Situating diversity in the global city
Emerging challenges and possibilities in Singapore

Junjia Ye

Singapore is changing rapidly because the world is changing rapidly. With increasing
globalisation, many people from different parts of the world may choose to come to
Singapore to work together with us or study together with us. Most of us will probably have
a colleague, classmate, schoolmate or neighbour from another country. These are
opportunities for us to interact and build new friendships across even more diverse cultures,
and make each of us a more tolerant and cosmopolitan Singapore citizen.

(Heng Swee Keat 2011, Singapore’s Minister of Education)

This chapter sets out the case for the idea of situated diversity. It puts forward a critical way of
understanding diversity through the ways in which increasing mobility contributes to changing
experiences of co-existing with difference. By referring to diversity as situated, I make reference
to its historic and geographic specificities. This is in response to much of existing literature on
urban diversity that is expressed in a Western context. I resist the urge to draw upon European
and North American models of ‘assimilation’, ‘integration’ and ‘multiculturalism’ by delineating
configurations of diversity in Asia, specifically Singapore. This is largely because of Singapore’s
distinct post-colonial geographies, histories of migration and economic development strategies.
In Singapore, as in other Asian cities, human diversity, as led by newer waves of migration,
presents myriad challenges and possibilities within the already existing varied socio-spatial
landscapes. Rather than a descriptive focus on state responses to diversity, this chapter is an
exercise in drawing linkages between processes of migration and the emergence of new forms
of diversity.

Taking the opening quote of this chapter both as a source of critique and hope, I approach
these linkages through a discussion of the strong role of the state before moving on to talk about
more prosaic ways in which people negotiate difference in everyday life – ways that challenge
official measures that contour diversity. I illustrate how the Singaporean state shapes the contours
of diversity by discussing its means of administering diversification through its historical measures
that mediate everyday forms of co-existence with difference. Moving on to more recent forms
of migration and diversity, I examine the realities of the city-state’s cosmopolitan aspirations
through which the social experience of living with difference is rapidly changing. I highlight the emergent limits and possibilities to co-existence in diverse spaces specifically through fleeting social encounters by offering two concepts with which to understand diversity in more situated ways. By using the term ‘emergent’ here, I not only draw attention to the empirical transformations taking place in Singapore as a result of newcomers, but also, more crucially, I suggest the pressing need to theorize differently and distinctly about human relationships with diversity in a non-Western context.

Approaching diversity in Asia
Diversification processes are taking place across Asia at a rapid pace and are largely led by migrants, not only of different ethnicities, but also of varied legal statuses, language backgrounds and religions, and holding different understandings of social norms. Existing research, however, does not reflect the volume, velocity and variations of these transnational flows and their resulting socio-spatial circuits. Indeed, much of the recent work on urban diversity has paid great attention to Western European contexts such as the United Kingdom (e.g. Amin 2012) and ‘immigrant’ countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand (e.g. Pearson 2001). Terms such as ‘multiculturalism’, ‘social cohesion’ and indeed ‘diversity’ have become part of both political and academic discourse in describing and prescribing social relations in contexts peopled by individuals of different backgrounds. In contrast, processes, patterns and meanings of diversification in Asia have received far less scholarly attention (see Lai et al. 2013). By using the example of Singapore, I suggest new directions in conceptualizing the processes of living with diversity that are attentive to the city-state’s historic and geographic particularities.

Historicizing diversity in Singapore
By the time Stamford Raffles landed on the island in 1819, Singapore was already a trade emporium with extraterritorial linkages to the region. Indeed, from its pre-colonial history, Singapore was already a multicultural entrepôt aided by its natural deep harbour. In becoming a British colony, Singapore’s economy and labour supply reached further and in greater volume (Chew and Lee 1991). The history of Singapore’s diversity, therefore, is founded upon its economic development. During the colonial period, it was the combination of immigration and geographical advantage that shaped the economic development of Singapore, and it remains one of the features of Singapore’s economic development today. Colonial labour policies were largely responsible for the massive infl ow of immigrant workers from China, India and Java to the Malayan hinterland and their concentration in separate-by-ethnicity work niches in Malaya and Singapore. In the rapidly growing economic environment, the division of labour was structured along ethnic lines – a pattern which went on to shape the opportunities of future immigrants (Lai 1995). By the time it achieved self-governance from the British in 1959, Singapore’s diversity of immigrants, paired with its comparative advantage in terms of geographic location along the trade routes, provided the platform for its future development strategies through migration and economic growth.

Managing a historically multiethnic state
With independence, there was also a shift in the way the governing body related to its people. The governing body had to face the challenge of imagining a common objective as a nucleus of
nationhood. Socially and politically, building a nation-state out of an ethnically diverse population with a complex background of economic, political, social and cultural differences has resulted in the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) attempt to produce an overarching national identity and an ideology of ‘multiracialism’ (Lai 1995: 17). This ideology officially gives separate but equal status to the Chinese, Malays, Indians and ‘Others’1 (or CMIO, for short) and informs official policies on various issues related to the economy, language, culture, religion and community life (Lai 1995, Perry et al. 1997). CMIO became part of the national ideology, so that Singaporeans of various backgrounds can imagine themselves as a multiracial people. English was adopted as a convenient language of trade and is the first language of the country, tying the different ethnic groups together.

The insecurity of Singapore’s regional geopolitics was, and often continues to be, another dimension affecting ethnic relations and management in the city-state. Situated in the Malay Archipelago that has a large ‘indigenous’ Malay population and an ‘immigrant’ Chinese minority, Singapore’s ethnic composition created an arguably disadvantageous fit to its surrounding region. It was because of its ethnic differentiation and dominance of its Chinese people that many viewed Singapore as a Chinese place, or even state (Lai 1995). To some extent, the ethnic identities of the Chinese and Malays in Singapore are shaped by the comparison of their economic and political positions with those of the Chinese and Malays in Malaysia. Further, the position of the Chinese in Singapore is structured by the historical experiences of the Chinese immigrant minorities in Southeast Asia (Tan 2004); conversely, however, some viewed the Malays’ social position in Singapore as a disadvantaged indigenous minority (Lai 1995). Finally, among both Chinese and Malays, the ethnically differentiated development during the colonial period has mutually resulted in limited interaction, the maintenance of rigid ethnic boundaries, strong stereotyping and an underlying sense of insecurity and fear of dominance by Chinese and Malays of each other. These fears culminated in three violent riots prior to Singapore’s independence.

The construction of the local multiethnic community must be understood against this background. Until the 1960s, Singapore’s population mostly lived in separate ethnic settlements established by the colonial administration. Large-scale resettlement into self-contained public housing estates, implemented through the Housing and Development Board (HDB), was one of the ways in which the ideology of multiracialism materialized spatially. Through the construction of publicly administered, largely ownership-based, housing projects, the HDB has been able to provide Singaporeans with affordable shelter and spaces to facilitate interaction among different ethnicities. These include neighbourhood schools, markets, community centres, playgrounds, void decks and walkways that link one block of flats to another (Chua 1995; Lai 1995; Perry et al. 1997). There are also ethnic quotas enforced to ensure each housing block reflects Singapore’s ethnic composition. From a strategic level, then, public housing in Singapore is a powerful tool in managing ethnic diversity and relations – a crucial issue that must be addressed in the creation of a national identity. Singapore’s planners also saw the HDB as an efficient way of providing improved living conditions that are necessary for the city-state’s economic success (Perry et al. 1997). The state also manages ethnic relations via the school curriculum, where the ethnicity of the student determines his or her ‘mother tongue’ – for example, a Malay student must study Malay, an Indian student must study Tamil. Ethnic identity also continues to be clearly denoted on every Singaporean’s identity card. Hence, the notion of multiracialism is conveyed and experienced in the everyday living spaces of Singaporeans. There are also softer measures of managing diversity through national festivals, such as the Chingay and Racial Harmony Day, that celebrate particular forms of multiculturalism (Goh 2011).
State-led cosmopolitanism as diversification

Economic restructuring measures since the early 1970s illustrate configurations of state, capital, labour and commodity production within a changing international division of labour of which Singapore has always been keen to be a part. While I argue that these measures are by no means limited to practices of the state and are instead conditioned by the dynamics of global restructuring, the Singaporean state has particularly strong control over its strategies of development through its purposefully shaped processes of diversification (Olds and Yeung 2004). The integrated development processes of export-orientation and foreign investment driven developmental strategies – perceived to attract desirable ‘global capital’ – requires the import of human capital, with both high- and low-waged labour.

While other transnational sojourners, such as marriage and student migrants, are also contributing to growing social diversity, the sharp increase in immigration to Singapore in the past two decades has been propelled by the urgent economic need to fortify Singapore’s labour force. The turn of century saw an increasing share of non-citizen population – a direct consequence of the city-state’s restructuring policies to attract and rely on foreign labour (Yeoh 2004). The deliberate and strategic reliance on ‘foreign manpower’ is part and parcel of the dominant neoliberal discourse of globalization as an ‘inevitable and virtuous growth dynamic’ (Coe and Kelly 2002: 348). Indeed, as former Prime Minister Goh said during the 1997 National Day Rally: ‘Singapore must become a global, cosmopolitan city, an open society where people from many lands can feel at home.’

Today, foreigners make up 33 per cent of the total workforce in Singapore. As elsewhere, the transmigrant population grows in tandem with restructuring processes to render labour more ‘flexible’ in relation to capital (Yeoh 2004). The workforce was strategically and rigorously configured to incorporate a significantly large foreign labour pool, which can be broadly divided into two strands: foreign talent and foreign workers. Both strands of workers are brought into Singaporean space strategically and they are administered very differently (Yeoh 2006). Foreigners’ access to rights and privileges is mainly differentiated by skills status and by the perceived desirability of these skills to the achievement of national goals. Differentiated access is institutionalized by the issuance of a range of work passes and permits that fall broadly into the employment pass and work permit categories (Yeoh 2004). Building a nation in the image of a ‘cosmopolis’ requires selectively inclusionary projects to entice ‘foreign talent’ – highly skilled professional workers, entrepreneurs and investors who are part of the face of cosmopolitanism in Singapore (Yeoh 2004). This group of migrants holds a form of the employment pass that enables them to apply for dependants’ passes and gain access to greater job mobility. Far greater in number, however, are the work permit holders, most of whom are concentrated in the manufacturing, construction, shipbuilding and domestic industries. This pool is also broken down further by nationalities, with rules and regulations set by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), permitting only certain nationalities to access work in particular industries (Ye 2013).

The bulk of the increase in foreigners in the city-state comes from the increase of temporary migrant labourers who hold work permits (Ye 2013, 2014). Of this group that holds work permits, the largest percentage increase comes from foreign construction workers, many of whom are from Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar. A large number of workers from the Philippines also take on work in the low-paying service sector outside of domestic work. These social divisions manifest tangibly in the segregated landscapes inhabited by temporary migrant workers compared to other populations in Singapore. Shipyard and construction jobs entailing shift-work require that Bangladeshi male migrants may work in the day or at night, and they generally work on sites that preclude interactions with the public. There is also a high degree of
spatial constraint in the daily lives of the Bangladeshi workers as the everyday lives of migrant workers are highly reliant upon their employers. As stipulated in MOM guidelines for employers who hire foreign workers, low-waged male migrant workers in Singapore should be housed in state-approved, employer-provided accommodation. These come in the form of purpose-built dormitories that are commercially run, industrial and/or warehouse premises that have been partly converted to house workers, temporary quarters on worksites, harbourcrafts (such as ships and marine vessels) and, to a lesser extent, HDB flats (MOM website). The majority of such accommodation is segregated from residential areas where locals live.

**Accommodating new migrants**

It should be noted that these newer waves of migration into Singapore have incited new social tensions and discrimination, expressed most prominently online (Yeoh and Lin 2013). The Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony – put together by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg, the national body for racial harmony – showed that Singaporeans are not comfortable with having new immigrants making up the majority of people in the country. Only about 50 per cent of respondents are comfortable with that idea, with most preferring the status quo when it comes to Singapore’s current racial mix (Channel News Asia 2013). In response to this unhappiness, the government has set up various organizations to address and mediate these tensions (such as the National Integration Council and various grassroots organizations such as the People’s Association and Onepeople.sg). Campaigns that seek to teach co-existence are also common, such as the ‘Love Thy Neighbour’ campaign to ‘promote good neighbourliness’ amongst residents. Also prominent are official discourses on the need to integrate, such as the following quote by Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore in 2013:

> Even as we maintain an open environment in Singapore, foreigners working here must understand that they too bear a responsibility to the local community, and should respect Singaporean values and norms. This also applies to the group of foreign workers who are here to provide us a service, such as those in construction and estate maintenance. They too have to abide by our social norms and values. At the same time, we should treat them with respect, and appreciate the work they do and the services that they provide for us.

While these campaigns are not solely directed towards newcomers, they do condition the contours of what is locally acceptable behaviour and what is not. These state responses are efforts to manage relations and interactions between new diversities and long-time residents; however, they are interpreted and manifest in everyday ways that may not neatly square with official intentions. Indeed, I have found that, embedded within everyday co-existence between migrants and locals, there are highly nuanced forms of situating and organizing multiplicity in Singapore.

**Everyday narratives of co-existing with diversity**

As we have seen, there are various state-led socio-spatial measures in place to manage these newer waves of diversity in Singapore, such as housing and job allocation and the attempt to manage tensions between the new and old waves of diversity. In spite of these, there are sites that remain and also emerge as places of contact. Indeed, the realities of such official visions of diversification cannot only be seen as segregated from everyday urban life but are, crucially, situated in and transforming the social fabric of mundane encounters. Shared spaces such as
schools, workplaces, buses, community events and food centres remain sites where long-time multicultural residents must both co-exist and interact with newcomers in highly prosaic and constantly evolving ways.

Yeoh and Huang (1998) draw attention to the way Filipina domestic workers use public spaces, such as Orchard Road’s Lucky Plaza, during their rest days. The temporary but regular appropriation of these spaces by female domestic workers, as well as the ways in which they are accommodated, reflect, reinforce and sometimes circumvent larger unequal power relations at these public spaces. Similarly, Bangladeshi male migrants also assert their presence within different public spaces in the Singaporean landscape in complex and contentious ways (Ye 2013). By appropriating spaces that are overlooked by other urban residents as socializing spaces, these migrants are circumventing official policy and marking their presence in the city. In other words, while their use of such spaces is largely a result of exclusion from other urban areas, such as within shopping malls, their act of appropriation reconfigures the dynamics of specific urban spaces. While these instances of appropriation do not directly or permanently challenge broader inequalities, such practices of appropriation are important precisely because they allow for spontaneity away from the constraints faced by migrants in much of their daily lives.

There are spaces, for example, where Bangladeshi male migrants congregate that suggest a co-presence with other urban residents without neglecting the broader power inequalities that are unfolded across space. Diversity in practice in such sites contains both challenges and possibilities to the project of living with difference. There are multiple modes of negotiating, including and excluding diversity that become patterns of socially organizing difference in everyday life; these can, in effect, produce new ways of discriminating as well as accommodating difference. I offer the notion of gui ju (规矩) as one such mode of social organization.

Gui ju

Gui ju is a localized code of conduct that mediates and governs people’s fleeting and more sustained encounters with migrants in different public spaces. This term was used repeatedly by Chinese-Singaporean respondents in my work. To these respondents, having gui ju generally means that one is civil and behaving in the appropriate way. I argue that the discursive practice of gui ju is a significant way of mediating encounters amongst strangers in public and, more recently, of introducing a filter between migrants and locals. To ‘integrate’ in the Singaporean context, therefore, means to have gui ju. Within socio-spatial patterns of co-existence, gui ju is a form of normative, social classificatory set of values that forms local notions of civility, in which locals are deemed to know how to behave in public, whereas migrants do not. Yet, crucial to this form of civility is the element of restraint which negotiates encounters with difference where people hold themselves back from direct confrontations. Gui ju hence prevents this tension from bubbling over into more violent conflict and becomes a mundane way in which urban diversity is encountered and governed in the everyday. The violation of gui ju by people – who are, according to my informants, newcomers – exposes dominant orderings in space: those who know how to behave and those who do not, those who belong and those who do not. Civility and norms then become highly nuanced tools with which to judge who belongs and who does not in ways that go beyond simply ethnicity, nationality and gender.

The theoretical impetus for gui ju is largely twofold. The first is to consider critically the ways in which studies on diversity in an Asian setting – in this case, Singapore – can engage with notions and processes of global mobilities without the ingrained impulse to refer to Western models of co-existence. The second impetus is a response to much of the recent
writings on cosmopolitanism, which celebrates openness and willingness to engage the other without recognizing the contradictions within such dispositions and attitudes.

Concluding notes

This chapter has addressed the ways in which diversity management in Singapore emerged, developed and continues to be reproduced. As Singapore was already multicultural as a pre-colonial trading port, the management of diversity during this time established the first traces of institutionalized co-existence. Diversification also intensified during the colonial period, with the arrival of migrants from China and India who eventually settled in Singapore. The policies of multiracialism through the CMIO framework after independence in 1965 thus reinforced the existing diversity. The overarching creed of multiculturalism in Singapore is most clearly institutionalized through the pervasiveness of the CMIO. This framework became a part of everyday life in Singapore through housing, education, religious and language policies. There are also softer measures of incorporating a citizenry of diverse backgrounds to co-existence in close proximity through various social campaigns. It can therefore be argued that older waves of diversity in Singapore have been socialized to accept particular ways of co-existence with difference. Diversification in recent years has been state led, with the majority of newcomers being international labour migrants. This incorporation of new diversity has been met with unhappiness and tensions from older groups of diversity. Rather than being conceived simply along racial and ethnic lines, I would argue that the unhappiness stems from the ways in which newcomers violate subtle, tacit cultural norms, values and behaviours because of their lack of local knowledge. Through the concept of gui ju, I argue that it is this highly nuanced, internalized cultural filter that enables people to judge who belongs and who does not in a place which has historically adopted and continues to reinforce a particular understanding of diversity.

Notes

1 This is a group comprising other ethnic minorities in Singapore – Eurasians, Jewish, Armenians, British, etc.

References

Junjia Ye


