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This essay explores the interplay of cultural participation and structural barriers, and how they shape an immigrant's identity in Singapore. My mother's stories, and her identity as a Malaysian Chinese immigrant were used as an entry point into this topic.

Singapore's national identity, which is often depicted as a mosaic, is constructed by key elements of English as our lingua franca, meritocracy as our guiding principle, and communitarianism. However, these elements pose barriers for immigrants, hindering their abilities to assimilate and feel a sense of belonging in Singapore. This essay examines how our expectations of English proficiency, cause internal tensions for immigrants who navigate societal norms. It also critiques the notion of meritocracy, and how it inevitably creates an environment where varying cultural capitals possessed by immigrants are disregarded and devalued, impeding their ability to participate in the race of meritocracy. Finally, the essay delves into citizenship policies and differentiated deservedness, and how exclusion and unbelonging continue to be reinforced and perpetuated, ultimately categorising immigrants as only economic agents rather than citizens of the nation.

This paper contributes to the discourse by framing an immigrant's identity formation as a constant negotiation between personal agency and structural barriers, underscoring the need for a better, more inclusive approach to the definition of national identity.

This essay assignment was submitted as part of a graded assessment for SOCG001: Understanding Societies in AY24/25 Term 1.

Introduction

The first thing my mother learnt to do in Singapore was hide.

As a Malaysian Chinese immigrant, she speaks about the hidden tax she paid — what she had changed to acculturate into Singapore. Hiding her accent, learning to celebrate festivals the "Singaporean way", and navigating the streets as locals would.

Despite that, she has never felt like she belonged here. Even while learning the rhythms of life, she has not been able to *feel* Singaporean. My mother's challenges and successes in Singapore are simultaneously unique and common — shaped by her individuality, while reflecting broader challenges faced by many other immigrants. In this paper, I ask the following question: *How do cultural participation and structural barriers intersect to shape an immigrant's Singaporean identity, and how do these barriers hinder the assembly of a mosaic-like identity*?

My mother's stories are merely an entry point into understanding the broader social forces at play in Singaporean identity formation, where we welcome and distance those born beyond our borders. Through this paper, I aim to untangle her sense of belonging and glean deeper insights into the broader lifeworlds of immigrants in Singapore to explore why, despite possessing **some** of the individual pieces of the mosaic, they often struggle to gather the required pieces to assemble their mosaic into a cohesive whole.

The Mosaic

In understanding the challenges immigrants face in assembling a mosaic of Singaporean identity, we need to define the larger, salient pieces of it.

In 1988, a communitarian national ideology was proposed, fearing that individualism would eventually undermine Singapore's competitiveness (Chua, 1995). Subsequently, shared values like "Nation before community and society above self", and "Racial and religious harmony" were identified, framing the ideology around multiculturalism and unity (SG101, n.d.).

Post-independence, English was adopted as our lingua franca. It aided in devising a new, common educational system, and was a pragmatic move towards enhancing Singapore's global image, boosting our development (Goh, 2017). Meritocracy is another cornerstone of our identity, as it "underpins the entire Singapore system" (Tan, 2024, p.32). By advancing individuals meritoriously, it contributes to social mobility, offering equitable opportunities for all. Despite its criticisms of perpetuating social inequalities and leaning on narrow ideas of merit, Singapore's meritocracy has been touted as a success story by other nations (LKYSPP, 2018; Ng, 2017).

While the elements of communitarianism, English as a lingua franca, and meritocracy represent formalised aspects of our identity, they are not exhaustive. Rather, they warrant extra scrutiny as my mother's experiences will exemplify, acting as key pieces of the mosaic that immigrants require but cannot obtain to form their identity.

Tongues Tied

As the only country within Asia that utilises English as our working language, English has become an identifiable marker of Singapore. Beyond its practicalities in nation development, English is also a neutral language (Goh, 2017), uniting Singapore's different ethnic groups under a shared tongue.

English has hence become an aspect of "Singaporean-ness" locals have internalised. In fact, among 500 native citizens, 80% of them were in favour of incorporating an English test into Singapore's citizenship application processes, as they deemed English to be key for social integration and cohesion (Tang, 2023). To Singaporeans, the ability to speak English is synonymous with belonging and everyday life.

However, many immigrants like my mother emigrate from countries where English is rarely used. Growing up, I watched my mother navigate some spaces like hawker centres expertly with Mandarin but freeze up in others like banks where English is usually used. Other migrants like Krish also face discrimination with the language barrier, citing instances when others would make fun of his English. Krish often remained silent, viewing his language struggles as a personal inadequacy (McKay, 2013). In 2018, a Singaporean man also berated a Chinese woman, saying "You cannot speak English, go back to your country.", to which she defended "it's not necessary to speak English" (South China Morning Post, 2018).

These dynamics can be analysed through Mead's Theory of The Self, which posits that one's Self comprises two aspects — the "I" and the "Me". The "I" represents our spontaneous, raw reaction to others around us, while the "Me" is built and socialised where we internalise external expectations and attitudes (Moore & Hurst, 2023). The interplay between "I" and "Me" balances personal agency with conformity, resulting in a Self that arises in social settings (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.).

When my mother navigates a hawker centre with Mandarin, her "I" dominates, allowing her to exercise agency without conforming to linguistic expectations. At the bank, however, her "Me" dominates, reminding her of judgement she may face deviating from the norm, suppressing her "I" which asserts that society should recognise her as Singaporean regardless of what she speaks. Krish's "Me" has synonymised English proficiency to social status, and subdues his "I" — the innate instinct to defend himself — with feelings of inadequacy. This contradicts that of the Chinese woman, whose "I" responded instinctively to defend herself from critique.

In analysing the different "I" and "Me" conflicts, we can see how immigrants like my mother navigate and define their identities in a society where English is critical to Singaporean-ness. Given similar situations, we can see how an interplay and negotiation between "I" and "Me" lead to a variety of reactions like conformity, silence, and confrontation.

These internal tensions reveal how English as our national language profoundly shapes immigrant experiences in Singapore, and how they constantly balance personal autonomy with conformity. Over time, this hinders identity formation, as they internalise a lack of belonging tied to their English proficiency.

Running a Rigged Race

Meritocracy is often seen as the crux of Singapore's successes. Meritocracy was not only important for enhancing our competitiveness, but also a way for Singapore's multiethnic society to compete equally (ForwardSG, 2023). Although it asserts that one only requires merit to succeed, this overlooks the vital role of cultural capital in deciding *who* gets to compete and succeed.

Cultural capital exists in three states — embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. Embodied cultural capital includes aspects like tastes, mannerisms, and an understanding of how to behave socially, while objectified capital involves physical objects such as books and art, but importantly, cultural understanding and interpretation of them. Finally, institutionalised capital exists as formal recognition such as degrees and certificates (Ramsey, 2024). One's level of cultural capital can influence their social standing in society, and the positions they can occupy (Bhugra et. al, 2021).

Research highlights that immigrants often experience challenges due to a cultural distance between their existing cultural capital (from their home country) and the dominant culture of the host country. When the host country deems these immigrants' cultural capital as alien, there is a tendency to devalue them, impeding their abilities to succeed (Leopold & Shavit, 2011).

As an ethnic Chinese, my mother's cultural proximity to Singapore has allowed her to enjoy a smooth integration process, particularly due to her speaking Mandarin and partaking in cultural practices. A study on ethnic identity found that over 90% of respondents believed it was acceptable for new Chinese, Malay or Indian citizens to be seen as "truly Singaporean" (Mathews et. al, 2017). Ethnic identity markers such as speaking the language and celebrating key festivals were essential to the ethnic identity, highlighting how a shorter cultural distance streamlined my mother's assimilation process (Mathews et. al, 2020).

However, my mother only possesses educational qualifications equivalent to primary school. With merit often narrowly defined as academic ability in Singapore's society, immigrants often find difficulty with upward social and economic mobility (Yip, 2019). In the words of Chinese migrant Lei, without formal education credentials, "you can't do anything in Singapore" (Yang, 2022). This demonstrates the importance of institutionalised cultural capital in Singapore, and how immigrants, despite their cultural proximity, are often relegated to lower-paying jobs and face barriers participating in the race of meritocracy.

This contrasts sharply with the North Africans' experiences in France. Despite possessing educational achievements (i.e. institutionalised cultural capital) and doing "everything right", they are still viewed as foreigners as they lack embodied cultural capital. These individuals are often denied cultural citizenship from a young age. From what they eat to how their name sounds, the French community constantly casts suspicion on the North Africans' practices, reinforcing their marginalisation (Beaman, 2017). The rhetoric of French republicanism argues to value all citizens equally regardless of race and ethnicity, and uphold meritocracy (Scott, 2018; Cedelle, 2022). In turn, this has caused a paradox where North Africans are simultaneously included and excluded, being legally French while facing social exclusion.

Comparing the immigrants' experiences in Singapore and France reveal how different forms of cultural capitals intersect with meritocracy, and those who have specific forms of cultural capital are privileged. Hence, it is not to say that immigrants are unsuccessful because they lack cultural capital. Rather, they lack the cultural capital acknowledged and valued by the host society, thus hindering a sense of belonging.

Building but Not Belonging

Since the 1980s, there have been about 1 million immigrants coming to Singapore per decade (Kuhn, 2012). With rising labour force needs and declining birth rates, Singapore's immigration policy was pragmatic in alleviating workforce constraints and fuelling economic growth.

Although these immigrants may continue to hold citizenship from their home country, Singapore's citizenship policy prohibits these immigrants from also obtaining Singapore citizenship (i.e. dual citizenship) (AskGov, 2024). The state holds the view that dual citizenship does not align with communitarianism, and that citizens acquiring or retaining dual citizenship could dilute their loyalty to Singapore (Low, 2017). Furthermore, immigrants are believed to leverage Singapore as a springboard for better opportunities, in turn, impeding the nation's ability to live out the value of "Nation before community and society above self".

Singapore's citizenship policy has consequently resulted in other immigrants like my mother to maintain their home citizenship and remain as a permanent resident ('PR') here. Like Lim, who feels like an outsider in Singapore despite being born and raised here, holding onto his Malaysian citizenship is a safety net for retirement plans. More importantly, as these immigrants maintain emotional connections to their Malaysian heritage (Koh, 2014), applying for Singapore citizenship and consequently revoking their Malaysian citizenship signals a loss and untethering from their roots.

The demarcation of citizenship in Singapore also functions to provide opportunities and resources only to citizens (Goh, 2024; Gov.sg, 2015). Given the country's small size and limited resources (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016), it adopts a "Singaporeans first" strategy (Rikvin, n.d.). Drawing on Teo's concept of differentiated deservedness, we

can analyse how immigrants who are accorded different levels of state resources and opportunities according to their citizenship, then shape their idea of national identity.

Differentiated deservedness is a set of principles that undergirds Singapore's welfare policies, where certain people are deemed as more deserving of support than others (Teo, 2015). The act of differentiation births categories that go beyond administration, but rather become a tenet of our identity (Teo, 2018). Singapore's policies differentiate individuals by their citizenship status, ranging from citizens to PRs to non-residents. However, this differentiation from above is a direct result of the demand for differentiation from the bottom. In a study, 63% of 211 natives saw migrants as competitors for jobs, believing that the government had to be proactive in restricting the number of jobs for migrants. Furthermore, natives believed it would be unfair to extend the same welfare privileges they enjoyed to the migrants (Zhan et. al, 2022).

The beliefs held by natives led the Singapore government to design policies that perpetuate a tiered system of belonging, where resources and opportunities are tied to an individual's citizenship status. These include new frameworks to ensure employers consider citizens and PRs before non-resident migrants, priority selection on primary school enrolment and more healthcare subsidies awarded to citizens over PRs.

To foster native-migrant integration, the National Integration Council was set up in 2009, and although natives agreed that migrants should be integrated into society, the opposite proves true. The new measures set out by the government has created an *integration dilemma*, where striving for both differentiation and integration is simultaneously impossible. Despite their contributions to nation-building, migrants continue to face discrimination, have difficulty finding employment, and have their children face exclusion from government-subsidised programs (Zhan et. al, 2022).

Leaning on the concept of differentiated deservedness, we can see how citizenship categories become infused with social meaning. Through assigning varying degrees of assistance and opportunities, the categories go beyond administrative, but come with a label of who deserves more. For immigrants, their citizenship status comes with a sense of their worth, determining the extent to which they are included in Singapore's vision of communitarianism. While immigrants like Paul continue to tirelessly work and express desire to "join this family" (Zhan et. al, 2022), it is clear that the state views its relationship with immigrants as transactional — that they are merely economic agents, and not members of the nation. This shows that while we value collective welfare of the society, there is an unsaid distinction of who belongs in the collective.

As the state continues to reap the benefits from foreign labour and disproportionately distributes them to natives, it perpetuates the idea that immigrants are less than, hindering their ability to feel belonging.

The Mosaic

In this paper, we've explored how my mother, like all other immigrants, is a walking contradiction, floating in a liminal space between belonging and unbelonging. Though possessing some of the pieces of the mosaic such as cultural proximity and a desire to integrate, structural barriers like linguistic expectations, meritocracy's narrow gaze and our citizenship policies continue to prevent immigrants from obtaining the larger, salient pieces of the identity. Ultimately, this affects the assimilation of immigrants and continues to highlight the gap between the pieces immigrants possess, and the social structures that determine the cohesive assembly of their mosaic.

Word Count: 2200 words (excluding in-text citations)

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