing up and being active in a transnational social field. In B. S. A. Yeoh & F. L. Collins (Eds.), *Handbook on Transnationalism* (pp. 198–210). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

McDonnell, S. (2021). Narrating homes in process: Everyday politics of migrant childhoods. *Childhood*, *28*(1), 118-136.

Ní Laoire, C., Carpena-Méndez, F., & White, A. (2016). *Childhood and Migration in Europe: Portraits of Mobility, Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Ireland*. London: Routledge.

Nowicka, M. (2007). Mobile locations: Construction of home in a group of mobile transnational professionals. *Global Networks*, *7*(1), 69–86.

Prazeres, L. (2018). At home in the city: Everyday practices and distinction in international student mobility. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *19*(7), 914–934.

Ralph, D., & Staeheli, L. A. (2011). Home and Migration: Mobilities, Belongings and Identities. *Geography Compass*, *5*(7), 517–530.

Rapport, N., & Dawson, A. (1998). *Migrants of identity: Perceptions of home in a world of movement*. Oxford: Berg.

Ratnam, C. (2018). Creating home: Intersections of memory and identity. *Geography Compass*, *12*(4), e12363.

Tolia-Kelly, D. P. (2004). Materializing post-colonial geographies: Examining the textural landscapes of migration in the South Asian home. *Geoforum*, *35*(6), 675–688.

Tolia-Kelly, D. P. (2006). A Journey Through the Material Geographies of Diaspora Cultures: Four Modes of Environmental Memory. In K. Burrell & P. Panayi, *Histories and Memories: Migrants and their History in Britain* (pp. 149–170). London: I. B. Tauris.

Tsong, Y., & Liu, Y. (2008). Parachute kids and astronaut families. In N. Tewari & A. N. Alvarez (Eds.), *Asian American Psychology* (pp. 365–380). New York: Psychology Press.

Tuan, Y.-F. (2004). Home. In S. Harrison, S. Pile, & N. Thrift (Eds.), *Patterned Ground Entanglements of Nature and Culture* (pp. 164–165). London: Reaktion Books.

Waters, J. (2015). Educational imperatives and the compulsion for credentials: Family migration and children's education in East Asia. *Children's Geographies*, *13*(3), 280–293.

Waters, J., & Brooks, R. (2021). *Student Migrants and Contemporary Educational Mobilities*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Waters, J., & Brooks, R. (2022). Geographies of education at macro-, meso-, and micro-scales: Young people and

international student mobility. In J. H. McKendrick, L. Hammond, M. Biddulph & S. Catling (Eds.), *Children, Education and Geography* (pp. 21–35). Oxon: Routledge.

Waters, J. L. (2005). Transnational family strategies and education in the contemporary Chinese diaspora. *Global Networks*, *5*(4), 359–377.

Waters, J. L. (2012). Geographies of International Education: Mobilities and the Reproduction of Social (Dis)advantage. *Geography Compass*, *6*(3), 123–136.

Waters, J. L., & Wang, Z. (2023). Families in educational migration: Strategies, investments and emotions. In J. L. Waters & B. S.A. Yeoh (Eds.), *Handbook on Migration and the Family* (pp. 200–216). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Wiles, J. (2008). Sense of home in a transnational social space: New Zealanders in London. *Global Networks*, *8*(1), 116–137.

Wolf, D. L. (1997). Family Secrets: Transnational Struggles among Children of Filipino Immigrants. *Sociological Perspectives*, *40*(3), 457–482.

Wu, C., & Wilkes, R. (2017). International students' post-graduation migration plans and the search for home. *Geoforum*, *80*, 123–132.

Yang, P. (2014a) A Phenomenology of being "Very China": An Ethnographic Report on the Self-Formation Experiences of Mainland Chinese Undergraduate "Foreign Talents" in Singapore. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 42(3-4), 233-261.

Yang, P. (2014b) Privilege, Prejudice, Predicament: "PRC Scholars" in Singapore – An Overview. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 9(3), 350-376

Yang, P. (2014c) "Authenticity" and "Foreign Talent" in Singapore: The Relative and Negative Logic of National Identity. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 29(2), 408-437

Yang, P. (2016). *International Mobility and Educational Desire: Chinese Foreign Talent Students in Singapore*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Yang, P. (2017). Understanding 'integration': Chinese 'foreign talent' students in Singapore talking about rongru. *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration, 1*(1), 29-45.

Yap, M. T. (2015). Immigration and integration in Singapore: Trends, rationale and policy response. In M. T. Yap, G. Koh, & D. Soon (Eds.), *Migration and Integration in Singapore: Policies and Practice* (pp. 25–38). Oxon: Routledge.

Yeoh, B. S. A. (2006). Bifurcated Labour: The Unequal Incorporation of Transmigrants in Singapore. *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie*, *97*(1), 26–37.

Zhan, S., & Zhou, M. (2020). Precarious talent : highly skilled Chinese and Indian immigrants in Singapore. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 43(9), 1654-1762.

Research Article

Immigrant Parents and Mother Tongue Language Education in Singapore's Bilingual System

Britney Qi Wen ONG
Lee Tat CHOW
Peidong YANG

National Institute of Education (Singapore)
Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

Abstract

Bilingualism has been the cornerstone of Singapore's language policy since 1959 (Lee & Phua, 2020). Given Singapore's diverse population, it is crucial to understand how immigrant parents from various cultural backgrounds perceive and engage with the country's bilingual education system. This paper investigates the perceptions and involvement of immigrant parents in the Mother Tongue Language (MTL) component of Singapore's bilingual education framework. The study focuses on two groups: Chinese immigrants from mainland China and non-Chinese immigrants from countries such as India and the Philippines. The research highlights immigrant parents' positive views on bilingual education framework as a benefit of migrating to Singapore for their children's education. Parents consider factors like future career prospects, cultural preservation, social integration, and reducing academic pressure when selecting their children's MTL. While some face challenges in navigating their children's MTL learning, others find their children adapt well. Nevertheless, all parents actively engage in efforts to enhance their children's MTL proficiency, whether by enrolling them in tuition classes, incorporating language-focused activities at home, or through other supportive measures.

Introduction

Singapore is a city-state of rich diversities. As of 2024, the non-resident population in Singapore numbered about 1.86 million, constituting approximately 30 percent of the country's total population of around 6.04 million (Prime Minister's Office, 2024). This substantial group plays a pivotal role in society, not only due to their numbers but also because of their potential impact on Singapore's social and cultural fabric. As immigrants integrate into the local community, their experiences, values, and perspectives can profoundly shape and be shaped by the existing cultural milieu. Paying research attention to the immigrant population, particularly immigrant parents who are often deeply invested in their children's education, can provide an important lens through which to examine the wider dynamics of cultural integration, educational adaptation, and community cohesion. Moreover, given Singapore's foundational bilingual education model, studying immigrant

parents' interactions with the educational system can offer valuable insights for shaping policies and practices aimed at fostering linguistic inclusivity within society. Immigrant parents, therefore, represent an important demographic for research, offering invaluable perspectives on the evolving multicultural landscape of Singapore.

Singapore's bilingual policy was implemented following the election of the People's Action Party (PAP) to power in 1959 (National Library Board, 2023). Under this policy, students are required to achieve proficiency in their official mother tongue—Chinese, Malay, or Tamil—while simultaneously receiving instruction in English as their 'first language'. The PAP government instituted English as Singapore's primary working language due to its significance in international business, diplomacy, and technology (Lee & Phua, 2020). Beyond its role in facilitating international trade and knowledge transfer, English also serves as a unifying force in Singaporean society, effectively bridging the linguistic diversity among the country's various ethnic groups, enabling interaction, collaboration, and mutual understanding (Wang, 2015). Recognizing the significance of mastering the English language, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew also emphasized the importance of being proficient in one's mother tongue, stressing that it is more than a simple communication tool (Lee, 2012). Mother tongue is central in preserving cultural heritage, allowing individuals to connect with the rich history, traditions, and customs of their ancestors. Additionally, it serves as a repository of a community's values and beliefs. Mastering one's mother tongue also nurtures a sense of cultural identity and belonging.

While it is mandatory for students in Singapore to learn an official MTL, there are exceptions for foreign students and those with special needs. With the flexibility offered by the Ministry of Education (MOE), immigrant parents have the option to decide whether they want their children to study an official MTL or opt for a Foreign Language such as French, German, or Japanese, Arabic, or an Asian Language like Burmese, or Thai (Ministry of Education Singapore, n.d.). Factors influencing the decisions made by immigrant parents for their children's MTL education may include their cultural backgrounds, language preferences, and educational aspirations for their children. However, to date, there has been limited research on this topic. Therefore, understanding the immigrant parents' perceptions and involvement of Singapore's educational landscape can offer valuable insights on the complexities of immigrant families' experiences within the educational system.

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have examined the language experiences of immigrant families within various countries' educational systems. For example, Barkhuizen (2006) and Park and Sarkar (2007) explored immigrant parents' perceptions and involvement in heritage language (HL) maintenance in their new countries of residence. Focusing on Afrikaans-speaking South African immigrants residing in New Zealand, Barkhuizen's study revealed that immigrant parents were concerned about their children potentially losing the Afrikaans language and culture. They struggled to balance their emotional attachment to Afrikaans with the practical need for their children to adapt to an English-speaking society. In contrast, Park and Sarkar's study on Korean immigrants residing in Montreal, Canada observed differing opinions among immigrant parents regarding the impact of Montreal's

multilingual environment on their children's language development. While some parents found managing the multilingual environment—comprising English, French, and Korean—challenging, others viewed it as an advantage, believing it fostered their children's appreciation for multilingualism in a diverse society.

Furthermore, some parents believed that the language environment in Montreal had little effect on their children's HL development and that a positive parental attitude towards the Korean language was the most crucial factor in helping their children maintain their HL. Both studies suggested that immigrant parents across different contexts face unique challenges and hold varying perspectives regarding their children's language development and cultural preservation. Additionally, both studies highlighted that immigrant parents often used their HL during family conversations to maintain their cultural and linguistic heritage. This finding was further supported by a recent study conducted by Liao and Huang (2020), who examined cross-cultural families in Australia. Their case study, featuring six interviewees from three different cross-cultural family units, revealed that Chinese parents prioritized the acquisition of HL, emphasising its use in family conversations as a means to enhance their children's HL learning.

Liao and Huang's study also highlighted the differences in parental perceptions regarding HL maintenance, particularly in relation to ethnic background. Chinese parents typically showed positive attitudes towards their children's acquisition of HL, in contrast to the often negative perceptions held by non-Chinese parents. These differing attitudes influenced how parents approached language learning. Chinese parents were highly proactive in managing their children's HL learning, such as by reading Chinese storybooks and practicing Chinese as much as possible. In contrast, non-Chinese parents were less active, focusing more on leisure activities like preparing Chinese meals at home and dining at Chinese restaurants. Liao and Huang (2020) noted that these findings were expected, as Australian parents without a Chinese cultural background often lacked the proficiency and ability to directly assist in their children's HL learning.

The existing literature also provides valuable insights on how immigrant parents in various countries perceive the challenges and opportunities associated with HL maintenance for their children, as well as the strategies they employ to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage. It is also important to note that several scholars have thoroughly researched parents' language ideologies regarding the maintenance of their children's HL. For instance, a study by Wang and Li (2024) revealed a noticeable trend among Chinese immigrant parents in Australia, showing a preference for economic benefits over cultural pride in their efforts to maintain their children's Mandarin proficiency. This shift was driven by the increasing commercialization of Mandarin. Nonetheless, parents continued to view language as a means of preserving their cultural heritage. These insights from existing research elsewhere prompt us to delve deeper into the motivations behind the language choices made by immigrant parents within the context of Singapore.

Overall, while extensive research has been conducted on the language experiences of immigrant families in different countries' educational systems and their motivations to maintain HL, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning Singapore. Limited research has been conducted on the perspectives of immigrant parents regarding Singapore's education system, particularly the MTL

education within its bilingual framework. Given Singapore's ethnically diverse population, this presents an intriguing opportunity to investigate how immigrant parents from diverse backgrounds perceive the educational landscape in Singapore.

Methodology

The data used in this study were collected from an ongoing qualitative study conducted by NTU-NIE, which investigates how immigrant parents influence their children's education in Singapore. Participants were selected based on specific criteria: both parents had to be foreign-born, regardless of their residential status. Participants of Malaysian background were excluded due to their cultural proximity to Singapore. Additionally, participants needed to have children enrolled in mainstream Singapore schools, excluding international and specialized institutions, covering the educational range from Primary to Post-Secondary stages.

Participants were primarily recruited through snowball sampling and advertisements on public noticeboards. At the time of data analysis, a total of 64 participants (Chinese = 31, Filipino = 12,

Indian = 14, Indonesian = 4, Others = 3) had been interviewed. However, this paper focuses on data from 20 participants (Chinese = 10, Filipino = 3, Indian = 5, Indonesian = 1, Others = 1) (see Figure 1). The majority of these participants were mothers from China, the Philippines, and India, mostly in their 40s to 50s. Many held Singaporean citizenship or permanent resident status.

Data collection began with an online survey to gather basic demographic information from the participants before the interviews. This was followed by in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted one-on-one, typically over two sessions, in the participants' preferred language—either Mandarin or English. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their original languages, with Mandarin transcripts being translated into English. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives about the parents' migration experiences and, more importantly, to explore their perspectives on parental involvement, expectations, and ideologies. Special attention was given to the participants' unique immigrant trajectories and backgrounds.

Figure 1: Table of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Residential status	Child's age	Migration age (child)
Camila	Female	40	China	Singapore Citizen	7.5	Before 12 years old
Cecilia	Female	40	China	Singapore Citizen	9	Before 12 years old
Penny	Female	44	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	8, 11	Before 12 years old
Linda	Female	44	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	13, 17	Not applicable
Sam	Male	40	China	Singapore Citizen	11	Not applicable

Winnie	Female	48	China	Long Term Visit Pass (LTVP)	17	Before 12 years old
Harley	Female	53	China	Singapore Citizen	14	Not applicable
Jenny	Female	40	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	12, 18, 20	Not applicable
Yvette	Female	45	China	Singapore Citizen	14, 16	Not applicable
Sandy	Female	39	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	12	Before 12 years old
Melanie	Female	40	Philippines	Singapore Citizen	6, 8	Before 12 years old
Jessica	Female	47	Philippines	Permanent Resident (PR)	16, 18	Before 12 years old
Richard	Male	48	Philippines	Singapore Citizen	13	Not applicable
Aanya	Female	38	India	Employment Pass (EP)	6	Not applicable
Amrita	Female	42	India	Permanent Resident (PR)	16	Before 12 years old
Siara	Female	49	India	Singapore Citizen	19	Before 12 years old
Manish	Male	39	India	Employment Pass (EP)	10	Before 12 years old
Maya	Female	38	India	Permanent Resident (PR)	7	Before 12 years old
Moses	Male	61	Indonesia	SingaporeCitizen	20	Not applicable
Caitlyn	Female	40	Germany	Permanent Resident (PR)	9	Not applicable

Chinese immigrant parents' perceptions of bilingualism as an advantage of migrating

When discussing the advantages of migrating to Singapore, most Chinese immigrant parents viewed Singapore's bilingual education system as a significant benefit, whereas none of the non-Chinese immigrant parents cited it as an advantage. Winnie, a 48-year-old Chinese mother of one, viewed the system positively, acknowledging the substantial value and unique benefits the system offered her son:

So, in this case, the various conditions, including the bilingual education, make it rather advantageous for Chinese children to come here. No matter what the case is, my son's Mother Tongue is Chinese, in addition to English [which he is learning], we hope he can become an international talent in the future. So, in this bilingual education environment, I think only Singapore can do it thoroughly, among more than 200 countries in the world.

Many other Chinese immigrant parents echoed Winnie's sentiments, believing that Singapore's education system's appeal lies

in its ability to nurture international talent through its emphasis on bilingualism. Camila, a 40-year-old Chinese mother of one, explained:

One of the advantages of Singapore education that attracts me is the bilingual programme. Although we had an opportunity in UK or other English-speaking countries at that time, my child will lose the advantage of bilingualism because is quite difficult to learn Chinese in those countries.

Camila's view of Singapore's unique linguistic blend as a significant advantage over other English-speaking countries parallels Ren and Hu's (2012) study, which revealed that Chinese immigrant families consider Singapore's bilingual education system a favourable aspect of living in the country.

Immigrant parents' choices in MTL education for their children

In the context of Singapore's bilingual education framework, various MTLs are offered, and immigrant parents often weigh four main considerations when selecting an MTL for their children: career prospects, cultural connection, social integration, and alleviating learning burdens.

Career Prospects

One of the most significant considerations is career prospects. Many immigrant parents view proficiency in a particular MTL as a valuable asset that can enhance their children's future career opportunities. Among the available MTLs, the Chinese Language (CL) is particularly seen as advantageous. A considerable number of parents, including those who are not of Chinese descent, believed that acquiring proficiency in CL could greatly improve their children's competitiveness in

the professional arena, especially by providing access to the Chinese economy. This perspective aligns with Wang and Li's (2024) study, which finds a strong preference among participants for the economic benefits associated with choosing CL as their children's MTL.

For instance, Richard, a 48-year-old Filipino father of one, strongly advocated for his son to learn CL. He expressed, "I never had second thoughts on having him learn Chinese…it will definitely be useful probably in a business context or in a corporate context that he knows it." This statement underscores Richard's deliberate and strategic decision, highlighting his high expectations for his child's future and his proactive approach to his son's language education. Jessica, a 47-year-old Filipino mother of two, shared Richard's views on the importance of CL proficiency for her children. She noted, "Internationally, we know that China has a big percentage of influence around the world. Aside from English, the second language that can communicate well, is Chinese." By recognising China's substantial global influence and positioning CL as a key language for effective international communication, Jessica acknowledged the practical and career-related benefits that come with choosing CL as her child's MTL.

Similarly, Melanie, a 40-year-old Filipino mother of two, echoed the perspectives of Richard and Jessica. Reflecting on her decision, she explained:

It's been…like when he was young, when he was 3 years old, then I sent him to a center for Chinese class because we have no…because we know we will put him in the local schools and also I like him to learn Chinese. It is good to have a good… you know, to learn Chinese right so ya, in my work, as [a Relations Manager], like most of the Chinese, they really bring in the big

clients right, so ya it is good to learn Chinese.

Melanie's decision was driven by practical considerations from her role as a Relations Manager. She recognized the advantages of CL proficiency in engaging clients and creating business opportunities, which led her to select CL as her child's MTL.

<u>Cultural Connection</u>

Some immigrant parents emphasize the role of language in preserving and enhancing cultural identity. They deliberately choose their own mother tongue to deepen their children's connection to their home culture, fostering a deep understanding of their cultural roots and heritage. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Barkhuizen (2006), which highlights a shared sentiment among different immigrant communities regarding the significance of language in maintaining cultural ties and heritage.

While acknowledging the advantages of learning CL, Aanya, a 38-year-old Indian mother of one, opted for Tamil as her child's MTL. She explained:

See, a lot of people they prefer to take Chinese. I mean I know a lot of Indians or non-Chinese people also take Chinese. I think the main reasons why they do it is because, one, it's a very important language to pick up; I mean, if you can speak English and Chinese, you can communicate with most of the world, right? So, it's definitely a language that's highly useful. But Tamil is important for me, because otherwise she cannot integrate with our family, right? And for her to feel that she is Indian, I feel that it's one of the important parts. So, for that integration, I definitely need her to pick up Tamil.

Aanya's decision reflects her priority in strengthening her child's cultural roots and sense of belonging to their ethnic community. This highlights the complex considerations that influence immigrant parents' decisions regarding their children's MTL education.

Siara, a 49-year-old Indian mother of one, shared a similar perspective with Aanya. Initially, she chose an international school for her child due to uncertainty about the availability of Indian mother tongue education in local schools. However, upon learning that local schools do provide Indian mother tongue education, she decided to transfer her child to a local school. She remarked:

When we put him into the international school, we were not so much aware of…you know, whether mother tongue would be offered in the local schools, because we still wanted him to be close with his roots as well, though he's in Singapore.

Another thing which also made us take this decision was that in terms of mother tongue there was an opportunity of him studying an Indian mother tongue even in the local schools, which is that he took up his mother tongue, which is Hindi, in his primary school as well as in secondary school.

Siara's decision reveals a conscious effort by immigrant parents to ensure their children maintain a deep understanding of their cultural heritage, even abroad. It underscores their dedication to passing down their cultural legacy and highlights the pivotal role language plays in preserving and transmitting cultural identity across generations and borders.

Additionally, although Chinese immigrant parents did not provide explicit justifications for choosing CL as the MTL

for their children—since it is their HL—they did emphasize the significance of MTL as a means of preserving cultural heritage. For example, Cecilia, a 40-year-old Chinese mother of one, mentioned:

We speak Chinese in our family, so I think actually language is the carrier of culture, so when you speak the language, your culture is inside, so I think I also did not deliberately go to him to introduce or give him a special kind of lesson to understand, to strengthen his understanding of this culture. But I think naturally he will be very interested in Chinese culture.

Cecilia's perspective suggests that through everyday language use within the family, children naturally absorb their cultural background, fostering a genuine interest and appreciation for their heritage without the need for formal instruction. This underscores the idea that language serves as more than just a means of communication; it is a vessel that carries the essence of one's heritage and roots.

Social Integration

Some parents give preference to a particular MTL to facilitate their children's integration into Singapore, emphasizing the importance of linguistic assimilation. This preference often leans toward CL, as reflected in Jessica's following statement:

First thing is because, aside from English, Chinese also is like 50-50 used here in Singapore, like communication.

At first we wanted Chinese, so that they can adapt well. Because Chinese generally if you know Chinese, easier to communicate here in Singapore. And then we want them to belong here because most of the students are also talking in Chinese. There are Malay, there are Indian but we know that majority are still Chinese, right?

So we want them also to belong, so that they can they can play with them or they can be friends with them. (47-year-old Filipino mother of two)

Jessica's choice of Chinese as her children's MTL reflects both practical and strategic considerations. For her, Chinese offers more than career benefits; it serves as a cultural bridge that aids in social integration, forming friendships, and fostering a sense of belonging.

Winnie's view echoed Jessica's, emphasizing the significance of cultural and linguistic familiarity in facilitating integration into Singaporean society. Winnie noted that one of Singapore's advantages, particularly for her as a Chinese immigrant parent, is the substantial presence of the Chinese community, which constitutes the largest ethnic group in the country. She stated:

One of the reasons is 70% of the population here is Chinese, be it the lifestyle or language environment, it is more suitable for us as Chinese citizens, because some of the living habits, ways of communication, we will not have language barriers, because our English is not very good. (48-year-old Chinese mother of one)

By acknowledging the predominantly Chinese community in Singapore, both Jessica's and Winnie's perspectives demonstrate a strategic decision-making approach, driven by the desire for integration and cultural alignment within the Singapore context.

Alleviating Learning Burden

Lastly, some immigrant parents consciously opted for a specific MTL to alleviate the learning burden on their children. In such cases, they often leaned toward the "Mother Tongue in-lieu" option,

choosing a Foreign Language or Asian Language instead of the official MTLs. This choice could be motivated by two main reasons.

Firstly, some immigrant parents opted for an MTL that aligned with their native language to avoid potential academic struggles for their children. This strategic decision was exemplified in the case of Caitlyn, a 40-year-old German mother, who mentioned that her child did not take a local mother tongue in school, despite having studied Chinese in preschool. Caitlyn explained:

He's not taking a local Mother Tongue, although he started Chinese in preschool…… Chinese is not a language which you can compare to English and German, or a Latin-based language. So, I, or my husband mainly, made the decision to not put my son under this stress, because we had an option. MOE actually provides an option to not be exempted from Mother Tongue, but to do a Mother Tongue in-lieu, and German is such a language. And since my son is bilingual, and his Mother Tongue is German, this is the option we chose. So outside of primary school time, he is learning German.

Caitlyn's insights shed light on how some immigrant parents strategically navigate the education system, considering alternatives that align with their children's linguistic background while aiming to alleviate academic stress.

Another group of parents made their language choice not because it aligned with their native language, but to avoid negatively impacting their children's performance on the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Unlike official MTLs, Foreign Language or Asian Language examinations are not part of the PSLE, giving parents the flexibility to choose a language without affecting their children's academic results—crucial in Singapore's high-stakes education environment. Jessica shared her experience of this strategic decision. Her eldest child initially studied Chinese as his MTL but switched to French in Primary 5. She explained:

But then, the difficulty is when they are already primary 3 or primary 4 where they need to write [in Chinese]. Initially, speaking or like writing the *han yu pin yin*, still in the alphabets, still they can cope. But the moment [laughs] they already starting to, you know, write those Chinese character, wah, they start to fail already, really fail. So we… that's the worry[ing] part, so that's why we were recommended by the school also to…if we wanted to go for another mother tongue, which is our selection during the time is, I remember Malay, Tamil or French. So of course we go French ah. So we selected French for both of them. (47-year-old Filipino mother of two)

Jessica's decision stemmed from concerns about her son's ability to cope with the increasing difficulty of CL, especially the challenge of writing Chinese characters, which is emphasized in Singapore's curriculum. By choosing French, Jessica ensured that her son's language study would not negatively impact his PSLE results. This decision reflects a strategic approach to navigating the education system, aligning language choices with the children's strengths and academic goals while maintaining flexibility. Jessica's experience also highlights how her initial intention—introducing her child to CL for spoken proficiency—shifted as the curriculum in Primary 5 began to focus more on writing. This prompted her to reassess the situation and opt for a different MTL that better suited her child's abilities and academic prospects.

Actions taken by immigrant parents to enhance their children's MTL learning

Immigrant parents have varying perspectives on the difficulty of MTL education, which in turn shape the actions taken to enhance their children's MTL skills. Most Chinese immigrant parents, whose children were studying CL as their MTL, found the level of difficulty in MTL education to be manageable, which can be attributed to their immigrant background. Having come from China, where Chinese is the native language, their children likely had a strong foundation in CL, as exemplified by Winnie:

In terms of grades, you also know that Chinese children do not need to worry about advanced Chinese because Mandarin is their mother tongue and the foundation of Chinese children is very good. (48-year-old Chinese mother of one)

Similarly, Sandy, a 39-year-old Chinese mother of one, noted that her son's solid foundation in Chinese stemmed from his previous education in China. She stated:

His Chinese was always better, because he did come over at an older age [having studied prior in China].

Linda, a 44-year-old Chinese mother of two, also noted that Chinese immigrant students could achieve high grades effortlessly due to their proficiency in CL. She stated:

Chinese is an advantage for immigrant children, as their Chinese skills are usually good. My children have never learned Chinese and do not attend any Chinese tutoring classes, but they perform very well. This is an absolute advantage in Singapore, where Chinese and Higher Chinese are required subjects in the Primary 6 exam,

they definitely can get a good grade in these two subjects. Even in middle school, he doesn't need tutoring, and he consistently performs well in his exams.

In fact, some Chinese immigrant parents found the CL education offered in Singapore to be too basic. To address this concern, some arranged short-term stays in China for their children to ensure sustained proficiency in their native language. This deliberate action highlights the importance these parents placed on maintaining a high level of proficiency in their native language. Harley, a 53-year-old Chinese mother of one, shared her experience:

In order to let my daughter's Chinese to be better, I have made a very special decision. When my daughter was in the third grade of primary school. She did not study for three months. I took her back to China to study. This is also what I discussed with her form teacher. I told her form teacher and had a discussion which I felt that the Chinese here could not meet my expectations.

Harley further emphasized her expectation of high proficiency in CL by enrolling her child in Chinese tuition. She stated, "I didn't give my elder daughter any tutoring except Chinese."

Jenny, a 40-year-old Chinese mother of three, provided further insights into how Chinese immigrant parents perceived MTL education in Singapore. She noted that her first two children, who had spent considerable time in China—one attending a local nursery center and the other enrolled in a Mandarin Center affiliated with a primary school—had established a strong foundation in Chinese and did not require additional Chinese tuition. However, her third child, who did not have the opportunity to stay in China for an extended period, showed a noticeable difference in

Chinese proficiency. Jenny explained:

My first and second children, we did bring them back to China for about a year. They went to a local nursery center, my oldest daughter even went to the CNY Mandarin Center which is affiliated to a primary school for more than half a year, so she [refers to the oldest daughter] built a very good foundation for Chinese. But of course, the Chinese level cannot compare to that of China. But they have good Chinese reading habit, which they don't need to go for tuition, their Chinese is very good. But my third child has such problem since she never stayed in China at all, she goes back China just to visit relatives, maybe 10 days or half a month only, so her Chinese is relatively poor. Yes, so it is very weird when our third child has the need of looking for Chinese tuition. You see our family, we are a Chinese family and we speak Chinese at home, but her Chinese is not good and doesn't like to read Chinese, so she didn't cultivate a good habit.

Jenny and Harley's experiences suggest that Singapore's educational environment might have fallen short in providing optimal conditions for Chinese children to excel in CL.

In contrast, many non-Chinese immigrant parents conveyed that MTL education posed considerable challenges for their children. Siara illustrated this perspective and discussed the steps she took in response to the perceived difficulty. She stated:

In primary school, he just took tuition for mother tongue, which is Hindi, because yes, it is a bit challenging, the Hindi syllabus is quite tough, I think it goes for all the MT languages, because they try to keep it at par with Chinese, as well as Tamil, and all the other languages. (49-year-old Indian mother of one)

Moses, a 61-year-old Indonesian Chinese father, who missed the opportunity to learn Chinese as a child, also highlighted the challenges faced by non-Chinese-speaking parents in navigating their children's education:

I think Mother Tongue, I think it's a bit… because for non-speaking Chinese, maybe it's not really that easy to learn Chinese. Even though my wife can speak a bit, but in terms of the writing, in terms of grammar, we don't really know about it.

Additionally, he pointed out the added challenge posed by the graded nature of the MTL education system, believing it places undue stress on students and their families, particularly those lacking proficiency in the language. He mentioned, "I think, why Mother Tongue? Maybe can be compulsory, but cannot be one of the main determinant in grading the student."

Melanie also shed light on the challenges faced by non-Chinese immigrant children in adapting to the CL curriculum, which in turn stressed the parents. She shared:

The Chinese class he can't comprehend most of the words and he's sleeping in school, now I feel stressed also for him. (40-year-old Filipino mother of two)

To support her child's CL learning, Melanie hired a tutor twice a week. However, the outcome was less than satisfactory, as the tutor noted her son's difficulty with memorizing Chinese words. This underscores the complexity of MTL education for immigrant children and parents, suggesting that extra classes alone may not be enough to overcome these difficulties.

In addition to strategies like enrolling their children in tuition and sending them

back to their home country, immigrant parents also organize language-focused activities at home to improve their children's MTL proficiency, as exemplified by Caitlyn:

Apart from the daily environment, we talk, my husband, my son and me, we talk in German. (40-year-old German mother of one)

Similarly, numerous immigrant parents, including Amrita, Penny, and Linda, insisted that their children speak their MTL at home. Linda, in particular, went the extra step of requesting her children to repeat themselves in Chinese if they spoke in English. She expressed her desire to enhance her children's proficiency in Chinese, fearing they might struggle to communicate with family members when visiting China in the future. Below are the original quotes by Amrita, Penny, and Linda.

We… till now we talk in Tamil. Tamil is the main source [sic] of communication in our house. (Amrita, a 42-year-old Indian mother)

We always insist on speaking Chinese to them, so, although their Chinese is relatively weak, they are still better than their peers who have been speaking English at home since childhood although they are Chinese. (Penny, a 44-year-old Chinese mother)

We require them to use Chinese at home. If they speak English, I'll make them say it again in Chinese. Because of my children, I worry that they won't be able to communicate with the adults when they return to China in the future, we go back quite often, but less during the pandemic, but normally we still go back quite often, so I must make sure that they speak Chinese well. Otherwise, if their Chinese is not good,

it will be a huge obstacle when we go back to China to visit grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives. It will create a sense of distance. I hope they speak Chinese very well. (Linda, a 44-year-old Chinese mother)

Additionally, immigrant parents like Caitlyn, Jenny, and Sandy also actively provided various resources, such as audiobooks, books, and TV shows, to immerse their children in the language and culture of their MTL:

He listens to German audiobooks, and he has German books, and he watches German TV, this is like the daily setting. (Caitlyn, a 40-year-old German mother of one)

My first two children, they have very good reading habits so they have good grasp of language, basically they can understand Chinese in a short time, so we never have tuition before, we don't have any tuition in art stream subjects at all, but we did have the cultivation since childhood. (Jenny, a 40-year-old Chinese mother)

I emphasized a lot on reading when we were in China, I would read with him a lot. Before he entered Primary 1, he basically could achieve self-reading already. (Sandy, a 39-year-old Chinese mother of one)

These insights highlight a shared commitment among immigrant parents to maintaining their children's proficiency in their MTL and nurturing a strong cultural identity.

Conclusion

This paper explored the perceptions and involvement of immigrant families in Mother Tongue Language (MTL) education within Singapore's bilingual education system. The findings reveal that most Chinese immigrant parents view

bilingualism as a significant advantage of relocating to Singapore, emphasizing the importance they place on the country's bilingual education system compared to their non-Chinese counterparts. However, when selecting their children's MTL, both Chinese and non-Chinese immigrant parents weighed various considerations, such as future career prospects, cultural connections, social integration, and academic pressure. These considerations can at times be conflicting, thus adding complexity to their decision-making process.

Some parents might choose a MTL perceived to lead to better career prospects, such as CL. However, this decision may come at the expense of their children's connection to their native language and culture, highlighting the trade-offs immigrant parents face. Similarly, while some parents might initially select a MTL to facilitate social integration, the academic pressure associated with mastering a challenging language may cause them to reconsider their choice, prioritizing their child's well-being over initial goals.

Given their immigrant backgrounds and the decisions they made, immigrant parents held differing opinions about the standards of MTL education. While most Chinese immigrant parents considered the MTL education standard in Singapore to be relatively easy compared to China, non-Chinese immigrant parents, particularly those who chose Chinese as their children's MTL, encountered challenges in supporting their children's language learning. This finding echoes the study by Liao and Huang (2020), which showed that Australian parents in cross-cultural families, whose children's heritage language was Chinese, struggled to assist their children due to their own lack of proficiency in the language. This language barrier similarly affected non-Chinese immigrant parents in Singapore, making it difficult for them to provide effective support and potentially hindering their children's progress in MTL.

Despite these challenges, all immigrant parents in this study actively involve themselves in enhancing their children's MTL proficiency through tuition classes, language-focused activities at home, and other methods. This finding contrasts with Liao and Huang's (2020) study, where non-Chinese parents in Australia often did not prioritize Chinese language learning, citing reasons such as the dominance of English in Australia and the perceived limited utility of Chinese unless planning to relocate to a Chinese-speaking country. The difference in attitudes highlights the unique cultural and educational contexts influencing parental perceptions and involvement in MTL education in Singapore.

Lastly, while this study contributes to the understanding of immigrant parents' perceptions and involvement in Singapore's bilingual education system, its generalizability is limited by the small sample size. With data from only 20 participants (10 Chinese immigrants from China and 10 non-Chinese immigrants from various backgrounds) analysed in this paper, the findings may not be representative of the broader immigrant population in Singapore. Future research could increase the sample size and include a more diverse representation of immigrant communities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this topic.

References

Barkhuizen, G. (2006) Immigrant Parents' Perceptions of Their Children's Language Practices: Afrikaans Speakers Living in New Zealand, Language Awareness, 15:2, 63-79, DOI: 10.1080/09658410608668851

Lee, C. L., & Phua, C. P. (2020). Singapore bilingual education One policy, many interpretations. Journal of Asian Pacific Communication, 30(1–2), 90–114. https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.00046. lee

Lee, K. Y. (2012). *My lifelong challenge : Singapore's bilingual journey*. Straits Times Press.

Liao, W., & Huang, H. (2020). Parents' perceptions and management of children's learning of chinese as a heritage language: A case study of cross-cultural families in Australia. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 10(10), 1218–1226. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1010.05

Ministry of Education Singapore. (n.d.). Learning in School. Retrieved March 28, 2024, from https://www.moe.gov.sg/primary/curriculu m/mother-tongue-languages/learning-in-school

National Library Board. (2023). Bilingual policy. Retrieved from https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=82fbbca5-e8e2-40cc-b944-fbb2bd2367fe

Prime Minister's Office. (2024). Population in Brief 2024. https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media -centre/publications/Population_in_Brief_2 024.pdf

Ren, L., & Hu, G. (2012). Home biliteracy practices and biliteracy acquisition : a comparative study of Singaporean Chinese families and recent immigrant families from China. National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

Seong Man Park & Mela Sarkar (2007) Parents' Attitudes Toward Heritage Language Maintenance for Their Children and Their Efforts to Help Their Children Maintain the Heritage Language: A Case Study of Korean-Canadian Immigrants, Language, Culture and Curriculum, 20:3, 223-235, DOI: 10.2167/lcc337.0

Wang, H. L. (2015). An in-depth study of the role and development of English in Singapore. The Journal of Morioka University, 32. https://www.academia.edu/33015718/An_I n_depth_Study_of_the_Role_and_Develo pment_of_English_in_Singapore

Wang, Y., & Li, J. (2024). Changing discourses of Chinese language maintenance in Australia: unpacking language ideologies of first-generation Chinese immigrant parents from People's Republic of China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1259398–1259398. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.125939 8

Research Article

Navigating Singapore's Education System as an Immigrant Parent

Tammy ENG Jing Rou

School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

Lee Tat CHOW
Peidong YANG

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges faced by immigrant parents in navigating and shaping their children's education in Singapore. It explores how the parents' migrant backgrounds influence their actions, reactions, and coping strategies within the Singaporean education system, identifying patterns of behaviour specific to this group. The study reveals several challenges unique to immigrant parents, such as a lack of information about the local education system, disadvantages in the school admission process, and difficulties in providing adequate academic support to their children. Besides these challenges, the paper also highlights the resourcefulness of immigrant parents and the strategies they employ to navigate and mitigate these difficulties within an unfamiliar social and educational environment. By shedding light on the experiences of immigrant parents, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which families adapt to and engage with the educational landscape in Singapore.

Introduction

Singapore is home to a highly diverse population, including many immigrants. As of mid-2024, the total population in Singapore stood at 6.08 million, of which non-residents made up approximately 30% (Prime Minister's Office, 2024). With such significant presence of immigrants, the issue of their integration into local society becomes both important and urgent. One category of immigrants of particular interest consists of those who are parents with children going to local schools. Given Singapore's demographic challenges, including sub-replacement birth rates and shrinking youth cohorts, children of immigrant parents are often seen as 'fresh blood,' vital to the country's future human capital. Therefore, how immigrant parents raise their children and guide them to integrate into Singapore's educational and social environments is a matter of concern not only to themselves but also to the broader Singaporean society.

However, navigating an unfamiliar educational landscape poses significant challenges for immigrant parents. Previous research has often attributed these challenges to factors such as a lack of sufficient knowledge about the host country's education system, language barriers, and cultural differences (Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Zhong & Zhou, 2011). Yet, much of the existing literature was based on the experiences of (non-Western) immigrant

families in Western societies, leaving a gap in understanding how immigrant parents adapt to non-Western destinations like Singapore. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring, first, the challenges immigrant parents face in supporting their children's integration into Singapore's education system, and second, the strategies they employ to cope with the difficulties of raising children in an unfamiliar social context.

Literature Review

Navigating the education system can be challenging, even for parents who are locals of the society. Göransson's (2023) research on Singaporean parents' perceptions of their children's education found that local parents often felt the pressure to balance academic focus with leisure activities for their children. They worried that their choices might disadvantage their children, leading them to adopt a mindset of providing as much support as possible throughout the educational journey. Furthermore, Göransson (ibid.) highlighted the concerns and uncertainty Singaporean parents face as they navigate the education system. While Göransson's research focuses on local parents, immigrant parents present an interesting group for further study. Immigrant parents bring with them distinct culture, values, beliefs, and behaviours which may differently shape their involvement in their children's education (Chuang et. al, 2011). This adds on a layer of complexity to how they engage with the education system in the host country.

With respect to immigrant parenting, one recent study involving Singapore explored the different challenges faced by Chinese immigrant parents regarding their children's education in various destination societies and the ways in which they cope with these difficulties (Zhou & Wang,

2019). Through comparing the parental expectations and practices of Chinese immigrant parents in Los Angeles and Singapore, Zhou and Wang (ibid.) found that similar profiles of immigrant parents can engage in different parenting methods and express different levels of expectations, depending on the context they are situated in. In Los Angeles, Chinese immigrant parents rely on external support throughout their children's education, such as ethnic institutions to support their children in yielding desirable educational outcomes. In Singapore, Chinese immigrant parents have established a strong stance to utilise intensive parenting and by setting high educational standards for their children in hopes of outcompeting the locals.

Broader literature on the challenges and concerns of immigrant parents is largely based on Western contexts. Among the key issues identified are language barriers and a lack of familiarity with the host country's education system (Antony-Newman, 2018). González-Falcón and colleagues (2022) noted that immigrant parents with lower levels of education often struggle to communicate and express themselves in the host society's language. For those belonging to ethno-cultural minorities, limited proficiency in the dominant language can be a significant barrier to participating in their children's education (Antony-Newman, 2018). Conversely, when immigrant parents share the same ethno-linguistic background as the host community, higher levels of parental involvement in education are often reported (Coll et al., 2002). This highlights the critical role language plays in shaping parental engagement. Parents who are proficient in the local language are better equipped to understand their children's educational needs and progress, enabling them to make timely interventions and decisions that can positively influence their children's academic performance and

broader life choices. Beyond language, unfamiliarity with the host country's education system limits immigrant parents' ability to support their children. Immigrant parents must navigate school's rules and education policies in a foreign country (Yakhnich, 2015). Differences in grading systems and academic standards further complicate the situation (Dilon, 2018).

Extant research also suggests that immigrant parents exhibit different attitudes towards their children's education, which shapes their involvement accordingly. Some parents prioritise academic success, actively seeking ways to integrate and familiarise themselves with the local education system. This has shown to facilitate smoother adaptation in contexts like Singapore (Yeasmin & Uusiautti, 2022). This underscores the pivotal role immigrant parents play in fostering their children's academic excellence. Furthermore, alignment between immigrant parents' attitudes and the school culture in the host country contributes to greater support for their children's success (Yeasmin & Uusiautti, 2022).

Understanding the Singaporean education system is vital for immigrant parents, yet little research has focused on their process of familiarisation. Most extant studies overlook the challenges immigrant parents face before their children are admitted to local institutions. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring immigrant parents' experiences across various stages of their children's education, from the pre-admission phase to full enrolment in Singapore's education system. In doing so, it aims to offer a more nuanced representation of the diverse trajectories that immigrant families experience upon migration to Singapore.

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 [i] (OER 09/20 YPD). 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).

The findings presented in this paper were based on referencing a part of the database, looking into 7 Chinese and 16 non-Chinese immigrant parents (See Table 1). The mixture and diversity of immigrant parents allow for all types of parents to be represented and studied in this research. Immigrant parents have been residing in Singapore for a significant period of time, where the shortest duration of residing in

Singapore was 3 years. This shows that immigrant parents should have had their experiences, or are currently going through the education process with their child, providing firsthand information for their

perspective to be studied.

Table 1: Participants' Details & Background

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Residential status	Length of stay in SG	Education	Age (child)
Aanya	Female	38	India	Employment Pass (EP)	14	Master's degree or equivalent	6
Amrita	Female	42	India	Permanent Resident (PR)	15	Master's degree or equivalent	16
Anika	Female	34	India	Permanent Resident (PR)	13	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	5, 11
Caitlyn	Female	40	Germany	Permanent Resident (PR)	14	Master's degree or equivalent	9
Camila	Female	40	China	Singapore Citizen	9	Master's degree or equivalent	7.5
Debora	Female	36	Philippines	S Pass (SP)	11	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	7
Harley	Female	53	China	Singapore Citizen	26	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	14
Jessica	Female	47	Philippines	Permanent Resident (PR)	15	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	16, 18
Karla	Female	47	Philippines	Permanent Resident (PR)	17	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	11
Linda	Female	44	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	8	Master's degree or equivalent	13, 17
Manish	Male	39	India	Employment Pass (EP)	12	Master's degree or equivalent	10
Maya	Female	38	India	Permanent Resident (PR)	6	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	7
Melanie	Female	40	Philippines	Singapore Citizen	9	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	6, 8
Micah	Male	35	Philippines	Employment Pass (EP)	16	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	7
Penny	Female	44	China	Permanent Resident (PR)	8	PhD or equivalent	8, 11
Ravi	Female	39	India	Dependent Pass	9	Master's degree or equivalent	10
Rebecca	Female	43	Philippines	Permanent Resident (PR)	15	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	9
Richard	Male	48	Philippines	Singapore Citizen	16	Master's degree or equivalent	13
Saisha	Female	42	India	S Pass (SP)	12	Master's degree or equivalent	14

Sam	Male	40	China	Singapore Citizen	16	Master's degree or equivalent	11
Siara	Female	49	India	Singapore Citizen	20	Master's degree or equivalent	19
Winnie	Female	48	China	Long Term Visit Pass (LTVP)	3	High school diploma	17
Yvette	Female	45	China	Singapore Citizen	26	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	14, 16

Findings

The challenges faced by immigrant parents while navigating Singapore's Education System fall broadly into three main types: (1) the lack of information and personal experiences with the local education system, (2) the difficulty in gaining entry into local schools due to their immigrant status and (3) providing suitable academic support for their child. The findings will unpack these areas and the immigrant parents' responses to these challenges.

Immigrant parents' lack of information and personal experiences with the local education system

Many immigrant parents in this study highlighted their unfamiliarity with Singapore's education system, particularly with the various pathways available for their children, which can cause confusion. This confusion extends to both the structure of the system and the resources necessary to support their children academically. For instance, Amrita, a mother of one from India, commented that they were unaware of the different educational pathways, especially those beyond secondary school. Initially, she had little knowledge of the different tertiary options, such as polytechnics and junior colleges, and found herself learning about these tracks alongside her daughter. Similarly, Siara, another immigrant parent, expressed regret over some of the decisions made during her son's schooling journey. She noted that

better choices could have been made, particularly regarding the distance between their home and his school, which resulted in long commute. This issue was exacerbated on days when her son attended co-curricular activities (CCAs), leaving him exhausted.

Several immigrant parents attributed their struggles to their lack of personal experience with Singapore's education system. Aanya, a mother holding an Employment Pass (EP) from India, explained, 'If I had been a Singaporean, I would have known how to manage the system, but I'm still learning, right?' This sentiment reflects the broader challenge faced by many immigrant parents: their lack of familiarity with the system means that they often struggle to make informed decisions, provide relevant advice, and effectively support their children's education. They must dedicate significant time to consulting with others, researching the education system, and understanding the specific terms and pathways unique to Singapore. These behind-the-scene effort are crucial for helping their children navigate the local educational landscape successfully.

Immigrant Parents' Information Seeking Behaviour

Despite these challenges, immigrant parents express a strong desire to be actively involved in their children's educational journey. They utilise various mediums and resources to acquire

knowledge about how the education system functions in Singapore, aiming to support their children's success. The information immigrant parents find particularly valuable includes details about different educational pathways, the streaming process, and even non-academic aspects such as the CCAs. Interviews revealed that Chinese and non-Chinese immigrant parents tend to rely on different sources of information.

Reliance on super-app from native country

Chinese immigrant parents identified WeChat as their primary channel for gathering information about Singapore's education system. This reliance appears to be unique to the Chinese community. WeChat, a free messaging app popular among native Chinese users, allows individuals to exchange information through voice and video calls, text messages, photos, and more. The app is widely used among Chinese immigrants in Singapore, helping them stay connected to both their home country and local immigrant communities. Sam, a father emphasised the value of WeChat for immigrant parents, noting that it provides a platform where 'everyone exchanges information with each other.' Through the app, parents are able to search for specific details about the Singaporean education system, such as school admissions, course selection, and even advice on CCAs. Winnie, a mother holding a Long-Term Visit Pass (LTVP), shared how WeChat helped her gather information:

WeChat provides us with insights, such as which junior colleges (JCs) are suitable for our children, which subjects are best to take after O-levels, and which CCAs in secondary school would give students additional points.

The app also serves as a platform for Chinese immigrant parents to participate in online support groups. These groups facilitate the exchange of experiences and advice among parents who have already navigated the Singaporean education system. Parents such as Linda and Harley mentioned using WeChat groups to discuss supplementary classes and gather advice from others in the community. These interactions help new immigrant parents learn from the experiences of others who have gone through similar transitions. This network of Chinese parents not only provides practical information but also fosters a sense of familiarity and community. WeChat offers a space where immigrant parents can connect with those who share similar backgrounds, helping them feel more grounded in a foreign country. The platform allows parents to share tips and advice on how to navigate the differences between the Singaporean and Chinese education systems, making the transition smoother for their children. Additionally, Chinese immigrant parents are often eager to share their own experiences of parenting and schooling in Singapore. This interaction creates an online community where both information and support are exchanged actively, helping parents better navigate their children's educational journey.

Local social network

Other immigrant parents have credited their colleagues and neighbours as sources of information. Anika from India and Micah from the Philippines have cited their neighbours or colleagues for providing them with information about certain institutions or experiences with the education system. It is common for immigrant parents' social circles to comprise mainly neighbours and workplace peers due to regular interactions. These exchanges allow immigrant parents to

express their worries and concerns and receive response instantaneously.

Information from neighbours and colleagues are valuable because of their localised experience and familiarity with the education system. Penny, a mother of two, consulted a 'local person' who happened to be her colleague regarding PSLE, since her child had just taken the nation-wide examination a year ago. Winnie shared similar sentiments with Penny, where she mentioned that she will 'ask my local friends or friends who are engaged in education [about their parenting experiences]'. Immigrant parents direct their questions and queries towards local parents. These parents can provide valuable information from a local perspective while explaining the structure and components of the Singapore education system, which might be more relevant than official documents that often lack specific details. For example, Winnie gave credit to her Singaporean friends who 'gave good advices', which directed her to the official channels for school admission, rather than going through 'agencies or intermediary' which acts as 'side-channels'. The help given by local parents has directed Winnie clearly to the accurate information sources.

<div align="center">Evaluation of information gathered</div>

Immigrant parents have access to various channels and platforms to gather information and resources to better understand Singapore's education system. However, they are selective in how they engage with this information. Rather than adopting advice blindly, these parents critically assess the relevance and applicability of the insights they receive before forming their own judgments. For instance, Winnie highlights that she does not treat information from platforms like WeChat as a 'standard.' She also seeks input from 'local people or local platforms'

but recognises that such information does not necessarily reflect the experiences of everyone. This underscores the importance of considering multiple perspectives and discerning the underlying meanings behind shared experiences. Linda, a mother of two said that 'every situation is different, and every child's personality, character, conditions, and interests are completely different.' Her emphasis on every child's unique personality, character, and interests reflects the broader sentiment among immigrant parents: the goal is not to compete, but to gather information that is most suitable for their own children's development. This approach highlights that while immigrant parents actively seek out resources and advice, they use them as guidance rather than a strict framework for parenting. This underscores the rejection of a 'one-size-fits-all' parenting approach, and instead, immigrant parents focus on tailoring their strategies to their children's specific needs.

Uncertainty in registering immigrant children in local schools

Immigrant parents have commonly shared their concerns about the uncertainty of securing places for their children in local schools. The school admission process accords lower priority to children of non-resident status and school slots available to them are limited. This is highlighted by Maya, who is currently a permanent resident (PR). She has commented that:

as a foreigner, the allotment is in the last phase, and also the schools are not as per your choice and they are not in the vicinity or neighbourhood that you stay. So it could be really far away from the place where you stay.

Maya's experience was not unique. When Siara's son first applied for primary school, he could only attend the last

balloting session. This was because they had not obtained the Singapore citizenship at that point of time. Additionally, Camila, whose child was not a citizen at the point of school admission, also shared her knowledge that the 'percentage to get selected (for primary school) through drawing lots' are low. Maya, Siara and Camila's experience of registering their non-citizen children for a local school highlight the systemic educational disadvantages faced by immigrants in Singapore at the point of admission, generating much uncertainty and anxiety for immigrant parents.

Yet, despite these challenges, many immigrant parents express a strong desire to enrol their children in local schools, perceiving them as vital to their children's integration into the Singaporean society. Aanya, a mother of a 6 year old, explained that 'Singapore is already a bubble, and international school in Singapore is a bubble within a bubble'. This shows immigrant parents do not want their children to be disconnected from the rest of Singapore. instead, they prefer local schools to help their children build connections with local peers and gain exposure to Singapore's social fabric.

Maya, a PR from India, described her child's local pre-school experience to be diverse, with 'a lot of Singaporeans and other background students'. She appreciated the mix of demographic, which is why she would prefer her child to continue having such interactions and being able to mingle with everyone. Immigrant parents appreciate the structure and diversity that local institutions provide. With the desire to enter local school, immigrant parents seek to increase their chances of enrolling their child into a local education institution through the following strategies.

Conversion of Citizenship

With citizenship being a major factor in the school registration process, many immigrant parents in our study attempted to apply for Singapore citizenship or Permanent Residence (PR). Maya believes that obtaining a Singapore citizenship will open up more opportunities for her child, as compared to being a foreigner in Singapore. Another motivation for acquiring Singapore citizenship is the higher schooling costs for non-citizen students. Linda noted that 'school fees are quite expensive because the tuition fees for PRs are not as low as those for citizens'. Singapore citizens are able to tap on government subsidies for school fees. By changing their children's citizenship, they would stand a higher chance in their admission into the local schools.

Volunteering for school admission

Some immigrant parents would volunteer at their desirable primary school to increase the chances of admission for their children because most schools take into consideration parental contributions, even though weight of this factor in the admission process is likely not significant. Rebecca, from the Philippines, is currently a Singapore PR. She did her fair share of research for her child's admission and found out that volunteering in schools carried some weight. Her status as an immigrant parent made her feel that she had no choice but to volunteer for her child's sake.

Faced with the uncertainty with school admission, immigrant parents will usually be more inclined to participate in these volunteering opportunities. This could be in the form of recess duty, where parents would be tasked to ensure the well-being of students during their break time. Other volunteering opportunities include assisting

teachers during learning journeys, or ushering students around school during morning assembly. Many have indicated their interest and signed up for similar programmes. However, our interviews revealed that immigrant parents would have to meet certain requirements before gaining a chance to volunteer in those primary schools.

Moreover, despite a willingness to volunteer, immigrant parents are not always able to due to their work commitment. Karla, a working mother, shared that her full-time job made it hard for her to volunteer – she felt that the administrative system in schools discriminate against working mothers, where they 'automatically assume that she should not be helping'. Conversely, Yvette, also a working mother, expressed that she had never attended a volunteering session, or took on the role as a parent volunteer. Her responsibilities at work made it harder for her to volunteer, as she would have to go out of her way to 'take leave and be absent' for her job. The conflict between being a full-time employee and mother has made it hard for Yvette to have the capacity to volunteer in primary schools, as volunteering timings would often coincide with immigrant parents' working hours. Only immigrant parents with the luxury of time can tap on this system to increase the enrolment opportunities for their children. Even so, the opportunity to volunteer is not a guarantee.

Indicative of another situation, Anika shared that as a foreigner, she was not eligible to volunteer due to her status – only PRs and/or citizens were able to volunteer. This was not the only instance that immigrant parents who have expressed interest in volunteering were excluded. Manish wanted to volunteer for his son's school – he had indicated his preferences for the opportunities available. However, he

was not allocated any.

In short, while immigrant parents may have the desire to be involved as school volunteers, opportunities are limited and local schools are often selective.

Challenges in providing academic support

Immigrant parents often find themselves navigating an unfamiliar educational landscape, leading to uncertainty about the extent of academic support they can provide for their children. We identified both similarities and differences in how these parents exert their influence throughout their children's educational journeys to offer support. There are observable patterns in the subjects that immigrant parents often struggle to help their children with language subjects. Both Chinese and non-Chinese immigrant parents have identified their children's weaknesses in this area. For children of Chinese immigrants, who often rely on Chinese for communication at home, English is a challenge. Conversely, non-Chinese immigrant children frequently struggle with the non-native mother tongue mandated in school. Jessica, a mother of two, highlighted her inability to support her children in their school's Chinese language classes due to her lack of knowledge and background in the language. This limits her ability to assist with homework or engage in conversations in Chinese, leading her to outsource support by enrolling her children in tuition classes.

Hands-on Involvement

To compensate for their disadvantages as immigrant parents, these parents became highly involved in their children's education. While immigrant parents typically assert that they do not impose unreasonably high expectations on their

children, they do not want their child to struggle either. Many immigrant parents have thus put in conscious efforts to be involved in their children's learning and interests. Caitlyn, from Germany, stated that 'I do have the time, I do have the luxury and the means to help my son, so I don't rely on external tuition.' Caitlyn believes that she can help her child with their work. The supervision of their children's homework and academic progress to ensure that they can keep up with the local curriculum, becomes a method of involvement for immigrant parents. From here, they have also extended their involvement beyond the academics and would actively participate in the non-academic development of their children.

Intervention through tuition

To compensate for their perceived shortcomings and disadvantages as immigrant parents, many enrol their children in tuitions to help them keep pace with the academic rigor in school. This decision is often driven by the desire to ensure their children are as well-prepared and knowledgeable as local students. However, the extent to which immigrant parents can support their children's education varies greatly, depending on their own strengths and subject proficiency. Some parents possess diverse skill sets that allow them to assist with a range of subjects, while others, lacking such abilities, feel compelled to outsource these services. Richard, a father from the Philippines, noted that as 'the topics became more complex, it's a little bit tougher to juggle'. As a result, Richard, like many other immigrant parents in our study, resorted to tuition centres to guide his child in areas where his own knowledge fell short and to supplement their parenting efforts.

Moreover, immigrant parents frequently use national examinations as critical benchmarks and decision points for considering tuition. Aware of the high stakes of these examinations, parents strive to provide all necessary support to help their children excel. Melanie, a mother of two children aged six and eight, is already contemplating enrolling them in tuition for subjects like Maths, Science, or Chinese 'when the time comes'. Similarly, Linda enrolled her children in tuition classes for all four subjects during their PSLE and O-Level examination years, emphasising the lengths to which immigrant parents go to ensure their children's success in these key performance assessments. Although immigrant parents may be uncertain about when to intervene in their children's education, they often use key events like national examinations as indicators to determine when tuition might be necessary. This approach allows them to strategically frame and facilitate their involvement in their children's education, leveraging the national education timeline as a guide for intervention.

Teacher-parent communication

Another important way immigrant parents in our study sought to support their children academically is by maintaining effective communication between teachers and immigrant parents is crucial in supporting children's development.

Amrita, a 42-year-old Permanent Resident from India, highlights the importance of communication, stating that he relies on 'parents-teacher meeting' to obtain information on whether 'the child is lagging'. Parent-Teacher Meetings (PTMs) play a pivotal role in facilitating communication between parents and teachers, offering updates on the children's academic performance and behaviour. These meetings ensure that immigrant parents remain aware of their children's development and can provide support when

needed. PTMs can also provide reassurance for immigrant parents through positive feedback from teachers about their children's progress. Ravi, a mother from India, shared her positive experience, where her daughter's teacher provided updates on her excellent performance, noting that she consistently scored near-perfect marks across all subjects. This feedback alleviated her concerns over her daughter's education and affirmed her parenting methods.

PTMs also serve as a platform for identifying areas where the child may need improvement. Debora, from the Philippines, found face-to-face communication with her child's teacher invaluable as she was informed about her child's need to attend remedial lessons. This insight enabled Debora to better support her child by providing additional resources to address his academic struggles. Direct feedback from teachers is often precise and reflective of the child's progress and needs. Such interactions offer immigrant parents reassurance and guidance, allowing them to adjust their parenting strategies to help their children thrive in Singapore's education system.

However, as their children progress to higher levels of education, some immigrant parents become less involved in direct communication with teachers. Siara, for example, expressed trust in her son as he grew older, eventually deciding to stop attending PTMs, saying, 'he did not need that kind of support'. Winnie shared similar views, noting that she had ceased contact with her son's junior college teachers compared to his secondary school years.

Interestingly, language barriers, which are common challenges for immigrant parents in other countries, were not significant obstacles for those in Singapore. Many immigrant parents in other contexts struggle to communicate with teachers due to unfamiliarity with the native language. In contrast, immigrant parents in Singapore are generally well-equipped to communicate with their children's teachers. This is attributed to their high levels of educational attainment. Most parents in the sample have at least a bachelor's degree, with many holding master's degrees, suggesting that they mostly possess the cultural capital necessary to engage effectively with teachers.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has investigated the key challenges faced by parents of immigrant background in navigating the Singapore education system, as well as their strategies of managing these challenges. The findings reveal that immigrant parents face significant challenges in gathering and understanding information about the local education system. They must navigate and internalise complex, unfamiliar processes from various sources, often relying on research rather than personal experience to guide their child's educational journey. Furthermore, enrolling their children in local schools poses additional challenges due to fixed quotas and systemic restrictions. Some immigrant parents thus attempt to increase their chances of securing a place through applying citizenship and volunteering.

Once admitted, immigrant parents often find their experiences aligning more closely with those of local parents, with their immigrant status becoming less of a defining factor. They encounter similar challenges and focus primarily on being present for their children and providing support when necessary. Despite these difficulties, immigrant parents actively seek guidance from local parents and strive to support their children to the best of their abilities.

The interviews conducted for this study involved only immigrant parents, and the analysis focused on the challenges they faced. However, due to the strong overlap between their identities as immigrants and parents, it is difficult to ascertain whether the issues they face are strictly related to their immigrant status. Future research could explore the difficulties encountered by local parents in Singapore to enable a parallel comparison, providing deeper insights into whether these challenges are unique to immigrant families. Additionally, gathering accounts from immigrant children could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the support they receive from their parents compared to their local peers. This perspective would enhance the analysis of immigrant parental support, revealing potential differences between the support immigrant children perceive they need, and the actual support provided by their parents.

References

Ministry of Education. (2023). *Admissions exercise for international students (AEIS): Overview*. Ministry of Education Singapore. https://www.moe.gov.sg/international-students/aeis

Antony-Newman, M. (2018). Parental involvement of immigrant parents: A meta-synthesis. *Educational Review, 71*(3), 362–381. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1423278

Chuang, S. S., & Moreno, R. P. (2011). *Immigrant children: Change, adaptation, and cultural transformation*. Lexington Books.

Dilon, C. (2018). Grading discrepancy in global education. *People: International Journal of Social Sciences, 4*(2), 1611–1624. https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.42.16111624

García Coll, C., Akiba, D., Palacios, N., Bailey, B., Silver, R., DiMartino, L., & Chin, C. (2002). Parental involvement in children's education: Lessons from three immigrant groups. *Parenting, 2*(3), 303–324. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327922par0203_05

Göransson, K. (2023). The big crossroad: Parenting, risk and educational transitions in Singapore. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 00(0), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/20436106231201175

González-Falcón, I., Arroyo-González, M. J., Berzosa-Ramos, I., & Dusi, P. (2022). I do the best I can: The role of immigrant parents in their children's educational inclusion. *Frontiers in Education, 7*(1006026), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1006026

Ladky, M., & Peterson, S. S. (2008). Successful practices for immigrant parent involvement: An Ontario perspective. *Multicultural Perspectives, 10*(2), 82–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960801998085

Prime Minister's Office. (2024). Population in Brief 2024. https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/Population_in_Brief_2024.pdf

Sohn, S., & Wang, X. C. (2006). Immigrant parents' involvement in American schools: Perspectives from Korean mothers. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 34*, 125–132.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-006-0070-6

Yakhnich, L. (2015). Immigrant parents in the educational system: The case of former Soviet Union immigrants in Israel. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 46*(3), 387–405. https://doi.org/10.1177/002202211557031 4

Yeasmin, N., & Uusiautti, S. (2022). Adjusting parenting and perceptions of well-being in the host country: A comparative analysis of immigrant parents in the Finnish Arctic and Singapore. In N. Yeasmin, & S. Uusiautti (Eds.), *The future of the Arctic human population* (pp. 89– 104). Routledge.

Zhou, M., & Wang, J. (2019). Challenges and strategies for promoting children's education: A comparative analysis of Chinese immigrant parenting in the United States and Singapore. *Genealogy, 3*(2), 20. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020020

Zhong, L., & Zhou, G. (2011). Chinese immigrant parents' involvement in their children's school education: High interest but low action. *Brock Education Journal, 20*(2). https://doi.org/10.26522/brocked.v20i2.18 6

---

[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.

Immigrant Parents' Articulation and Imaginings of the Singaporean Education System

Ariel Kit Yen CHUA
School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

Lee Tat CHOW
Peidong YANG
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

Abstract

Drawing on a study into immigrant parents' influences on children's education in Singapore, this paper presents preliminary and partial findings on immigrant parents' discourses surrounding various forms of schooling or education systems, specifically the local mainstream schools, international schools, education in their countries of origin, and shadow education in Singapore. The paper demonstrates how such discourses inform and are intertwined with the immigrant parents' articulations of their parenting ideologies and educational philosophies. It is found that immigrant parents generally hold positive views on mainstream schools in Singapore, sometimes comparing these favourably with the perceived education and culture in international schools, as well as that of their countries of origin. At the same time, immigrant parents also pointed out the drawbacks of the Singapore education system in terms of its stressful nature, which has given rise to a pervasive shadow education sector. Through talking about and reflecting on these different forms of schooling/education, immigrant parents construct their notions of a good education. However, the paper cautions that the various characteristics attributed to different types of schools/education should be understood as immigrant parents' subjective and imaginary constructs, reflecting not so much 'objective reality' as their ideologies and expectations pertaining to their children's education.

Introduction

As one of the most cosmopolitan global cities in the world, Southeast Asian city-state Singapore hosts a significant number of im/migrants. 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 [i]. Furthermore, among resident populations, a significant portion had migrant background. The presence of such large numbers of immigrants adds to the immense diversity of Singapore's social and cultural fabric.

This paper is concerned with immigrants' experiences as parents of children who attend local *mainstream* schools in Singapore (i.e. not international schools, religious or special education schools). In Singapore, mainstream schools

run by the state prioritize the enrolment of local residents, making it challenging for children of immigrant status to secure school places. Sending children to the more costly international schools is an option for immigrant parents, but those who have obtained local status (citizenship or PR) typically enrol their children in local mainstreams schools.

Set against this backdrop, this paper examines how Singapore-based immigrant parents perceive and talk about different types of schools, and how their imaginaries and perceptions of these different education forms are intertwined with their parenting discourses and educational philosophy. Specifically, we look at how parents perceive or imagine the education offered in international schools as well as schooling in their countries of origin, and how such discourses juxtapose with their evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the local school education in Singapore.

Methodology and data

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). 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 (Mainland China = 31; India= 14; the Philippines= 12; Indonesia= 4; other nationalities= 3).

This paper has a relatively modest scope, focusing on the narratives of just eight participants from the larger dataset (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Profile of selected participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Residential status	Years in Singapore	Children's age
Aanya	Female	38	India	Employment Pass	14	6
Melanie	Female	40	Philippines	Singaporean	9	8 and 6
Siara	Female	49	India	Singaporean	20	19
Caitlyn	Female	40	Germany	Permanent Resident	14	9
Winnie	Female	48	China	Long Term	3	17

				Visit Pass		
Linda	Female	44	China	Permanent Resident	8	13 and 17
Richard	Male	48	Philippines	Singaporean	16	13
Debora	Female	36	Philippines	S Pass	11	7

Imagining Non-Local vs Local Schools

This section focuses on how immigrant parents in our study articulate their educational philosophies and expectations for their children through discursively constructing ideas and images of *non-local* schools, particularly international schools and schools in their countries of origin.

Findings reveal that such discursive conjuring of non-local schools can serve to highlight both what is perceived as *desirable/positive* of local schools and what is regarded as *undesirable/negative* about them. It should be noted that since research participants in the study have enrolled their children in local schools, their views about international schools are not always based on first-hand experience, although when they invoke education in their countries of origin, they tend to be drawing on personal experiences.

Desirable/positive

For parents in our study, different school types represent different values and cultures, and they believe their children will be socialised differently depending on the school they attend. Aanya (female, age 38) says:

> So it's like, many of the Western families I see the children don't even respect parents because they have the freedom of speech right, they can say whatever they want. And anyways, once they turn 16 or 18, they are off on their own, there's no concept of living with parents, taking care of parents, etc..

So for us, we are more rooted to those kind of values: respect, discipline, etc.. So for me, I just felt that the Asian system will be better.

Aanya's comments reflect not a direct critique of the international school system but an imagined understanding of it. She perceives international schools as places where values like respect, filial piety, and discipline may not be taught, which she considers essential for her child. The type of school becomes a lens through which parents imagine the kind of socialisation their children will experience, leading to their decision to avoid international schools due to perceived misalignment with their parenting values. Here, Aanya clearly articulates that her parenting philosophy is rooted in traditional values, and she associates international schools with Western ideals that contradict those values. She reinforced this point when she brought up the issue of sexuality:

> For example, in some international schools, I've heard they have LGBT clubs, and I'm like (chuckles), you know, that's not me for sure? So, I don't want her to be exposed to all that, because at a young age, it would just unnecessarily put thoughts in their head. They will eventually figure it out in time. But what I don't want is the school, in an effort to or with the intention of giving wider exposure, influencing her.

Many immigrant parents imagine that international schools instil liberal values that conflict with their own ideals for their children. Winnie (female, age 40) contrasts her perceptions of local and international

schools to justify her decision to choose a local school:

> The feeling I got from the kids there [international schools] is that they are very free-thinking, very free-spirited, and they have no discipline. Of course, you will think they have no rules, they don't stand properly, sit properly, but they may live very reckless, right? They don't care about others, what do you think of me? Right? But most of the children who came out from the Singapore education system, what I see is that the boys and girls are very well behaved and disciplined. They always follow the rules. You can see that when you look at them, you will know which one is from the international school, which one is from the local school.

Although neither Winnie nor her child has experienced the international school system, her perception of it is negative. Words like 'free-thinking' and 'free-spirited', while not inherently negative, are used with an implied criticism, suggesting a lack of discipline. This perception informs her value judgement and reinforces her preference for local schools, which she associates with producing disciplined, rule-abiding students. Conversely, by articulating why local schools are preferred, both Aanya and Winnie can be seen as asserting their parenting ideologies and expectations for their children's growth.

Undesirable/negative

While non-local schools can be used as a foil to highlight the merit of local schools, the converse is also true. At times, immigrant parents in our study used international schools and schooling experiences from their countries of origin as reference points for offering critical evaluations of the education their children receive in local schools in Singapore.

Linda (female, 44), for example, contrasts the schooling experience in her hometown of Shanghai, where students can pursue multiple sports, performing arts, classical music, and even traditional Chinese medicine:

> The courses offered by Shanghai schools were actually richer than those in Singapore, such as courses on Chinese herbal medicine and handicrafts. Primary schools in Singapore just focus on academics, with no time for entertainment.

Immigrant parents who send their children to local schools thus often compensate for the lack of such holistic activities in the school curriculum by engaging private tutors for lessons in sports, art, music, and more. There is a common assumption among immigrant parents that international schools offer more holistic activities, whereas local schools focus heavily on written national exams. For example, Richard (male, 48) critiques the academic rigour of local education, stating:

> So, there's a lot of emphases on written exams, on term examinations. And, you know, the problem is, before, I think in primary there are about four major exams, split into 3 or 4 exams, like 15%-15%-15% and then the bulk would be the last examination. Now in secondary school, I think it's less, about 3 exams, with the majority on the written examinations at the end.

Carina (female, 40) compares local schools with international schools, using the latter's project-based approach to highlight what could have been a better learning environment for her child:

> I've also seen what great projects international schools do, yeah, when some of my friends share it, it's like

wow! This is like... a whole project where you get the parents involved if they have time. So, it's all about experiencing and playing, which deepens social skills, natural skills, and discovery through play.

Immigrant parents feel that Singapore's exam-centric mode of assessment is not as effective as having a variety of assessments, such as projects and presentations. For some parents, streaming at the age of 12 (through PSLE[ii]) is particularly problematic because their children may not be mature enough to fully grasp the importance of the exam, yet once they are streamed in secondary school based on the exam results, their educational path is perceived as set in stone. Siara contrasts Singapore's streaming system with India's, where students only face their first major exam in Secondary 4.

> When I went through my education in India, my major exam was only in Sec 4, which is similar to O' Level, and then the next major exam was in JC2, similar to A' Level. So, it was very difficult for me to think of children sitting for such a major exam at the P6 level.

In a similar vein, Melanie (female, 40) reflects on her education in the Philippines, where she recalls 'having fun' and 'enjoying life'. She contrasts this with Singapore's competitive atmosphere, noting how the former offered a sense of balance she now wishes for her children:

> In the Philippines, we were not that competitive with regard to grades. We still knew how to have fun. I mean, we still enjoyed life, hanging out with friends... It's more about wanting a balanced, well-rounded experience for my children.

Taken together, the above findings illustrate that certain notions about *non-local* schools, be they international schools or schools in immigrants' sending countries, can serve to construct images of the local school by highlighting both the desirable and positive as well as the undesirable or negative.

The next section focuses on what research participants say about local schools in Singapore based on their actual experiences.

Local Schools in Singapore

Immigrant parents' discourses about education in local mainstream schools also contain both *positive* and *negative* appraisals.

Praise: bilingualism

On the positive front, Singapore's bilingual education policy—which mandates the learning of a mother-tongue language (MTL) (see the paper by Ong, Chow and Yang, this issue)—is commonly viewed as an advantage because parents believe it provides their children with a competitive edge; to them, having bilingual children will enable greater success in the future labour market.

Caitlyn considers bilingual education in Singapore the main attraction for immigrant parents, which is especially relevant as her child's mother tongue is German.

> One of the advantages of Singapore education that attracts me is the dual-language programme. Although we had an opportunity in UK or other English-speaking countries at that time, my child will lose the advantage of dual language because is quite difficult to learn Chinese in those countries.

Singapore's mandatory bilingualism

simplifies the process for second-generation immigrants to learn Mandarin, as parents do not have to go out of their way to incorporate the language into their children's education. Having it embedded within the school system alleviates the pressure on parents who want their children to acquire Mandarin. This positive outlook not only highlights immigrant parents' goals for their children, such as bilingualism, but also the specific type of bilingualism they desire—English and Mandarin.

Further analysis shows that English-Mandarin bilingualism is highly valued by both Chinese and non-Chinese immigrant parents. Aanya, for instance, explains how this trend is common among non-Chinese parents:

> I mean I know a lot of Indians or non-Chinese people also take Chinese, as the Mother Tongue language in school. I think the main reasons why they do it is because, one, it's a very important language to pick up; I mean, if you can speak English and Chinese, you can communicate with most of the world, right? So, it's definitely a language that's highly useful, especially if you're going to settle down somewhere in Asia, whether it's China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia to some extent, etc.

Likewise, Richard, whose child's mother tongue is Tagalog, chose English-Mandarin bilingualism, seeing it as a form of social and cultural capital.

> I never had second thought on having him learn Chinese, because I know that he needs to be conversant in the language and understand it really well when he grows up, because that's his environment, and a lot of his friends are Chinese, and it will definitely be useful probably in a business context or in a corporate context that he knows it.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Winnie, a Chinese immigrant parent, who highlights how Singapore's bilingual education system is perceived as a way to raise global citizens and enhance their competitiveness in the labour market. Although bilingualism is a requirement, it is seen and spoken of as an asset.

> So, in this case, the various conditions, including the bilingual education, make it rather advantageous for Chinese children to come here. No matter what the case is, my son's mother tongue is Chinese, in addition to English [which he is learning], we hope he can become an international talent in the future.

It is clear that parents use different aspects of the school curriculum as tools to shape and express their goals for their children. For Winnie, the goal is for her child to become an 'international talent', and she views bilingual education as a stepping stone towards achieving that aim. To immigrant parents, bilingualism is not just an element of Singapore's education system; it is seen as a crucial resource to be fully utilised to achieve the desired outcomes for their children.

Moreover, bilingualism is also credited with facilitating integration and is considered a form of cultural capital, particularly by Chinese immigrant parents whose children's native language is Mandarin. Winnie (female, 48) states that being Chinese nationals enabled her child to integrate more easily into Singaporean society:

> But in Singapore, our identity is Chinese, including our appearance and some preferences, it is still very easy to integrate into this society. In fact, if the ultimate purpose of studying abroad and

staying here, he (my son) needs to integrate himself into this society.

She further explains that her second-generation immigrant son does not need to worry about Mandarin, as he already has a strong foundation in the language. Therefore, bilingual education does not pose a challenge for him in the same way it might have done if he were learning Mandarin without a Chinese background. Additionally, she believes that his proficiency in Mandarin will enhance his employability:

> And he is a Chinese, and his Chinese is definitely much better than Singaporean, then the government must have the demand for this kind of talents in this field.

Criticism: high-stakes examination and streaming

While local education in mainstream Singapore schools is praised for its cultivation of bilingual abilities, it is also commonly criticized for its heavy academic emphasis, the high-stakes examination system and culture, and the streaming mechanism.[iii] Prior to the recent reform, students in Singapore are channelled—based on PSLE results—into the Normal (Technical), Normal (Academic). Express stream students are regarded as more academically inclined, and consequently admitted to "better" schools with more resources and opportunities which are less available to students in other streams. Immigrant parents in our study were highly critical of this system for the academic stress it places on students.

Aanya (female, 38) explains how the streaming processes following the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) instil fear in children:

> I find it very strict in the sense that, to some extent they seem to be driving a bit of fear in the children, you know? […] So for me, sorry to say but it almost sounds like a caste system. Because if you start segmenting kids so early right, that's how they will grow up, right? So that's one thing that I don't want, agree with, so that's one thing that probably doesn't match in my philosophy. Whereas in the US, right, I feel it's much more simpler. […] Like there, once you go, you pay tax, everyone gets into a neighbourhood school, you go through the same experience. There's no such streamlining or grading or anything right, you just go through the system, and that's it. So I think we can maybe put less pressure and focus on the children at that age, that's the only thing I would say, my ideology is different from the ideology here. Not saying streaming isn't important, it is important, not when they're eight or nine years old. We should do it when they're 16 years old, that's the only point.

Rather than simply separating students, Aanya's comparison to the Indian caste system illustrates how certain streams are more coveted than others. The perception that certain streams confer greater prestige adds to the pressure parents feel, as they strive to ensure their children fall into the desired academic category.

Siara (female, 49) shares a similar critique of Singapore's education system:

> This is quite a big difference that I saw in Singapore. In the Indian system we don't have anything like that at the P6 level. Then another thing I noticed in the primary school was that even at P3 there was this test for a gifted education programme[iv], you know?

In sum, in the discourse of immigrant parents in our study, the local Singapore school education appears to be attributed both praise-worthy and critique-worthy qualities. Voicing their approval and disapprovals respectively, we argue, can be interpreted as immigrant parents' ways of articulating their conceptions of a desirable education for their children.

Shadow Education

Singapore's rigorous and highly competitive education system has spawned a huge shadow education industry that is widely utilised by Singaporean families.[v] This last section presents immigrant parents' discourse about shadow education, which serve to further illuminate their parenting and educational ideals.

Research participants in our study almost unanimously expressed critique and regret regarding the pervasive tuition culture in Singapore, which often may be interpreted as an extension of their critique of the Singapore education system *per se*.

For example, Aanya (female, 38) shared:

…what I definitely see is, like, some of the Singaporean parents that I've observed or the local parents, how to say, they put a lot of pressure on the child I feel. Like I know a lot of my friends whose, you know, children are sent for tuition, you know, they start sending them for like coding classes, robotic classes, and then I have also heard, for example, there's the gifted education programme, right? So they send them for tuition so that they you know, can get into the sort of GEP programme.

Despite such common practices, Aanya subverts this norm by choosing not to send her child for shadow education at the Primary One level:

No, no, no tuition, no tuition, not until P5 (laughs). At least that's my hope, right? So, she goes for music, Indian classical music, karate, swimming, and she learns the piano. We've just recently enrolled her also in tennis, although I'm now wondering if that's too much, because she already has four classes. Yeah. Four to five.

Aanya explains that her decision is grounded in her belief that parents should provide their children with a relatively stress-free childhood that encourages happiness and freedom, rather than an obsession with academic performance:

Because you know, the childhood is for them to enjoy, to learn and to explore, rather than be worried about grades and being streamlined and being in the right school or the right class.

The contrast between spending large sums of money on tuition versus holistic education, such as music or sports, is significant. The issue goes beyond the financial expenditure itself, but the type of classes parents choose, which reflects their parenting philosophies. The phenomenon of sending children for tuition as early as Primary One is alarming to immigrant parents because it is associated with stress and the pressure to excel. By choosing to enrol her daughter in music and sports instead, Aanya communicates her values and goals as a parent.

Insightfully, Melanie (female, 40) observes that in Singapore shadow education is no longer a means to help children outperform their peers, but rather functions as a leveller:

[My boss] was telling me that 'my salaries goes to maths, classes, science',

so ya, they said they are not competitive actually, they want to help [their children] to survive [in school], their goal is not really to have a high grade actually. They just want their kids to survive.

This highlights a paradox: shadow education, once intended to give students an edge, has become so widespread that it no longer delivers the competitive advantage it was designed to provide. Instead, it has been reduced to a tool for keeping up, rather than getting ahead. The intense competition in Singapore makes it difficult for individuals to excel, repositioning shadow education as a necessity for survival.

Siara (female, 49) reflects on the emotional toll experienced by parents who choose not to engage with shadow education. For these parents, opting out of the tuition culture often leads to self-doubt about whether this unconventional choice might harm their children's academic performance:

When I saw all his classmates going for tuitions and all that, that was a source of worry for me you know? That, "Am I doing the right thing by not putting him in tuitions?

Immigrant parents acknowledge that, even if they do not pressure their children directly, the competitive culture does. This creates an ongoing tension: while the normalisation of shadow education makes parents who initially avoid or resist it question their decisions, they also aim to minimise the stress their children face. For some, a success would be their child graduating from primary school without having attended tuition at all. While no single parenting philosophy is inherently superior in this context, it is notable how immigrant parents navigate their own priorities alongside the demands of the education system they have chosen.

Conclusion

This paper has explored immigrant parents' ideals and priorities with respect to their children's education in Singapore by examining their discourses surrounding different types of schooling and/or forms of education. Specifically, immigrant parents' discursive constructions of the 'international school', schooling in their countries of origin, the local Singaporean mainstream school, and the shadow education sector were explored. We found that, by commenting on these different schooling/education forms and making comparisons between them where appropriate, immigrant parents articulate their preferences, values, and ideals about the kind of education they would like their children to receive in Singapore.

One notable finding was the often positive way in which immigrant parents spoke about how children socialised in local schools tend to be disciplined, respectful, and obedient. They contrasted this with their perception that international schools are more liberal and flexible, which they assume yields the opposite results. One possible explanation for this preference could be that immigrant parents in Singapore mostly originate from other Asian countries, which arguably have cultures and value systems more aligned with those promoted in Singapore.

While affirming the desirability of local schools in terms of value inculcation and the usefulness of the bilingual education policy, parents in our study also expressed concerns about the highly competitive and stressful nature of local schooling system and culture, focusing their critique particularly on the streaming system, high-stakes examinations at relatively early age, and the widespread use of shadow

education services.

Overall, immigrant parents in Singapore navigate a plural landscape of various schooling options and limitations. Balancing their educational philosophies and priorities with the realities of local schooling, immigrant parents' decisions regarding children's education are shaped by perceptions of discipline, socialisation, academic rigor, as well as concerns with their children's holistic development. While critiques of both local and international schools are common, parents often accept trade-offs in order to meet their broader educational goals for their children.

One inherent limitation of the findings presented here stems from the fact that the broader study from which this paper is derived only involved immigrant parents with children enrolled in local mainstream Singapore schools. As such, the findings and tentative conclusions drawn here should not be extrapolated to immigrant parents more broadly defined, especially those whose children study in private and/or international schools. This latter group constitute one possible direction for future research.

[i] Population.gov.sg (2024) *Population in Brief 2024*. Retrieved from: https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/Population_in_Brief_2024.pdf

[ii] Primary School Leaving Examination.

[iii] While the streaming system has been recently refined to reduce stratification based on academic performance, students are still segregated by their results, albeit to a lesser extent.

[iv] The Gifted Education Programme (GEP) is an official scheme in the Singapore school system that selects intellectually "gifted" students through a 2-stage screening process to join a more academically demanding curriculum from Primary 4. Selected students may be transferred to schools offering GEP academic programmes. In 2024, significant reforms to the GEP programme were announced, which will likely change the meaning of the programme for parents and students. These changes lie beyond the scope of this paper.

[v] Wise (2016) *Behind Singapore's PISA rankings success – and why other countries may not want to join the race*. Retrieved from: https://theconversation.com/behind-singapores-pisa-rankings-success-and-why-other-countries-may-not-want-to-join-the-race-70057

Findings Report

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

Yi Fei LOH
School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

Lee Tat CHOW
Peidong YANG
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

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.

References

Jenkins, R. (2008). *Social identity* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Kwek, T. (2019). (Trans)National Service: Reconfiguring Citizenship through Conscription in Singapore. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.* 92, pp. 67-90.

Prime Minister's Office. (2024). Population in Brief 2024. https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/Population_in_Brief_2024.pdf

Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2005). Introduction: The second generation and the children of immigrants longitudinal study. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 28*(6), 983–999. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870500224109

Zhou, M. (1997). Segmented assimilation: Issues, controversies, and recent research on the new second generation. *The International Migration Review, 31*(4), 975–1008. https://doi.org/10.2307/2547421

---

[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.