

# The Significance of Mass Migration, and How to Better Talk about it

Edward Tan Yu Fan

*National Institute of Education (Singapore)*

## Introduction

Why should we place an emphasis on the wave of mass migration to Singapore in the years before the Second World War? Singaporeans who have gone through the local education system would know very well about the mass movement of people to the island after the coming of the British. Their pre-existing understandings are likely to have been forged by a symbiotic combination of National Education messages and the popular media portrayals of the period. Local drama serials such as *The Awakening* (1984) and *The Price of Peace* (1997) proved to have a significant and enduring impact on the popular memory of Singaporeans regarding the narratives of mass migration to Singapore.<sup>1</sup> One enduring narrative, reinforced every National Day, was that migrants came to Singapore in search of a better life, and together they built a shining city on the hill, and whose fruits of labour we are still enjoying. An appreciation of the achievements of our forefathers plays an important role in the process of nation-building, for instance, by providing younger Singaporeans with something they can feel proud of. Mass migration is therefore the bedrock upon which the Singapore Story was built.

## Singapore and the wider world system

There is much validity in this narrative. It is true that Singapore was a migrant society that was made up of thousands of

men and women seeking a better life. However, in the context of a history classroom, we should aspire to go beyond that narrative and give our students a deeper understanding of the complex global forces that were at work which drove Singapore's founding, and triggered a large wave of migration to the British colony – bearing in mind that this was a wave of migration that was only second in numbers to European migration to the Americas, Australia and New Zealand during this period.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is odd for a society that was built on the back of migration from far and near to not dedicate substantial time and attention to these historical processes that had shaped Singapore's historical development.

Singapore was by no means the only migrant-settler society, yet the air of exceptionalism was thick in the national narrative of the Singapore Story. During this age of migration, between 1850 and 1914, the movement of people around the world reshaped many countries into the current ones that we are familiar with.<sup>3</sup> During this period, Australia and New Zealand were gradually populated by European settlers, mainly from Britain and Germany; and the United States of America was in a bid to close their western frontier under the aegis of *manifest destiny*.<sup>4</sup> It was also due to this period of mass migration that the sizeable Japanese diaspora in Brazil took root, and the Indian communities in Kenya and South Africa were formed. They were all participants in a wider era of migration, filling jobs from

that of plantation hands to accountants and civil servants.<sup>5</sup>

What is clear is that the movement of people to Singapore was by no means special or exceptional. It is merely proof that Singapore had always been part of a wider world system.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, it serves as a valuable looking glass for our students to start to see how Singapore was part of a wider world, beyond just sitting on the crossroads of trade routes. Due to the design of the current lower secondary history syllabus, the second unit of Secondary One is also the last opportunity in the entire secondary school history syllabus to talk about this issue with any depth. Furthermore, given that students have become familiar with the centrality of Singapore's history in the material form of trade by the end of the first unit of the Secondary One syllabus, the second unit offers an opportunity to push that understanding further and for teachers to urge our students to consider the world in terms of connections and inter-connections of various communities. This represents the untapped potential of the existing syllabus.

Beyond the syllabus, this topic is also significant as it has strong relevance to the global world that our students will grow up to operate in. They are born into a global age, and many of the problems they will be grappling with in their lives are often global in nature, often demanding global solutions.<sup>7</sup> Challenges such as climate change, and intensifying global migration are just two of the most common issues of the current day. It is therefore advantageous to place in the hands of our students some of the frame and cognitive tools to approach the future world, by urging them to consider their own past in global terms. Drawing on developments in global history, mass migration in the 19th century is not merely about people

moving, but about the scale of the movement. The sudden and large-scale movement of people to new places warrants a different way of making sense of it.

At a personal level, there is something unnerving about the mass movement of people to Singapore in the 19th century. As I researched into this topic, the thing that always bothered me were the *silences*. The hundreds of thousands of migrants were nameless, and there were no records of their names, and the only record of their deeds were the numbers reflected on the balance sheets of the Straits Settlements Blue Books and Census. Even most school records were not retained to any meaningful degree. It was in such a context where Singapore as a migrant society becomes a valuable asset to the study of our own past. In order to make sense of Singapore's trajectory, we will have to understand why people from all around the globe decided to move to Singapore in the years before the Second World War, and by pursuing this line of inquiry, we can hear the voices, motivations, and hopes of the generations of sojourners who preceded us.

Therefore, what this paper will do is to first unpack the syllabus design and examine what are the current shortfalls that prevent us from fully exploring the potential of this topic with our students. It will then proceed to suggest two augmentations that can be made to two sections of the syllabus such that we can deliver a more holistic understanding of the era of migration, and more importantly allow students to better appreciate the role of Singapore in the world system that had come to shape Singaporean society.

### Dissecting the current syllabus

Given the historical significance of migration to Singapore, as explained above, and the potential learning points this topic has for us, what are the problems with the current syllabus that prevents our students from appreciating mass migration as the important event that created Singapore, and as the porthole into Singapore’s role in a wider world?

The overall design of the syllabus is sound. It asks the main inquiry question of “*Why did people come to colonial Singapore before the Second World War?*”, and attempts to address this main question using three subsidiary inquiry questions, which aimed to address the following: (i) who migrated; (ii) why was there global migration during the 19th century in general; and finally (iii) why did these migrants end up in Singapore.<sup>8</sup> These three questions are logical and does follow on from each other in a manner that would help set the context for students, before

specifically discussing migration to Singapore. They first identify the actors who were on the move, then ask why were so many people moving to new places in the 19th century, before attempting to demonstrate how Singapore was attractive to some migrants.

However, the syllabus does not achieve its full potential of discussing Singapore in a global context because it did not fully embrace the notion of “mass” in *mass migration*. For the most part, the textbook and factors identified in the syllabus only peripherally dealt with the “mass” scale of the phenomena, and treated the wave of migration to Singapore as one that is simply based on individuals choosing to depart their homes for countries with greater opportunities. Therefore, this paper proposes the changes to the first and second subsidiary inquiry questions in order to better deliver a more nuanced, informative, and lasting approach to the issue of mass migration.

Sub-Inquiry Question	Changes	Role in Overarching Historical Narrative
Who were the people that came to Singapore in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries?	Addition of nuances in the form of: (i) greater diversity within each ‘ethnic group’, and (ii) greater diversity of migrants in relation to the changes in time.	Demonstrating the melting pot dimension of mass migration and settlement, and demonstrating changes in migration patterns over time with potential links to thinking about the current trends in migration to Singapore.
Mass migration in the 19th Century – why did it happen?  What is migration?	Addition of overarching framing to the three factors identified in order to better set a global context as one of a rapidly changing world system.	Demonstrating the changing economic order of the world that served as a series of ‘push-factors’ which drove the entire world on the move during the period, of which Singapore was experiencing a part of that wider movement.
Reasons for coming to Singapore.	None.	Specific pull-factors that made Singapore attractive to migrants during the 19th century.

These suggested changes are made in order to better bring out the key features of mass migration, which are the diversity in migrants in the process of forming new societies, and the global system which drove this migration. The changes to the first two sub-inquiry questions will give students a deeper understanding of mass migration, pay heed to the scale of the migration, while at the same time demonstrating the centrality of the global context and plugging some gaps in the current content of the syllabus. This will be explained in the two subsequent sections.

### **Talking about the characters who moved**

The first sub-inquiry question asks the question of “who migrated?” to Singapore during this period, and the textbook identified some of the key groups by geographical origins. These were the Arabs, the Europeans, the Chinese, the Indians, and the people from all over the Malay Archipelago. It is a simplistic model that works well and fits with the prior knowledge of our students, who would be familiar with the Chinese-Indian-Malay-Others (CMIO) racial framework that is used in National Education and other public discourse within Singapore. There are two ways to improve this framework.

We will first have to reduce the reliance on the prior knowledge of our students. The CMIO model was a narrative created for state administration, and has limited utility in the historical classroom. We should be focusing on the flip side of the migration coin, of Singapore as a melting pot of influences from around the world. In order to tell the story of a melting pot, demonstrating nuances and changes in migrant profiles over time is a useful method.

In order to add nuance, it would be to stress on the sub-groups within the CMIO model. For instance, the people who migrated never fully thought of themselves as Chinese or Indians, but rather felt greater allegiance to their sub-ethnicities. This was rightly hinted at in the textbook, but was seriously underdeveloped. It would be useful to unpack these groups into their further sub-groups - to speak of the Hokkiens, Hakka, Teochew, Javanese, Padangese, Tamils, Bengalis, and Sinhalese rather than of Chinese, Malay, and Indian. In doing so, we would be encouraging our students to consider the meeting of many worlds in Singapore, an essential feature of migration.<sup>9</sup>

One of the things that struck me when I was sharing about the Chinese secret society and communal riots of the 19th century, such as the Penang Riot of 1854, or the Singapore Post Office Riot of 1876, was that students and adults alike would often wonder why were the Hokkiens rioting against the Teochews. It was at some point where I realized that not even with the suspension of disbelief in a historical classroom could students imagine their subtle ethno-linguistic differences to be sufficient reasons to clash with each other. This is the opportunity within the syllabus to present this element, and set the stage for students to understand unit three of the lower secondary history syllabus, about life in colonial Singapore.

The second way to stress on the nature of Singapore as a melting pot for all these various different peoples would be to focus on the change in migrant profiles over time. For instance, not all Chinese migrants were the same over the 123 years before the outbreak of war in the Pacific. During the early period, the migrants were overwhelmingly male labourers, who fuelled the growing demand for dock and plantation hands. The same trend was true

of the Indian migrants. However, as the 19th century drew to a close, there were greater and greater numbers of women and children moving to Singapore, reflecting the increasingly settled nature of the colony. It was further underpinned by the increasingly safe nature of the Straits Settlements, as government and community interventions led to a decrease in the worst of the secret society riots and other violent crimes. The changing profile of migrants therefore reflects a changing Singapore and a changing world.<sup>10</sup>

Above all, it also reflects the successful settlement of migrants on the island of

Singapore, and the re-creation of their societies, hence pushing for the meeting of these different cultures. While the textbook gave a snapshot of the people who moved to Singapore through the 1891 census, what would be more powerful is to demonstrate the diversity of migrants over time. The table below, taken from a study of Chinese migration by Lee Poh Ping demonstrates one such example.<sup>11</sup> Other writers such as Saw Swee Hock had also done extensive population studies of Singapore, demonstrating the changes in relation to time.<sup>12</sup>

Year	Chinese Male-to-Female Ratio
1824	8.2
1830	11.3
1836	14.6
1849	11.5
1860	14.4
1871	6.2
1881	5.1

Other changes in profile of migrants who came could be seen from the opening of an increasing number of schools across all community groups in colonial Singapore, and the appearance of the first non-European publications such as the Chinese *Lat Po* (1884) and *Sing Po* (1891), and the Malay *Jawi Peranakan* (1876).<sup>13</sup> These were all signs of a growing number of literate migrants, and of children – specifically, signs of settlement and the gradual integration of different communities.

Therefore, what these two changes hope to achieve is to give our students a greater sense of the historical diversity of the migrants who came to Singapore, and the changes and continuities in the profiles of the migrants who came to Singapore during the 19th century. It also encourages students to view the current wave of migration as a part of this ever-changing profile of migrants arriving in Singapore. While it goes beyond the simple CMIO model, it does not supersede it, it merely unlocks a new level of nuance and understanding for our students. Through this process, hopefully students would be

able to see that the added function of migration is that Singapore served as a vital melting pot, combining worlds previously separate.

### **Talking about the globe on the move**

The second sub-inquiry question examines the global context of why people were on the move before the Second World War. This is also the weakest link in the syllabus due to the three factors that were explicitly identified: (i) the industrial revolution, (ii) the opening of the Suez Canal, and (iii) the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. These factors proved to confuse more than it aids in students' understanding of the era of migration as they are geographically and chronologically distant from Singapore. Furthermore, they are all surface symptoms of greater changes in the world during this period.

The three factors identified were so distant from Singapore that students would find it difficult to make the connection as to why those factors influenced why the world was on the move. Attempts to make the link between the 1807 abolition of the slave trade, the 1833 abolition of slavery, and Chinese or Indian migration to Singapore while possible, would prove to be too convoluted for a history classroom of Secondary One students. Imagine making the link: the abolition of slavery in the Americas in the 1830s created a demand for wage labourers in the Americas, which used to rely on slavery. As a result, Chinese and Indians moved to Singapore in the 1860s to fill the growing number of jobs in mines and on plantations. There was no plausible link that does not require significant mental gymnastics on the part of the teachers and students. There were obvious missing connections that the course book does not talk about.

Similarly, the discussion of the opening of the Suez Canal, while definitely relevant to the growth of Singapore as a major colony, since the time required for trade between East and West was reduced considerably, was also problematic. How does the opening of a canal 5,000 miles away from Singapore prompted the movement of peoples from China, India, and the rest of the Malay Archipelago to Singapore, especially when none of their journeys required the crossing of the Suez Canal?

More importantly, mass migration to Singapore had already started even before the opening of the Suez Canal, and the abolition of slavery. Between the founding of Singapore and the abolition of slavery, Singapore's population went from an estimated 500-1,000 to around 25,000. Singapore's population crossed the 100,000 people mark before 1868, and arrived at 300,000 by the 1880s, earning her the moniker "the spirited little colony" in her early years.<sup>14</sup> The movement of people to Australia and North America from Europe also started before the opening of the Suez Canal, and the development of the steamship. In fact, the settlement of North America was so successful that the territory acquired the critical mass to sustain the 1776 American Revolution, and the War of 1812 even before any dramatic advances in transportation technology.<sup>15</sup> The opening of the Suez Canal was a symptom, not a cause of the intensification of this global world.

The abolition of slavery, intensification of trade and the industrial revolution, and the opening of the Suez Canal were all part of a greater series of global developments that tied the fates of a textile worker in Lincolnshire to the fate of a plantation worker in Malaya. It linked the fate of a banker in the City of London to that of an

Indian domestic servant in colonial Singapore. The true driver of this global movement of people, is therefore, not these surface developments, but the fundamental restructuring of the global economy in the 19th century under the aegis of the British Empire.

Therefore, we should not shy away from talking about the true causes of this global movement of people when discussing mass migration during the 19th century. While the use of a factors-based approach would be immediately familiar and easy for students to understand, this is an issue that does not warrant a factors-based explanation, especially if the factors are mere symptoms rather than the true cause of the global migration of the 19th century.

Rather, this issue should be approached with a singular narrative. One where the world system was dramatically changing due to massive disruptions in the manner people organized themselves. It was in the early 19th century where the British led the charge towards a new way of organizing the political-economy of a territory. The abolition of slavery was in effect the implementation of wage labour, and with that “great experiment” (as abolitionists called it) came in to practice.<sup>16</sup> Accompanying that was the adoption of the 19th century liberal ideas of free trade, and the abandonment of mercantilism, which led to the opening of new markets and the development of new business potential all around the world – even before the dawn of the industrial revolution in the mid-Victorian period.<sup>17</sup> These two fundamental intellectual changes reformatted the world economy, and it caused a massive displacement of people to fit new jobs in new areas.

Suddenly, India ceased to be the most efficient producer of cotton as Southern

USA rose to fill that niche.<sup>18</sup> Suddenly, spice ceased to be the main export of the Malay Archipelago as rubber and tin grew to fill that position.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps these developments that displaced millions during the period is best represented by a visual metaphor – that of the changing shape of a container. Water would naturally flow to fit the shape of a container, and in the 19th century, this was what happened. Old industries died, and new ones rose amidst the massive dislocation of the global economy. Mass migration is situated within such a nexus.

However, the challenge lies in delivering this within the history classroom, and rather than talking about these developments in the language and terms that contemporaries and historians use – such as liberalism, abolitionism, and free trade – this issue should be approached as a simple one of global change. The resources that were in demand, the areas that produced these resources, and the speed and cost of moving these goods around have all changed dramatically over the 19th century. These changes meant that new jobs opened up in some places, while old jobs disappeared. This framing in effect tied together all three factors into a single narrative – in effect a *world system*, to borrow the World Systems Theory of Emmanuel Wallenstein. The three factors identified in the syllabus are the evidence of this changing world, and the delivery of this bigger narrative would help students see that the world that Singapore was a part of was indeed changing during the 19th century.

Therefore, by talking about the deeper causes of the movement of people around the world in the 19th century, rather than the surface symptoms, what it would achieve is to give our students a more intricate understanding of the global and

interconnected nature of the world in the past, and hopefully give them a frame of reference towards understanding their interconnected world today. This would also help to allow students to understand the context of global migration, which they can keep in mind while they narrow down on the more personal and human reasons of why people moved to Singapore as per the third sub-inquiry question.

### Conclusion

It is important for history teachers to discuss migration with greater depth with our students, such that they gain an appreciation for how Singapore was and always will be part of a wider world system, and how our participation in that system will shape who we are. It would be a great pity if we allow this opportunity to slip simply because it seemed too daunting to convey ideas of mass migration and world systems to 13 and 14 year-olds.

The proposed changes to the first two sub-inquiry questions hope to exploit the full potential of the topic of mass migration to Singapore, and engage our students to think about Singapore in terms of its role in a globalized world. It would serve to add a greater degree of nuance to the historical characters who were passing through Singapore, not only in the form of the sheer number of groups who migrated to Singapore, but also in terms of the change in migrant profiles over time. Furthermore, by reframing of the various global “factors” as mere symptoms of a wider changing world, it would bridge the weakest link in the syllabus and better deliver on the forces that drove global migration during this period. Collectively, what this paper hopes to achieve is to better discuss the processes of mass migration in the late-19th century, and give our students a better understanding of the processes that shaped Singapore – as

this is, after all, the last opportunity to dive into this issue to any greater depth.

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