

BURSARY REPORT

Yoga Prasetyo
Master of Arts in Migration Studies
Andrew Francis Pickup Global
Citizens Award recipient 2024



AT A GLANCE

Monetary benefit

- £1000

Expenditure

- Round-trip flights (£652)
- Accommodation (£289)
- Travel insurance (£94)

Dissertation project

"Integration-transnationalism in the context of enforced transience: Managing racial harmony and temporary labor migration in Singapore"

ABOUT MY PLACEMENT

This award allowed me to carry out a six-week research placement at the Migrant Writers of Singapore (MWS), a Singapore-based migrant-led initiative aiming to promote a sense of collectivity across the citizen-migrant divide through the shared love for literature and arts. I thank the family of late Andrew Francis Pickup for their generous donation, which has enabled many emerging scholars to conduct path-breaking research in various fields and continue their beloved son's legacy.

I am also grateful to MWS for helping me immerse in their literary activism and become involved with wider migrant rights movements in Singapore. Without their assistance, I would not have been able to complete my dissertation project which, aside from fulfilling the requirements of my MA degree, has become a tool of activism in itself.

ABOUT MY RESEARCH

In response to the 2013 'Little India riot' involving around 400 temporary migrant construction workers, Singapore introduced the Foreign Employee Dormitory Act (FEDA, 2015) to spatially partition migrants from the rest of Singaporean society by legally requiring them to live in "self-contained townships for foreign workers" (Sin, 2020) that are sited away from the city. While pushing migrant workers 'out of sight', however, the government paradoxically rolled out the Foreign Worker Ambassadors Program aiming to "integrate [temporary migrant workers] into [the Singaporean] community better (SPF, 2014).

Drawing on 16 in-depth interviews and 2 FGDs, and reconceptualizing temporariness as potentially long-term and factually permanent, my dissertation generates insights into i) why and how the concept of integration, which was developed in western contexts but has now traveled across the globe, is understood, appropriated, and pursued by Singapore to 'incorporate' *temporary* migrant workers while simultaneously blocking their access to *permanent* settlement and full membership; and ii) how such arrangements shape migrants' social relations with those in Singapore and at home.

MAIN FINDINGS

Integration is defined by the Singapore state largely in relation to public order. This involves requiring migrants to submit to the regulatory powers of the government and 'perform' their obedience in public. To be considered integrated by the state means to 'behave' in public and blend into the workings of the city without causing disorderliness. These structural arrangements produce what I call 'temporary integration', a process in which migrants must secure their limited and transient foothold in the city-state by continuously proving their obedience for a temporary but long-term period. In this sense, the state appropriates the discourse of integration and employs it as a tool of control that involves creating a hierarchical social structure within the migrant population predicated largely on mutual surveillance and self-regulation.

The state's urban strategies of spatio-temporal segregation and social 'integration' work in tandem to serve the same purpose: to discipline and control. While the former is aimed at drawing crowds away from the city to control them more readily, the latter is designed to 'tame' the crowds through mutual surveillance and highly symbolic social relations fashioned with a sense of acceptance and diversity. In this regard, state-sponsored 'integration ambassadors' play a strategic role. Although they may seem to submit to the forces of Singapore's disciplinary regime, they simultaneously work within the state constructions of integration to carve out spaces where they embed themselves and others in local social settings and exert their existence in the city.



The Little India riot in 2013 was used to legitimize the scaling up of surveillance far beyond the specific location in which it occurred—to police an entire area of South Asian heritage, whose previously obscure physical boundaries have now become clearly demarcated and made manifest by the proliferation of liquor-control and no-fighting signs (see the pictures I took during fieldwork above) that mark these spaces as exceptionally problematic and dangerous.

SIGNIFICANCE ON WIDER MIGRATION SCHOLARSHIP

My dissertation contributes two crucial insights to extant scholarship on the nexus between integration and transnationalism. First, it puts into sharp question the dichotomy of permanence and temporariness, which often serves to exclude temporary forms of migration from both empirical and theoretical frameworks of integration and transnationalism (see for example: Bloch and Hirsch, 2018; Waldinger, 2015; King and Aristou, 2014; Levitt, 2014; Oeppen, 2013). By treating temporariness as officially transient but factually permanent, my dissertation demonstrates the need to engage with time and temporalities more fluidly to capture integration and transnationalism processes in the otherwise overlooked contexts of temporary migration regimes.

Second, my dissertation shows that while migrant construction workers are socially pressured to ‘integrate’, they are simultaneously barred from ever becoming permanent residents or bringing their dependents into Singapore. As such, their migration becomes a highly individualized undertaking that invariably entails family separation, for which they must reorganize and perform family obligations across borders (Asis and Feranil, 2020). Thus, staying within transnational social fields is not a question of choice, but an everyday necessity to prevent and mitigate ‘ruptures’ in family relations. Migrants cannot *choose* to either integrate or remain transnational or both; rather, they are *forced* to be both integrated and transnational. Therefore, transnationality in this context serves as a marker of the continuing significance of border control rather than a sign of blurring nation-state boundaries, as suggested by much of western-centric scholarship.



REFERENCES

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PLACEMENT ACTIVITIES & FIELD OBSERVATION



I taught English to Indonesian migrant workers.



I visited a group of migrant musicians who gathered after work and showcased their talents.



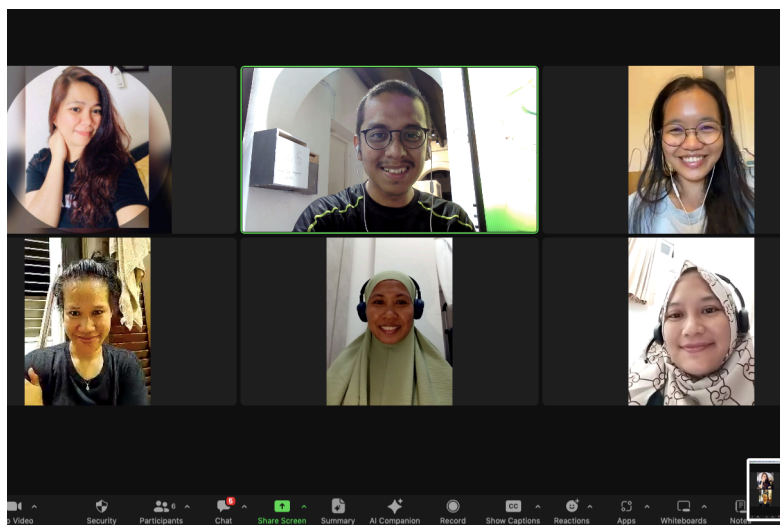
The people who founded 'the Migrant Band of Singapore'.



I attended the 'Migrant Cultural Show', an annual performance showcasing migrant talents and cultural heritage.



I helped organize MWS' 'literary walk', a monthly activity in which migrants and locals bond over various artistic expressions, such as poetry-writing, drawing, singing, etc.



I led a photo-story project, in which migrant domestic workers used their photography and writing skills to explore their simultaneous but contradictory experiences of belonging and marginalization in Singapore.