Transmigratory Experiences of the Singaporean Transnational Capitalist Class

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Abstract

In the past decade, processes of globalization have contributed to an increasing number of skilled migrants around the world. In the case of Singapore, these processes intertwined with the Singapore’s government call to its citizens to spread the country’s wing in the region have resulted in a growing number of Singaporeans living outside its limited geobody. This group of Singaporeans overseas purportedly belongs to an emerging breed of transmigrants otherwise known as the transnational capitalist class (TCC). As the title suggests, Singaporean TCCs are described as transmigrating elites who, in the course of their transnational mobilities, develop intricate social networks interweaving different countries together. While TCCs are allegedly highly proficient and adroit at functioning in diverse environments, little is known about the family strategies they employ in the course of transmigrating. Also, Singaporean expatriates – especially those with children – are often reportedly confronted with various difficulties when they venture far from the comforts of a familiar home. Hence, this paper aims to provide a gendered perspective on the transmigratory behaviour and experiences of Singaporean TCCs, delving into the challenges and struggles they face. The paper focuses especially on the familial issues of Singaporeans TCCs with school-going children, and seeks to explore the family strategies they employ in the wake of the government’s call to ‘go regional’ and/or ‘go global’. The reservations that Singaporean parents have, especially those pertaining to their children’s education, are also examined.

Keywords: transnational capitalist class, Singaporean, family, education
Introduction

In the recent years, a growing number of Singaporeans appears to be responding to the government’s call for them to spread Singapore’s wing in the region. A group of relocating Singaporeans in particular purportedly belong to an emerging breed of transmigrants otherwise known as the transnational capitalist class (TCC). As the name suggests, Singaporean TCCs are described as transmigrating elites who, in the course of their transnational mobilities, develop intricate social networks interweaving different political geobodies together. While TCCs are allegedly highly proficient and adroit at functioning in diverse environments, little is known about the family strategies they employ in the course of transmigrating. Also, Singaporean expatriates – especially those with children – are often reportedly confronted with various difficulties when they venture far from the comforts of a familiar home. Hence, this paper seeks to explore the familial issues experienced by Singaporeans TCCs with school-going children.

The ensuing sections will delve into the migratory stories of Singaporeans TCCs and sieve out their triumphs, struggles and concerns about their families. In particular, the worries that transmigrating parents have over their children’s education and how their subsequent life choices are being shaped by such anxieties are highlighted through the study of two distinct groups of Singaporeans: those who chose to bring their families along with them on their journeys and those who decided to leave their families behind in Singapore. On the one hand, the perspectives of Singaporeans who moved overseas with their families will be investigated by probing first into their reasons for relocating themselves, and then their families as well. Apart from examining their life choices, their views on how an education from an overseas institution – be it from a Singapore or other international schools – compare against the local Singapore education system will also be discussed. On the other hand, viewpoints from transmigrants who left their spouses and children behind in Singapore provide an interesting contrast. Their life choices, views and reasons for moving without their families in tow will be examined vis-à-vis the other.

1 TCC may more specifically be the “TNC [transnational corporation] executives and their local affiliates (the corporate fraction); globalizing bureaucrats and politicians (the state fraction); globalizing professionals (the technical fraction) [or] merchants and media (the consumerist fraction)” (Skilair, 1996; 2001: 17). World tycoons and billionaires are also said to be transnational elites belonging to the TCC (Lever-Tracy, 2002).
Transmigrating Singaporeans: Who are they?

In this study, 31 Singaporean transmigrants in China, Hong Kong or Thailand as well as those who have since returned to Singapore were interviewed using various in-depth interview techniques; namely face-to-face interview, electronic mail and telephone interview. Within this group of interviewees, 19 of them (61.3%) were mothers while the remaining 12 individuals (38.7%) were fathers. All their children were at a school-going age ranging from kindergarten to university. Where possible, some of these young Singaporeans were also interviewed to obtain their perspectives and sentiments on some of the issues that were raised. Incidentally, all the fathers in this group were the lead migrants and have profiles befitting that of a TCC. They were either businessmen or skilled professionals coming from a wide range of occupations. Unsurprisingly, all the women in this study were trailing spouses, accompanying their husbands on their expatriate posting. Most of the female respondents (78.9%) in this study gave up their careers in Singapore to be with their husbands/families and only 21.1% of the women continued working (in teaching-related jobs) after migrating. The other female interviewees decided to become full-time housewives during this period.

The majority of the interviewees were Chinese (87.1%) and the remaining 12.9% came from other ethnicities such as Malay, Filipino and German. With respect to their age, the interviewees were spread rather evenly between two age groups; most of them being in their 30s (48.4%) or 40s (45.2%) - see Table 6.1). Among the Singaporeans in this study, 45.2% placed their children in a Singapore international school (SIS). An equal percentage (45.2%) had children who were studying in other international schools of American or British origins. One mother enrolled her children in both types of institutions, with the elder one in an American international school and the younger one in a SIS. Finally, 6.5% of the parents left their children in Singapore.

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2 Due to the limited sample size, this study does not claim to be representative of the overseas Singapore population. Instead, it hopes to give voice to some of them and stimulate thinking about their life overseas.

3 It was noted that many of them did this while continuing to have maids to help them with the household chores when they are overseas.

4 Considering that some interviewees (5 couples) are married to each other, the breakdown could be recalculated into the following: 42% of the parents enrolled their children in a SIS; 46% of them with children studying in other international schools; 4% has children enrolled in both types of institutions while 8% left their children in Singapore.
TABLE 6.1: AGE COMPOSITION OF INTERVIEWEES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>30 – 39 (%)</th>
<th>40 – 49 (%)</th>
<th>50 – 59 (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
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Reasons for Leaving: Balancing work and family

In the course of interviewing, it was revealed that most of these respondents have a rather different set of reasons for leaving Singapore (with or without their families), as compared to the interviewees from another study on transmigrating Singaporean teachers\(^5\). Where migration was portrayed more as an adventurous decision made by free-wheeling individuals as in the case of Singaporean teacher interviewees, at least half of the respondents in this section shared that their migration was actually borne out of a sense of necessity rather than personal preferences. Most of them confided that they were sent abroad by their companies, with little or even no initiative on their parts. In fact, many of them lamented that they were practically ‘commanded’ by their companies to relocate or face the possibility of retrenchment. Interviewees such as Pinxiong (40, Director) and Larry (40s, Director) stated that they would lose their jobs if they did not comply with their companies’ decision. Pinxiong said,

> it was stipulated in my job contract that I have to undertake an overseas posting. Anyone who rejects the posting will usually be asked to leave, as it is really unfair to the others.

Respondents appeared to be resigned to this fate and shared further that given the poor economic forecast and outlook for Singapore, they were also pessimistic about the chances of finding another job in Singapore should they disobey their bosses’ directives. In an extreme case, one respondent, Huaqiang (50, Manager), even hinted of sabotage by colleagues within the same company that led eventually to his extremely reluctant move overseas without his family.

Another harsh reality was that many companies in Singapore were in actual fact closing down selected departments and shifting them elsewhere. Hence, when faced with dwindling job opportunities in Singapore, several interviewees had no other alternatives but to abide by their companies’ decision. Fabian (45, Accountant), who was rather hesitant about moving abroad, related the cruel realities behind his seemingly ‘glorious’ expatriate posting,

> … I didn’t view this [move] as a real career development … No, we were just transferring jobs from Singapore to Bangkok, so that didn’t appeal to me. [I knew that they were closing down the Singapore section] and the reason that they [company] wanted us here was just to make sure that it works, that’s all … There is a risk there [that there won’t be a job left for me after this] but we have reached a point where we don’t worry too much about the future now. We just take one step

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\(^5\) The study on expatriate teachers was conducted in conjunction with this study on Singaporean TCCs. Both studies were part of the author’s Masters Dissertation titled “Nation-Building and Transnational Mobilities: Singapore-Style Education and Educators abroad” (Department of Geography, National University of Singapore) submitted in 2005.
at a time …

In other desperate cases, there were simply no jobs available for several respondents in Singapore thus forcing them to seek their livelihoods elsewhere. Such respondents mirror the reality often reported in Singapore newspapers (see for example, The Sunday Times, 4 April 2004). Cuiling (40, homemaker) stated that given her husband’s profession as an architect, there were actually very limited employment opportunities for him in Singapore.

I won’t say that it [the overseas stint] is helping him in his prospects … just guarantees him a job. Because right now, you don’t … as an architect especially, the building industry here [Singapore] is like almost all flat. Almost all his friends were asking him to try to bring them into China. I think for some professions like architects, if you don’t want to go overseas, you will never get a job. I think Singaporeans would have to face up to that. Two, three years ago, when they try to get people to go to China, nobody wants to go. Singaporeans are so comfortable, nobody wants to go but now everybody is sending him email you know. Do you have something for me to do? And they are willing to go without their families. I think that’s very unhealthy. In fact, because of the squeeze here, a lot of companies are wanting only the guy who’s working, they don’t want to support the family.

Indeed, Singaporeans who found themselves caught in such unfortunate circumstances have to actively seek employment in other more viable markets or risk becoming obsolete. Even though this group of respondents might have moved overseas ‘independently’, their ‘initiative’ stemmed from a desperate act of survival rather than an enthusiastic search for new challenges and adventures. Several hard-pressed interviewees were even pushed to overlook the lack of expatriate benefits and accept jobs on local terms just to secure a job.

The pressure to cling on to a job was doubly crucial for Singaporean males as they still feel that men should be the breadwinners of the family. When couples were confronted with the need of having one party give up his or her career, it was mostly the women’s careers that get the axe. This trend was apparent in this study as evidenced in the migrants’ profile where the trailing spouses were all females. Cherie (31, former Sales Support Administrator turned homemaker) retold the ‘discussion’ process that transpired between her spouse and herself.

I guess he’s (husband) a very chauvinistic guy. He’s like ok, no doubt you’re an extrovert and you need to quit your job, so what? [He said] “But I am here, you better be here with me, I need the family to be together. So you have to think for me, now I have to work here”. He has that kind of thinking … [Actually, I told him] you go … six months later I will join you.” … I decided that it was ok for him to come home once or twice a month. I don’t want to quit my job yet. [He said] “No! What’s the point of me flying up and down? Since I have already decided to work there, you have to come! I give you about three months”. In the end, I said ok you need to give me time, so I just find all sort of excuses to drag.

Roxanne (38, Assistant Bank Manager turned homemaker), another respondent, tried having a transnational family arrangement for several years before finally giving up her career to join her husband.
in China. She related her mixed sentiments over the relocation and her reasons for eventually relocating,

I didn’t want him (husband) to go … my son and I only joined him 2 and a half years later … It [the separation] was a difficult decision to make but I felt that for the sake of his career, it was agreed upon … I managed my son alone and felt like a single parent. However, work was very satisfying … Doubting thoughts were really eating like a cancer into our relationship then … [When] we were separated, though my career was great, I felt that between hubby and I, we were drifting apart. A lot of mistrust, for example all those horror stories about the Chinese women. On top of that, hubby worked so hard that his health suffered. My son started to treat him like a stranger. I didn’t think it was fair for my hubby. That’s why we joined him 2 and half years later. [After migrating], seeing the difference in the relationship between my daughter and her daddy versus my son and his daddy (which I hope has mended by now), made it all sort of worthwhile to have given up my career.

As observed, there was still a tendency for respondents to award priority to men’s careers over the women’s despite the women holding well-paid professions themselves. While female respondents might feel sad occasionally over the loss of their careers, they do feel that their sacrifice for the overall well being of the family is worth it.

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that not every move out of Singapore was propelled by economic and/or market changes. For a selected number of respondents, the corporate culture adopted by some global corporations has also influenced their individual work ethos and outlook in life. For instance, interviewees such as Hamzar (33, Vice President) embraced the companies’ initiatives and felt that working in different countries would indeed bear fruitful experiences. They were also aware that working overseas would help their career tremendously and accelerate their climb up the corporate ladder. Finally, there were also rare cases where respondents actually persuaded their companies to create an overseas posting for them. Sean (42, Financial Controller) specifically asked for a China posting and his employer agreed readily. Despite his eagerness to leave, his family was not and he had a hard time persuading them. He said,

[their] immediate reactions were: why the change? Why leave home? Why not continue with the existing familiar environment in Singapore? Children’s education … and all the reasons that can be thought of! It was a tough selling job for me.

His family’s reaction was expected and paralleled what has often been reported in the press where Singaporeans were noted to be “reluctant to relocate” and “unwilling to break away from their comfort zones” (Financial Times, 19 June 2003).

The struggles of Singaporean TCCs

As revealed earlier, the general powerlessness of numerous interviewees in controlling market conditions and company’s decisions has created several struggles within families. Although most respondents’ companies were willing to compensate them for their move overseas and provide them with hardship allowances, such expatriate packages vary. Transmigrating Singaporeans had to weigh the
opportunity costs arising from their relocation carefully since such costs were not confined to monetary matters alone. Potential migrants were bombarded with multiple tricky questions such as: if they should go alone or with their families and/or what will happen to their children’s education? Indeed, one recurring worry in this study relates to children’s education – a major hurdle obstructing one’s migration trajectory – rather than fears of readjustments and/or acclimatizing to new environments. Interviewees exhibited an immense phobia of withdrawing their children from Singapore’s education system, worrying that their offspring might lag behind their peers.

Therefore, the initial path chosen by some migrants was to split their immediate families in two different countries and conduct their family lives across borders. The prevalent tendency was for the fathers to commute while their offspring remained in Singapore with their mothers. This was a variation of the astronaut strategy adopted by many Hong Kongers where the children were left in a foreign land while the man, and sometimes the wives, returned to their homeland to work (Skeldon, 1994). Nonetheless, the intentions and priorities of all parents were the same; that their children receive the best education.

Then again, this strategy did not often have a happy-ever-after ending. As testified by Roxanne earlier, maintaining a transnational family was not an easy task and various misgivings over issues pertaining to fidelity and family relationships soon generated additional mental, emotional and physical stress on both the migrants and those who were left behind. There were also concerns over the possible negative impacts of raising children in a single-parent environment (The Sunday Times, 16 November 2003). Hence, while eight respondents did not migrate together with their families initially, their mindsets shifted dramatically over time. After enduring months of separation – of varying periods –, many of their earlier reservations were now overruled by the conviction that the immediate family should stay together and that they had enough of commuting and long-distance caring. They too quit the transnational family arrangement to constitute the 93.5% who relocated with the immediate family. Such changes act as reminders that transnational family arrangements might only be interim arrangements; families who were initially separated in different locations might not remained dispersed.

It is thus important to elaborate on the processes leading to this change of heart. To add to Roxanne’s story, Anna’s (36, former engineer turned homemaker) internal turmoil – before joining her husband in Bangkok with her children – was articulated in the following:

Initially I was very apprehensive, that’s why my husband was here 9 months before me. I was concerned with the school system and my children fitting back when we go home … [What made me decide to come over?] Ok, importantly the family should stay together, that’s the ultimate reason … I reckoned that being with the father, that’s what’s more important. In fact, they [children] have no relationship at all [during the time when the father was away] … They were pretty detached you know. Because … I believe in the family nucleus, I mean if there’s no family bonding, I think that’s the cause of breakdowns. [They don’t ask about the dad] and that’s another thing that sort of like shocked me because when the dad calls, there’s nothing much to say and the dad doesn’t really ask for them. Yar, so that’s not very healthy.

When probed on her initial qualms about withdrawing her children from Singapore’s education
system, Anna rationalized her final decision,

… I reckoned that education is just one bit of a child’s life and whether they are under the Singapore system or they are somewhere else in another part of the world, as long as they are learning … erm, its ok you see … I shouldn’t be so result-oriented. … I think that being out of Singapore is already an education. It’s already an experience that probably the children in Singapore won’t experience. You know, learning about someone else’s culture, learning about their way of life and learning about currency exchange. All these, a little bit of maths is also involved … because if you look at it, there are many people in the world who have not undergone Singapore’s system but yet have done very well. So it’s not the be all and end all and I am not so kiasu⁶ a mother …

As a working mother, Anna also revealed the difficulties in juggling work and single parenthood during her husband’s absence. Besides working, she had to play the role of a chauffeur, amongst other roles, to her children and was often exhausted. In addition, she was frustrated that major decisions could not be made quickly since she had to wait for her husband’s call before proceeding.

Similarly, Cuiling related why she finally caved in and joined her husband overseas.

My husband has been working in Shenzhen for actually 3 years, 4 years prior to us moving over. So he was like doing 2 weeks there and he comes back for 2 weeks and so on. And we were resisting moving … because of the school … there isn’t even a proper English-speaking school in Shenzhen. So all these while, it has been a lot of shuttling to and fro for him until we decided that it’s kind of difficult for a boy to grow up seeing his father like only part of the time … It was a difficult period in the sense that every time he comes back, there were like all these things you have to do while you are home. Settle all these issues, make decisions for the two weeks and then he goes off again for another two weeks … it was also very tiring for him.

Such sentiments merely form the tip of the iceberg, offering just some insights into what perfectly capable women - and indirectly the men - in this study have experienced when they were separated from their spouses. Their stories provoke one into contemplating if existing literature have in some ways glorified whilst oversimplifying a transnational family arrangement by grouping separated relatives under the generic term ‘family’. Also importantly, in highlighting the Achilles' heel of transnationalism or the “material and emotional costs of mobility” (Leung, 2005), such stories reaffirmed the presence of a ‘dark side’ to transnational living. While Singaporean respondents acknowledged the relative ease of maintaining multi-faceted ties across nations due to improvements in technology, they deemed that such an arrangement is often undesirable for the immediate family in the long run. Their stories thus suggest at the unsustainability of such transnational family arrangements, especially for the immediate family.

After relocating, the Singaporean TCCs in this study found that they were able to fit into new situations relatively easily, settling down comfortably within three months. However, their deeper emotional well being, often tied to their feelings toward the family, was an aspect that required further

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⁶ A Hokkien term used by many Singaporeans to denote the fear of losing (Talkingcock.com, 16 December 2004).
attention. Respondents do have to weigh their priorities very carefully before deciding for or against a transnational family arrangement. Dilemmas over their careers versus their children’s education, money versus filial piety and single versus dual income can shove transmigrants into tight corners. Strategies adopted were aimed towards the survival of the family such that each member did not lose out in any way. While every factor, especially their children’s education, was important, the collective good of the family eventually prevailed.

Life after migration the struggles continue

It would appear that Singaporeans overseas have become increasingly entrenched in stereotypical gender roles after migration, with men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Due to visa problems, it was generally difficult for women to find paid work in the receiving countries and they found themselves alienated from the job market. They became stay-home moms – if they were not already one in Singapore – with only their children for company most of the time. Mothers with relatively older children might feel lonelier since their children were generally more independent. Husbands also work late habitually, returning home even later due to the longer travelling times needed in the new countries of residence. Otherwise, wives would again be left alone with their children when husbands travel for business. This was especially true of the wives in Hong Kong as recounted by Cuiling,

I mean all of us when the ladies meet… [ask] where is your husband? [answer] In China. Where’s your husband … in China. Almost everybody is in China. Seems like not having the man coming back everyday is quite a norm.

When managing household duties, several Singaporean women respondents faced new challenges in areas such as domestic help and children’s education. First, many found it difficult to get domestic help overseas, particularly Thailand, and that many domestic helpers actually preferred working for Caucasians to Singaporeans. Such discrimination was not commonly experienced by a typical Singaporean. Also, other frustrated migrants complained of their helpers running off and getting pregnant – problems that were less common in Singapore due to the stricter laws imposed over domestic helpers. They also worried over hiring illegal migrants and getting themselves into trouble.

In the educational aspect, most mothers have the double task of ensuring that their children perform well academically overseas yet keep up with Singapore’s standards simultaneously. Apart from the mothers who became involved in education-related jobs to help their children academically, other mothers gave their children extra enrichment at home by relying heavily on assessment books and worksheets from Singapore schools\(^7\) that they had shipped over. In some cases, mothers experienced additional stress when schools in Singapore lapsed in their duties in supplying the papers. In such cases, mothers have to conscientiously contact the schools and negotiate for the papers to be sent over. When this also failed, one annoyed mother had to orchestrate an ‘acquisition exercise’ by enlisting the help of extended family members in Singapore to obtain what she wanted. Also, mothers tried to stay abreast of

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\(^7\) Presently, Singaporean children have to be enrolled in Singapore schools even though they are overseas. Parents have to pay a nominal fee of varying amounts (depending on the school) annually to maintain a place for their children. As such, the schools are obligated to provide the children with worksheets and examination papers. However, parents wish that this can be done electronically so as to save costs.

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educational changes in Singapore for their children’s benefit. It must be noted though that such behaviours hail mainly from mothers with younger children or mothers who were quite sure that their stint overseas were short-term. The anxiety lessened significantly over time and for those who were unlikely to return to Singapore for pre-tertiary education. Yet, mothers continued to remain vigilant in an unstable economic era where their families might be suddenly sent back to Singapore.

At the same time, although transmigrants were always preparing their children for the probable event of returning to Singapore, they did try to engineer their migration such that their children would finish at least their pre-tertiary education before returning. Cuiling said,

the most important thing is the secondary school, because at his age you know, he’s going to be in Primary 5 next year. We have to make major decisions. If we don’t come back by then, we probably won’t come back [to Singapore] until he finishes his university because once he misses the secondary here, for him to come back it’s going to be a big struggle.

Despite their efforts, most parents still worry that it would be difficult for their children to “fit back into Singapore’s education system after receiving an international education overseas”. Therefore, they sought to ‘protect’ their children and minimise any disruptions to their lives. This suggested that their continued stay overseas might also be educationally-motivated.

Not everything is rosy for transmigrating men either as they too have to struggle with the different culture and/or work attitudes in their new locations. Several men confided that the quality of work abroad was unlike Singapore’s and felt that Singaporeans were better employees. They were exasperated that their instructions were received with a smile but often not followed through and deadlines were not met. As such, Singaporean men found themselves having to lower their expectations constantly. Also, there were other cultural differences that they now need to be more sensitive to and have to watch their personal behaviour continually. Fabian shared some of the things he learnt,

… don’t raise the tone. Just raising the tone is considered very rude and people would get upset … to speak in a loud voice like Singaporeans is considered rude actually … Got to be careful when using words, certain things can be insulting to them. The other day my staff told me don’t use the word ‘that’s commonsense’ because that implies that they are stupid, say they don’t like it. So I said ok.

Lastly, another major concern many Singaporean transmigrants have pertains to the state of the healthcare in the receiving countries. First, they were worried that healthcare services provided in their host countries were inadequate and inferior to Singapore’s. Next, epidemics such as SARs and avian flu kept them on tenterhooks over the health and safety of their family members. Therefore, transmigrants often agonize over the relocation of the entire family since they felt that they were endangering their loved ones. Such worries over the receiving country’s state of health and healthcare facilities could, and would add significant stress to their migration.

Before these accounts mislead one into thinking that life is bleak after migration, it must be emphasized that trailing spouses do make a special effort to enhance their lives whilst overseas. Since they tend to have more time, they were able to do volunteer work or enrol themselves in enrichment classes such as yoga, art and language courses. Overall, women respondents formed very tight networks with fellow female transmigrants – be it Singaporeans or other nationalities – to obtain an alternative
source of strength and support in the absence of their family networks. On the family front, families who chose to migrate together also experienced the intangible benefits of migration more profoundly. For one, the immediate family spends more quality family time together in the absence of in-laws. Cuiling shared this,

    We also find that because we don’t have an extended family over there, we actually end up having more quality time as a nuclear family. That was something, because you know back home [Singapore], every weekend you are at grandma’s, aunties’ …

    There were also more opportunities for the families to travel around the region together in view of the lowered costs of travelling and the extra time on their hands.

    As mentioned earlier, two male expatriates in the study decided not to relocate with their families after weighing the various factors. This was not an easy decision for them but they felt that they had little choice in the matter. They missed their family tremendously and Huaqiang put it all candidly,

    [I have to give up] family warmth … mother and siblings. Not being around when you are needed. [To prepare myself for the move, I] pack up, then cry a lot until no tears lor … no choice what. Regret got use meh?

    One can almost taste the bitterness underlying Huaqiang’s outwardly flippant response. Regardless of their feelings, they have to put up with the separation for several reasons. First, schooling was a problem as their children were already in good schools and they either did not wish to upset their lives or there were simply no suitable schools in the receiving country. The fees at the international schools were also costly and some companies were unwilling to subsidize the entire amount. Also importantly, they felt that the meagre allowance given did not justify that their spouses give up their jobs. Siliang (51, Manager) replied pragmatically,

    Company will pay $500 allowance for those who bring family along, but my wife’s salary is much more than this amount and my son still has to study in Singapore, so this makes me no choice … Take it or break it!

    While TCCs seem to lead a glamorous globe-trotting life, the above vignettes illustrate that they, Singaporean TCCs in particular, are often not as carefree and flexible as they are portrayed to be. The numerous emotional entanglements and family obligations as evidenced in this study may be impeding their mobility and marring their performance in their new environments. Instead of being completely tied to a global capitalist system or a state, Singaporean TCCs appeared to be grounded to their families. Thus, one must stop perceiving TCCs as individuals but rather, as parts of their respective family units.

    **Educating young Singaporeans overseas**

    Aside from home tutoring, the school is obviously another important place for children to
receive an education. As indicated earlier, a fair number of Singaporean children were enrolled in SISs versus other international schools. To summarise, there were several factors influencing Singaporean parents’ choice of schools. First, they would determine if there was a SIS nearby\(^8\) and compare the quality of the educators and programmes to other schools in the area. They also considered the schools fees and the amount that their companies were subsidising for their children’s education. Recommendations from friends and colleagues also played a huge role in influencing parent’s decision. Where available, most parents typically place their younger children into SISs as they considered that this would facilitate their children’s return to Singapore. Nonetheless, there were other parents who felt that they should grab the chance of being away from Singapore to expose their children to other teaching methods and curriculum.

For parents with children in SISs, their feedback was that they were rather pleased that their children were receiving an “education similar to Singapore’s” and were thankful that their children would have “supposedly less difficulties in fitting back home”. They were also rather satisfied with the quality of teachers and the educational programmes run by the school but would not hesitate to voice their displeasure to school authorities. Overall, Singaporeans abroad did feel that their children were sometimes not given enough homework and were hence worried about their learning progress.

Another major concern parents have relates to the curriculum and textbooks that were currently being used in these SISs. They felt that schools were following “outdated syllabuses and using old textbooks” whereas students in Singapore were already learning from new syllabuses and using new textbooks. While they trust the old syllabus and texts, they feared that their children might be losing out to their peers in Singapore who have supposedly ‘advanced’ onto the new curriculum. Cuiling revealed,

> the concern always is that we do not know how well they are preparing him for PSLE9. We do notice that some of the books used are already not being used in Singapore schools … like they use PETS for English …Science textbook also. I did feedback to the teacher and she said, “yar, it’s true”. Most of the Science in the schools in Singapore is being moved out of the book. I think at the back of our minds, most of us are a little worried if he can actually do the PSLE. But other than that, as for the rounded education, I think the international school is better.

Academic concerns aside, parents felt that SISs were imparting the right values to their children and that the schools were doing a good job in reminding the young ones subtly of their national and cultural affiliations.

Singaporeans who had chosen other international schools – American, British or otherwise – for their children, were also very satisfied with the teaching methods employed in the schools as well as the contents transmitted to their children. They were glad that the schools were nurturing both the children’s IQ (intellect) and EQ\(^{10}\) (emotion). What troubled these parents most was their children picking up undesirable Western values, specifically “permissive values”, and losing their “Asian” roots. Fabian (Accountant, 45) was shocked that his 13-year-old daughter was already talking about dating due to peer pressure.

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\(^{8}\) This factor may become secondary because when given an option, some parents will shift to places near the schools of their choice. Hence, the quality of the educators and programmes in the school are the key concerns of parents.

\(^{9}\) The Primary School Leaving Examination is a benchmark examination for children 12 years of age in Singapore.

\(^{10}\) According to Dictionary.com, EQ is defined as “intelligence regarding the emotions, especially in the ability to monitor one's own or others' emotions and to interact effectively with others” (11/3/2005).
influences at school. He frowned upon school events such as dances where even his 11-year-old son could attend. Jennifer (Homemaker, 43) also shared her anxieties, with regard to absorption of Western values, I actually am concerned. But not all of it is bad. I like their value of the individual, the worth of a person, the importance of having your own mind on things etc … not all of it is unacceptable to us. The bad parts are their rather accepting attitude towards promiscuity, teenage rebellion etc. Therefore, parents with children in non-SISs felt the need to keep a tighter rein over their children for fear that they might stray onto the wrong path.

Another problem that worries parents was that non-SISs typically “don’t have a good mathematics and science grounding”. Since Singapore schools do place much emphasis on these two subjects, parents were then worried that their children’s standards were not on par with their peers. They attempted to make up for this with additional tutoring at home. Also, parents were unhappy with the lack of focus on mother tongues such as Mandarin and Malay in other international schools. In fact, some Chinese Singaporeans ended up taking French or German as a second language because their own mother tongue was not offered in the school. Thus, many Chinese parents felt the need to send their children for extra Mandarin lessons outside school as they fear that their children would gradually lose touch with their own culture. More importantly, parents were apprehensive that their children might not be able to cope with the mother tongue subject when they return to Singapore.

In addition, parents were rather concerned that their children studying in non-SISs might not be able to fit into the mainstream Singapore schools. They were afraid that their children might be “held back” a year by Singapore schools in the name of letting them ‘catch up’. They even considered putting their children into international schools in Singapore should they return but this might prove to be a costly decision in the long run. Hence, as indicated earlier, parents do try to coincide their time overseas to when their children are ready to enter the university or have at least missed the major benchmarking examinations in Singapore. Parents with even younger children would schedule their return to Singapore just as their children were entering Primary 1. This would help ensure that fewer readjustments are needed and that their children would be on par with their peers.

Overall, parents believed that their children were learning a lot more in a multicultural, international environment. They saw their children enjoying their studies in a more “creative environment” and were happy with their “holistic development”. Parents felt that children were better trained in “public speaking and critical thinking”. Yet, some parents were unhappy over the lack of homework and the less structured learning setting in international schools. Whether the children were studying in Singapore or other international schools overseas, parents would try to bridge the gap by registering them in immersion programmes when they return to Singapore. However, this might actually have a negative effect because some of the children who attended such programmes did not enjoy them. Having experienced a more vibrant learning environment overseas, children complained that Singapore schools were rather “boring”. They soon realised that teachers in Singapore labelled children who expressed themselves freely as troublemakers. Therefore, these students who have become accustomed to sharing their views would tend to keep to themselves to avoid trouble. They were also bored with the material taught as they would have already studied them abroad since the schools operate on different academic calendars. Ultimately, children themselves might not want to return to study in mainstream Singapore schools.

Preserving ‘Singaporeaness’ and negotiating one’s national identity
Feedback from most of the interviewees revealed that despite their children’s relative lack of national education (NE) when overseas, their children have remained largely Singaporean despite being away from their homeland. While no parent was able to pinpoint the exact reason for their children’s inclination towards their Singaporean identity, they were able to offer various speculations on their behaviour. First, almost all their relatives – grandparents, uncles, aunties and cousins – and friends were still in Singapore. Young Singaporeans remained very attached to the people they have grown up with and even though they like their present lifestyles overseas, they remained very positive about reuniting with their loved ones in Singapore. Children have good memories of Singapore as most of them have grown up there. Thus, embracing their Singaporean identity might possibly be due to nostalgia and a longing for their past ‘time’ and ‘place’ (Lam and Yeoh, 2004).

Apart from their attachments and memories, it must be stressed that both parents and schools have a big part to play in reminding children of their Singaporean ties. Parents, whether consciously or subconsciously, do frequently update their children on the current happenings in Singapore by highlighting important news and information concerning the country from relatives, local and Singapore newspapers as well as television. The latest incidents and news regarding their loved ones in Singapore were concurrently shared with the younger generation to help maintain a close link between families and inadvertently, countries. Occasionally, adults would also reminisce with their children about the happy times they had in Singapore and remind them that it was still their home and the place where their relatives were. Also importantly, the schools – be it Singapore or other international schools – also created opportunities for children to share information about their homeland through special occasions such as International Days. Singaporean children enrolled in schools where there were many fellow citizens also get a chance to relive their Singaporean ties vicariously through talking to their friends. Finally, one must remember that the bulk of the children in this study were rather young (mainly in primary schools) and might still relate their preference for a particular place to the amount of fun they have derived from it. Since they returned to Singapore mainly for holidays, expatriate parents felt that their children would always think fondly of the country. Children might want to return to Singapore because they had so much fun playing and interacting with their friends and extended families there.

Overall, because of their age, most of the younger children do not have any problems with their national identity. They were aware that they hold different identification papers from their hosts and would readily regurgitate drilled information, informing others that they were Singaporeans. It was mainly the older teens who had spent a longer time overseas who tend to struggle with their national identity as the gap between their identity on paper and their actual feelings widens. They have increasingly less affiliation with a country that had issued their identity papers and growing attachments to the country they were staying in. Carol (Educator, 41) talked about the multiple identities her 17 year-old son, Manfred carries,

[when asked about his national identity] he will always say he is mixed. He will never say that I’m a Singaporean, Filipino or a Thai, he will always say he’s mixed … Culturally, the way of life … more American because he knows more … or a Thai. [He would say:] I know more about America and Thai ... Of course, in Singapore we go there like Chinese New Year, when we’re there, they [children] usually feel like they are Singaporean … [it depends on the setting]. They know that they are in

Refer to Chapter 4 for more information on the school’s efforts to remind Singaporeans of their Singaporean ties.
Singapore, they are Singaporean but once here, even though nationality is mixed but the way of life is adapted here.

This was understandable seeing that Manfred was born overseas, had lived the majority of his life away from Singapore and was also educated in an American international school. In comparison, Carol felt that her 6-year-old son might actually know more about Singapore since he was studying in a SIS.

Also, expatriate male teens faced more tension than girls since they have to decide if they were to return to Singapore for national service (NS) before they turn 18 years old. Girls on the other hand were not constrained by such laws and have more options. In Manfred’s case, this was actually a rather challenging time for him and his family seeing that he needed to decide fairly quickly if he were to return to Singapore – a country where he has limited associations with – to fulfil his NS obligations. Carol pondered over their current situation aloud,

That is our dilemma actually. He is American-educated; he really wants to go to America after Grade 12. Because American system and Singapore system is different, so he prefers to go to the US but I don’t know yet. And citizenship wise, we’re thinking about it. Maybe after he finished college, maybe then he can decide.

Still … for him … if he were to serve two years [in NS], stop and then go again … So I am still in a dilemma whether he finishes college then after that decide or …
But we’re still also thinking about going to Singapore for his university … I don’t know, it’s not concrete yet. Nothing has been decided … he’s [son] still excited about the National Service … but then when another friend talks to him then he changes his mind … he really likes it … and he wants to be in this whole army, soldier kind of thing … but then again, he’s torn between going on to finish his university like his peers.

Both parties have engaged in frequent discussions over this issue and while Manfred’s parents do encourage him to enlist seeing that it would be a good experience for him, they would still leave the final decision to him. However, should he decide to serve, there would be many logistical details to negotiate since they need to arrange for accommodation and someone to look after him. They could not relocate the entire family back to Singapore due to work and other family commitments simply because one child has to serve NS. Although Manfred and his family were caught in a quandary over NS issues, other males do not consider this a problem. A chance meeting with a Singaporean, Alfred (Businessman, 30s) living in Hong Kong revealed that there were males who would return to Singapore for NS despite having lived away from Singapore most of their lives. They felt that it was their duty to do so and were, in a way, protecting their birth and/or citizenship rights at the same time. Their families felt the same way and supported their decision to return. Alfred recounted that he had no qualms about going back for NS and even saw it as a challenge. This was possibly because his links to Singapore remained very strong due to the resilient ties he maintained with his extended family there.

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12 All male Singaporeans who have reached 16½ years old have to register for NS and are enlisted by the time they turn 18. Singaporean males who choose to renounce their Singaporean citizenship need not be enlisted. Severe penalties await those who evade NS (Contact Singapore, 2005b).
Conclusion

In this paper, the lives of selected members of the Singaporean TCCs are revealed through the negotiations of their expatriate living. One is reminded that TCCs are not simply carefree individuals without any other commitments. For those who are married, their families feature very strongly in their lives and their life choices are often shaped by their concerns over them. Indeed, major decisions relating to career and migration are often made with their families in mind.

Finally, it must be reiterated that this study only provides a glimpse into the lives of selected Singaporean expatriates abroad and more work is definitely needed on this topic. The literature will be further enhanced by longitudinal studies conducted on the younger children in this study to see how their perceptions of their national identity change over the years they are away from Singapore. Nonetheless, one is constantly reminded that extended families such as cousins are huge factors rooting overseas children back to Singapore. Also, frequent visits back to Singapore serve to re-cement overseas Singaporeans’ ties to their homeland. It would thus be important and beneficial for the relevant authorities to organise interesting immersion programmes for the children when they return to Singapore to remove any aversions they may have to the country.

References


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The transnational capitalist class is expressed as a global ruling class and essential players of global capitalism by William Robinson and Jerry Harris.[2]. In the transnational capitalist class, according to Professor Leslie Sklair, there are four fractions which are, corporate, state, technical and consumerist.[3] The four fractions stated by Professor Leslie Sklair, bring together transnational corporations (TNC), globalizing bureaucrats, globalizing professionals, and merchants as well as the media as members of the TCC. Also according to the Sociology of the Global System,[3] the World E Theories of Transnational Corporations, Environment and Development. A review of the four dominant perspectives. By Michael W. Hansen. neo-classical economics. However, in contrast to the global reach perspective, the radical perspective views the adverse impacts of TNCs in LDCs, such as environmental degradation, in terms of the structure of the international capitalist economic system. Finally, the â€œecologicalâ€”perspective presents a fundamental critique by TNCs similar to that of the radical perspective; however, compared to the radical perspective, the ecological perspective bases its critique on neo-Malthusian rather than neo-Marxist reasoning.