

Partial Assimilation: Mainland Chinese New Migrants in Singapore

by Jin Luo

1. Introduction

After the opening up of China in 1978, the number of mainland Chinese migrants, namely the “new migrants”, increased rapidly on a global scale. Singapore is a popular destination for the mainland Chinese new migrants in Asia, and there have been rising concerns and notable debates both in academia and in the general public around issues of assimilation of the new migrants in this country. Due to growing numbers of newcomers and increasing controversy around the topic, research on these new members in the Singaporean society holds its importance.

There is a growing body of literature covering this relatively new phenomenon. Transnationalism practices have been systematically discussed (Liu, 2013), among which comparative studies between the new migrants in Singapore and western countries provide unique insights into conditions of the new migrants (Liu, 2009; Zhou & Liu, 2013). Research on the new migrant associations has also been conducted extensively (Huang & Liu, 2011). However, the assimilation of new migrants in Singapore has not received much attention, especially compared to other migrant groups, for example Asian immigrants in the United States, whose assimilation processes have received extensive coverage in academia. This may result from the common ancestry of Chinese migrants and most local Singaporeans, as over 70% of Singaporean population is ethnically Chinese, whose ancestors migrated from southern China to Singapore in an earlier time. Despite common ethnic origin, it is important to acknowledge notable differences between these two countries, and that the new migrants do go through assimilation processes to become a part of Singaporean society. Based on the considerable public debate in Singapore related to the increasing number of foreigners, it can be inferred that there is an urgent need for further investigation into the process of new migrant assimilation.

This essay uses an analytical model to explore the assimilation experiences of new migrants, concluding that although the new migrants and majority of

Singaporeans share similar ethnicity and heritage, they are not yet fully assimilated into the Singapore society.

2. Definition of Key Terms

2.1. New Migrants

According to the definition of the Chinese government, “new migrants” refers to individuals who migrated to other countries after 1978 (Nyíri, 2001). In the Singaporean context specifically, this concept refers to Chinese people who migrated to Singapore after 1990, with the establishment of formal diplomatic relationship between China and Singapore (Zhou & Liu, 2013). In this paper, “new migrant” is defined as Permanent Residents (PR) or citizens of Singapore who were born in mainland China and arrived in Singapore after 1990. Students or workers who are not yet PR or citizens, and the local-born descendants of new migrants, are not included in this discussion.

2.2. Assimilation

Assimilation is traditionally defined as a one-way approximation of one culture to the other, while it is argued that the process could also be bilateral with both sides absorbing something of the other (Chan & Tong, 1993). Typically, assimilation is studied when the assimilator and the to-be-assimilated are initially different in power and ethnicity (Chan & Tong, 1993). This paper, however, focuses on a situation in which migrants and majority of the local people are both ethnic Chinese; furthermore, there is an uncertain power relationship between the groups under the context of China’s fast growing economy. Assimilation can be viewed as a two-way but asymmetric process; this essay focuses on the migrant-to-local direction of assimilation.

3. The context of Chinese migration to Singapore

Migration from China to Singapore intensified in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, forming a country in which over 70% of its population is ethnically Chinese

(Zhuang, 2002; Zhuang, 2008b). The interaction between China and Singapore paused after the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, but it resumed with the opening up of China in 1978 and establishing of formal diplomatic relations in 1990. The number of Chinese people who migrated to foreign countries increased rapidly after 1978, when the migration policy of the Chinese government became more permissive, and migration was celebrated as a patriotic act that could contribute to China through transnational activities (Nyíri, 2001). It is estimated that 600,000 mainland Chinese people legally migrated to foreign countries between 1980 and 1995 (Zhuang, 1997).

Although only a small proportion of the global new Chinese migrants have arrived in Singapore, this issue has had a significant impact on the Singapore society. As a small country with limited natural resources and low fertility rate, the Singapore government makes efforts to attract foreign talents (Liu, 2009; Gong, 2013). It is estimated that around 300,000 new migrants arrived from 1990 to 2010 (Xie, 2010; Leo, 2012). It has been observed that main patterns in this wave of migration include contract working, studying, family migration, investment, and others (Shen, 2007). The major reason to migrate has been identified as the increased economic interaction between China and Singapore, while other factors such as the desire for a legal society, consideration for children's education, and economic opportunities have also played a certain role in the process (Zhuang, 2008a; Du, 2011).

It has been argued that the essence of the Singaporean locals' attitude towards the new migrants is political and economic pragmatism (Liu, 2012a). However, others have discussed public dissatisfaction, fear and suspicion towards the new migrants (Liu, 2012a; Liu, 2012b; Zhou & Liu, 2013). The government has made attempts to integrate locals and new migrants, such as by establishing the National Integration Council, while still stressing the importance of immigration for Singapore (Guo & Wang, 2008; Liu, 2012a). The rise of China as a global power has given both opportunities and challenges to the new migrants (Liu, 2012b). For example, their loyalty towards Singapore appears to be questioned by local population, while the attitude seems to be more positive when facing business collaboration with China. In

this context, assimilation of new migrants into Singaporean society becomes an important concern for various parties, including new migrants themselves, both individually and collectively, the Singapore public and Singapore government.

4. Methodology

4.1.Data

To investigate the extent to which new migrants have assimilated to Singapore society, both primary and secondary sources were used for analysis. Secondary sources included various research articles published in conferences and journals. Primary sources included the following:

First, oral history interviews were used from the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). All interviews in the “New Citizen” category were reviewed, and three interviews of mainland China-born people were taken for analysis. The interviews of these first generation new migrants were all conducted in Mandarin and quotations used in this essay were translated into English.

Second, three interviews were conducted by the author. The interviewees were undergraduate students at Nanyang Technological University who came to Singapore with their parents between the ages of 7 to 9, considered to be “1.5 generation” new migrants. One of the participants went through a structured interview for one hour, while the other two were given a few questions during casual conversation. The male interviewee was a naturalized Singapore citizen, while the two female interviewees were Chinese passport holders with permanent residency in Singapore. Two of them came from the northern part of China, and one interviewee from the south. The interviews were all conducted in Mandarin.

Third, ten media articles by Singapore local newspapers and magazines were included. Some of them covered new migrant associations, and some others reflected the views of the Singapore public.

Fourth, official releases from Singapore government were compiled. Two speeches by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and one by former Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong were analyzed to demonstrate the state ideology in terms of migration

issues.

Due to the limitations of available data, interviews with migrants who came to Singapore as contract workers were not conducted and are not covered in the scope of the discussion.

4.2. Theoretical Model and Analytical Method

The theoretical model and method of analysis used in this essay is illustrated in Figure 1. The timeline represents three phrases of the assimilation process, first focusing on the experience of newcomers, then the process of assimilation, and finally the present situation. The dimensions related to the assimilation process were classified based on the data which was collected, focusing on the self, the new migrant community, Singapore public, and Singapore government. The analytical model for the benchmarks of the present situation was adapted from Waters and Jiménez (2005). According to their original model, there are four primary benchmarks of assimilation: socioeconomic status (SES), spatial concentration, language assimilation, and intermarriage (Waters & Jiménez, 2005). As “intermarriage” was hard to estimate, particularly because the interviewees were still undergraduate students, this benchmark was replaced by “lifestyle and values”, which was frequently mentioned in both interviews and media releases.

The analysis was conducted according to the timeline shown Figure 1, beginning with a focus on issues faced by the newcomers, or newly arrived migrants. Then, the assimilation process was analysed based on the four dimensions of self, the new migrant community, the Singapore public, and the Singapore government. Finally, the present situation was assessed based on the four benchmarks of socioeconomic status (SES), spatial concentration, language, and lifestyle and values.

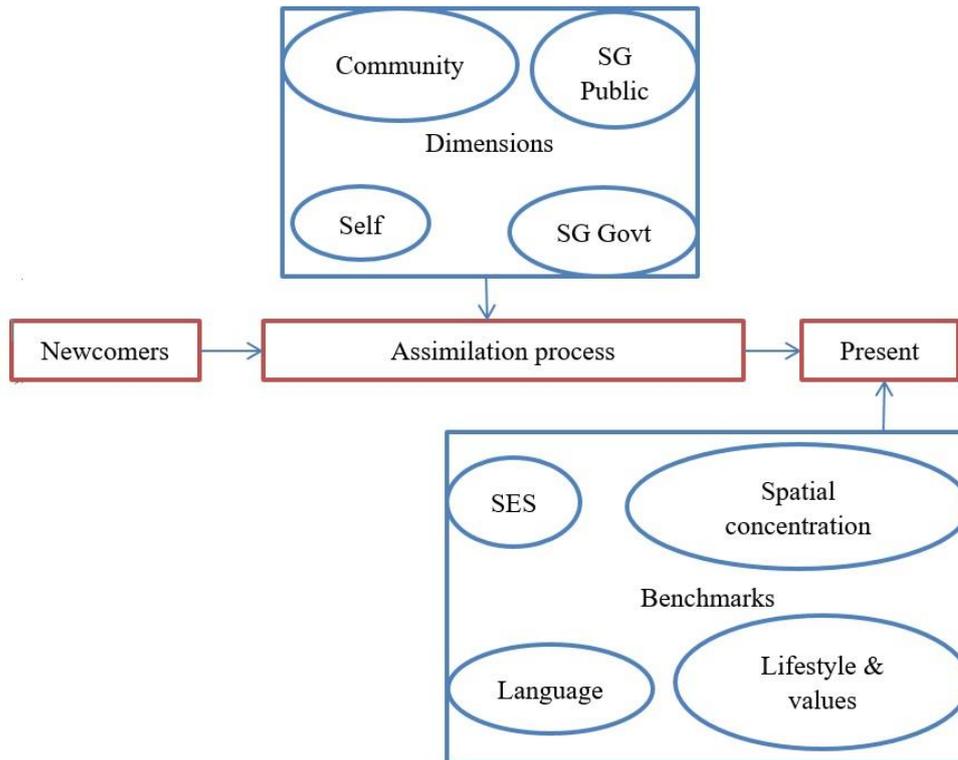


Figure 1: Analytical model for this study, adapted from Waters & Jiménez (2005)

5. Discussion: Newcomers

Despite Singapore being a Chinese-majority community, the new migrants still struggle when they first arrive in this foreign country and face the challenge of adapting to their new environment. Although a large proportion of Singaporeans speak Mandarin, which makes new migrants feel accepted (Du, 2011), language is still one of the major problems for newcomers (Wang, 2013; J.N. Zhang, 2012). Most new migrants have faced problems with English, as English education is not as important in China as compared to Singapore. One 1.5 generation respondent talked about her experiences in primary school English class. Although she was a new pupil in the school and her English was rather poor, one teacher still forced her to talk in English, which reportedly made her feel distressed and uncomfortable. Moreover, the Mandarin accent of Singaporeans is quite different from the mainland Chinese one, especially its northern version, adding to the initial difficulties related to language.

Lifestyles and the living environment in Singapore are also quite different from

China (Wang, 2013). From food to weather, the new migrants have apparently encountered a range of differences between their home country environment and new context and thus found it challenging to undergo the process of rapid adaptation (Lu, 2015). Some social rules in Singapore are stricter, and the workplace or school culture is also rather different. Discrimination towards their Chinese identity is also frequently referred to by oral history interviewees; this issue is explored in more detail in the following section which explores the process of assimilation.

6. Discussion: Assimilation process

6.1. Self

Discrimination towards mainland Chinese people in general is mentioned by a significant number of interview participants, often from Singaporeans with Malay and Indian ethnic background. When Du Zhiqiang arrived in Singapore as a factory manager, he was not familiar with the working environment, but he was challenged by the Malay and Indian workers, claiming Singapore's superiority over China and explicitly suggesting that he should go back to his home country (Du, 2012). Some evidence of discrimination came from Chinese Singaporeans, with a rather negative name "Ah Tiong" being used to refer to mainland Chinese. When Du, currently a Singapore citizen, recalled his early years upon arrival, he described the difficulties encountered when both he and his wife had to focus on work and had no time to take care of their son. He said that "sometimes the locals think that new migrants are not active in contributing to local society... but new migrants actually have their hardships. They have to settle down their families, adapt to the working and living environment, think about the relatives back in China, and they are asked to contribute as much as locals... They actually face a lot of pressure, and especially when they encounter some unfriendly people in social activities, they will be even more reluctant to get involved" (Du, 2011).

Facing this situation, some new migrants may try to hide their Chinese national identity in order to avoid discrimination. This is reported in particular by the 1.5 generation respondents, who have mastered Singapore Colloquial English (Singlish)

well, which makes it hard to distinguish them from local-born Singaporeans. Some tried to learn the cultures and lifestyles from locals despite their salient Chinese identity, which made the locals behaving more friendly towards them (Du, 2011).

6.2. Community

In oral history interviews, new migrants consider the support from family and friends very important. When faced with pressure or unfair treatment, they tend to seek emotional comfort from close relatives or friends, which in fact is an adaptation strategy (Huang & Liu, 2011). Apart from bonding emotionally with individuals from their immediate circle of connections, they tend to cluster with other new migrants who share a similar background (J.N. Zhang, 2012). Therefore, established associations or simply naturally formed groups from daily lives have emerged (Du, 2011; Zeng, 2006).

Interview respondents from the 1.5 generation report mostly making friends with fellow new migrants. Some have established personal ties with migrants from Hong Kong or Taiwan, probably because they have shared migration experiences and therefore can generate emotional attachment (J.N. Zhang, 2012). One interviewee interpreted this social behavior as “self-protection”, since there is limited advocacy for the rights of new migrants, either on campus or by the government.

The establishment of the two most famous new migrant communities, Tianfu Association and Huayuan Association, may also reflect similar self-protective ideologies. Tianfu Association started with informal gatherings in the house of Du Zhiqiang, the founder, and with the support of Singaporean government expanded to a bigger community including over 2,000 members (Du, 2011). Comparatively, Huayuan Association was started by Wang Quancheng, the director and founder, with the purpose of helping the adaptation of new migrants (Zeng, 2006). Both associations attracted elites among the new migrant group and the attention of Singapore government officials. Both founders expressed their intention of accelerating the communication between Singapore and China, encouraging new migrants to fit into local lives, expanding social networks, and being thankful for the environment

Singapore has provided (Du, 2011; Zeng, 2006). The associations do serve these functions (Huang & Liu, 2011).

6.3.Singapore public

According to the interview data, the new migrants perceive Singaporeans to have generally limited knowledge of China, as well as of the background of recent migration activities. Some consider China to be a poverty-stricken country with limited financial resources, even after the reforms and opening up (Du, 2011); some show excessive curiosity when they discover someone from this country and would like to know more about their background. Many are friendly towards new migrants, especially when they assume Singlish-speaking new migrants to be like “themselves”; some teachers even pay extra attention to new migrant students (J.N. Zhang, 2012).

Some of the unfavorable perceptions towards new migrants might be justified from the general public’s perspective (Guo & Wang, 2008). As the resources are already limited in Singapore, locals may resent their opportunities for education and employment being taken by these new immigrants. Even though both groups are ethnically identified as Chinese, the customs and behaviors of Chinese-Singaporeans and Chinese-Chinese have become different in many ways, which causes confrontations. Furthermore, local-born Singaporeans reportedly tend to question the identity of new migrants, expressing views that the newcomers still identify themselves as Chinese-Chinese or might be in Singapore only temporarily and would move to other countries, which might prevent deeper bonding with the local communities (Guo & Wang, 2008).

A proportion of seemingly friendly Singaporeans may also hold stereotypes which might not be expressed explicitly and sometimes concealed. According to one respondent, they will “shut the door and talk about it by themselves”, which echoed the results of some earlier small-scale research (Fan, Meng, & Chen, 2001). At the same time, interviewees also perceived Singaporeans to be quite welcoming, since the environment they grew up in appears to be less complicated than the one back in China in terms of established social policies. It difficult to draw a conclusion about

whether Singaporeans have helped the new migrants to assimilate into their society or have had a negative effect.

6.4. Singapore government

As the migration policy-maker, the Singapore government holds a welcoming attitude towards new migrants. Being aware of the problematically low fertility rate and the importance of talents to Singapore, the government has been actively attracting new migrants, and made much effort to persuade locals of the necessity to absorb “fresh blood” (Goh, 2009). The government also supervised the new migrant associations and established the National Integration Council in 2009 to promote social integration (National Integration Council, 2010). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong encouraged new migrants to mix with Singaporeans and adapt the new lifestyle as well as learn to understand and use Singlish (Lee, 2012). Because of the friendly migration policy, many new migrants felt they were being welcomed by the government, and their sense of belonging towards Singapore has been strengthened (Du, 2012). Generally speaking, the government is playing a positive role in helping the new migrants assimilate into the Singapore environment, though it should also be noted that the government has responded to dissatisfaction towards foreigners, by tightening the immigration policy (Lee, 2011).

7. Discussion and Analysis of the Extent of Assimilation

Based on the four benchmarks of socioeconomic status (SES), spatial concentration, language, and lifestyle and values, the extent of the assimilation of new migrants into the Singaporean society will be assessed.

7.1 Socioeconomic status (SES)

Many new migrants documented in this and other studies have achieved relatively high socioeconomic statuses. As the Singapore government has implemented policies to attract foreign talent, their original education and career attainment of the new migrants can be quite high. Many 1.5 generation new migrants have gone to elite

secondary schools and junior colleges, and one interviewee reported that Chinese nationals are among the best students in the top junior colleges. Nevertheless, their high achievement has aroused concerns from local Singaporeans that the new migrants are using already limited resources (Wu, 2006).

Based on this observation of higher achievements of new migrants and reported backlash from some Singaporean residents, the extent of assimilation of new migrants based on the benchmark of socioeconomic status is determined to be incomplete assimilation.

7.2 Spatial concentration

New migrants still concentrate within their own community more than local-born Singaporeans and people of other ethnicities (Fan, Meng, & Chen, 2001; H.P. Zhang, 2012). One of the respondents mentioned that although her lifestyle and values have become closer to Singapore than China, she still finds it easier to communicate with Chinese people. She further shared that her parents' friends in Singapore are mostly new migrants also. Thus it appears that the emergence of new migrant associations can increase the concentration and relative detachment of newcomers further. It is noted that concentrating in one area is not necessarily negative for migrants' adaptation into the host society; it is argued that those enclaves could be helpful to help migrants gain socioeconomic opportunities, especially in the early stages upon their arrival (Zhou, 2010).

While tending to live and spend time in areas with other new migrants, the new migrants report maintaining considerable connections with China, regardless of whether they are Singapore citizens or PRs (Guo & Wang, 2008; Liu, 2013). These transnational connections mainly include kinship, friendship and business networks.

Owing to the spatial concentration reported by the 1 and 1.5 generation migrant interviewees, it is determined that assimilation into Singaporean society has not been achieved in this respect.

7.3 Language

From the oral history interviews, it can be noticed that spoken languages of new migrants have been heavily influenced by Singaporeans, especially that of the 1.5 generation. One interviewee reported that she is now more comfortable reading English than Chinese, and that she did not perform well in Chinese writing modules. The respondents interviewed by the author all have native proficiency level Singlish, while their Chinese accents are still distinguishable from local-born Singaporeans. Though their Chinese accents are also different from their mainland counterparts, one of the interviewees said that she found herself “somehow unable to switch to the Singaporean Mandarin accent”. For the first generation migrants who had lived in China for a long period of time before moving to Singapore, Chinese is also the dominant language, even though they reportedly put a lot of effort into mastering English. Still, it can be noticed that some words used in their speech are borrowed Singaporean expressions, despite the northern origin of some of the interviewees.

The lack of English proficiency reported by the first generation migrants indicates that their language assimilation is incomplete. As the 1.5 generation of new migrants report more fluency and ease with English, yet still mention difficulties in communicating in Chinese, they are assessed as only partially assimilated in the context of language.

7.4 Lifestyle and values

Many lifestyles and values of new migrants are similar to those of Singaporeans. Certain aspects of Singaporean society, especially regarding laws and regulations, have been mostly accepted by the new migrants. One possible reason for this is that the well-established legal system in Singapore is one of the factors attracting Chinese people to migrate, since, from some of the respondents’ perspective, the laws in China appear to be not so well established. In this regard, they consider themselves more Singaporean even though some of them are still PRs. However, the aspects of Chinese lifestyles and values that the new migrants try to preserve are quite stable across different individuals. Many interviewees talked about the distance in interpersonal relationships in Singapore, in contrast with China where more emphasis is placed on

the concept of family and interpersonal bonding (Guo & Wang, 2008). One of the respondents said that the Singaporeans she knows have very limited contact with their relatives, even relatives as close as cousins, and she found it unacceptable in her opinion. The first generation interviewed reported keeping more of their original way of life, while the 1.5 generation described becoming much more Singaporean than their parents while consciously maintaining aspects that they like from their heritage.

Regarding this benchmark of lifestyle and values, the new migrants are assessed as only partially assimilated to their new society.

8. Conclusion

From the above discussion, a conclusion can be drawn that the assimilation process of new migrants in Singapore is not yet completed at this stage. Generally, the new migrants in this study report having adapted well to the lifestyle in Singapore, and the younger generation, who have more proficient use of English, appear to perceive themselves more Singaporean than Chinese. Yet, the new Chinese migrants have not assimilated in regards to the benchmarks of socioeconomic status and spatial concentration.

As there is a perceived lack of research on new migrant assimilation in Singapore, this paper attempted to fill in the existing gap by describing current condition of the new migrants as well as representing the new migrants' efforts to integrate into Singaporean society. With access to many primary sources such as oral history interviews and media articles, this essay hopes to provide first-hand insights on Singapore's new migrant issue, as well as expand the application of assimilation theories to cases lacking significant ethnic differences.

It is important to outline some of the limitations for this study and possible directions for further research. As the NAS is operated by the Singaporean government, the data retrieved from the oral history interviews by NAS are believed to be more 'politically correct', and therefore may not reflect some of the real thoughts by the new migrants. Due to the limitations of data, migrants who came to Singapore as contract workers could not be covered in the scope of discussion. As this

essay looked at both first generation and 1.5 generation new migrants, researchers might consider looking more closely at the differences between the first and 1.5 generation, possibly comparing it with the generational change among migrants in other countries.

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I would like to thank the interviewees mentioned in this essay, who kindly agreed to tell me about their own life experiences as new migrants. As a group that has rather weak power of discourse, I feel obliged to tell their stories, on how much they have struggled in and contributed to the Singapore society. Their intention, which is as simple as previous generations of migrants, is to seek for better lives. For this, they deserve to be respected.

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