Chapter 15

Not Quite Fitting In:
Asian International Students in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

For more than a decade Singapore has been investing heavily in establishing itself as a rising star in the competitive international education market that services students from the region and elsewhere. Singapore is an attractive destination for international students because of scholarship opportunities, a high standard of living and job opportunities post-graduation. Moreover Singapore has geographical and cultural proximity for students coming from Asia while being ‘Western’ enough to attract those from beyond the region. By interviewing 57 international students about their sense of belonging in Singapore, impressions of Singapore and the social networks they developed in the island-state, this chapter suggests that despite a welcoming local government, seeming cultural similarities to the host nation, substantial periods of time studying in Singapore and intentions of taking up permanent residence, international students not only have difficulties adapting to Singapore society but create their own form of agency that allows them to navigate their everyday life in transience.

INTRODUCTION

Work in the area of Asian international students in the well-known international education hubs of Australia-New Zealand, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, often points out that these students find adapting to life in the host nation challenging due to reasons that are home and host country-related (e.g. Fong, 2011; Ying 2002; Portes & DeWind, 2004; Sawir et al, 2008). These reasons are often reflective of being away from the home nation and their families, and the difficulties encountered in adjusting to the host country’s culture and society. This work notes that Asian international students report that they face loneliness and experience homesickness while not being able to adjust to the society of the host nation particularly since many students state that they have difficulty developing meaningful relationships with locals due to cultural differences (e.g. Gomes, in press, Sawir et al, 2008). The literature, in other words, acknowledges that international students encounter emotional

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difficulties while in transience and almost never able to successfully integrate with the local population. Asian international students in Australia moreover cite their transience as a factor in not being able to feel a sense of belonging to the host nation and openly state that permanent residence would change this perspective (Gomes, in press). However, what about Asian international students living and studying in other Asian countries? Do they experience the same kind of issues as reported by their counterparts in Euro-America and the Antipodes?

This chapter looks at the experiences of Asian international students in Singapore – a country which prides itself on being a melting pot of Asian cultures. Singapore reported in 2012 that it had around 86,000 international students (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 2012). At the beginning of 2014, international students made up 18 per cent of the university-going students in Singapore with most coming from Northeast Asia, particularly Mainland China, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Do Asian international students feel a sense of belonging in Singapore because the country shares similar cultural traits with them or are these students disconnected in some way from the host nation? If they are disconnected from the host nation, how do Asian international students go about navigating their everyday life in Singapore in order to create a ‘home away from home’ while in transience? In order to address these questions and with the help of two Research Assistants, I conducted in-depth interviews with 57 Asian international students in Singapore in early 2014.

What I found is that while the international students interviewed for this study were keen to successfully apply for permanent residence and admitted that Singapore was a good place to live in for practical reasons such as job opportunities, cosmopolitanism and personal safety and security, they felt that they did not fully integrate into local society. This lack of integration takes place even though participants share common or similar ethnic and cultural traits with Singaporeans who mainly identify as coming from Chinese, Indian or Malay backgrounds. Instead, participants reveal that they attain a greater sense of belonging in Singapore through the meaningful relationships they made with fellow international students who came from the home nation. I argue thus that Asian international students do not necessarily integrate into Singaporean society even though the island-state supports a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual population that has close similarities to the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the students. Before discussing the results of this study, it is necessary to understand Singapore’s rise as an international education hub and its attraction for the Asian international student.

**International Students in Singapore**

In the early 2000s, the Singapore government began to imagine itself as a global education hub host to diverse public and private institutions of higher learning from local and foreign education providers attracting international students from the region and elsewhere (Sidhu, Ho & Yeoh, 2014; Ziguras & Gribble, 2014). This was done through the Global Schoolhouse initiative which witnessed diverse institutions and programs establish themselves in the nation-state in 2002 followed by the launch of the Singapore Education brand in 2003 which was meant to promote Singapore as a ‘premier education hub’ with the aim of attracting international students (Dessoff 2012, p. 19). Looking at the higher education sector alone, Singapore has two public universities (National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University), three government supported universities (Singapore Management University, Singapore University of Technology and Design; and the Singapore Institute of Technology), private universities (e.g. Singapore Institute of Management which administers foreign university degree programs on top of their own) and branch campuses of foreign universities (e.g. Chicago Business School and Technische
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