‘Good Fences Make Good Neighbours’?
Geographies of Marginalisation: Housing Singapore’s Foreign Workers

Brian J. Shaw* and Rahil Ismail**

*Associate Professor, School of Earth and Environment (SEE), The University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009, bjshaw@cyllene.uwa.edu.au

**Associate Professor, Humanities Social Studies Education (HSSE), National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, rahil.ismail@nie.edu.sg

Abstract

Singapore has one of the largest percentages of foreign-born workers in the world, and this labour has been a significant factor in the city-state’s transition from a ‘Third World to First World’ economy. Success in the Singapore case has been predicated upon a dual or segmented labour market which differentiates between the highly educated and highly skilled ‘expatriate talent’ sector and the semi- or unskilled ‘foreign worker’ group. The latter have been particularly prominent in the ‘five Cs’ of caring, carrying, catering, cleaning and construction but at the same time have been denied substantive citizenship, or sense of ‘belonging’, by virtue of their lower incomes and state restrictive practices which govern factors such as working conditions and access to housing. In this context the 2008 burst of NIMBYism over the proposed housing of foreign workers within the privileged upper middle-class neighbourhood of Serangoon Gardens seized Singaporean attention. While the purported issues were of congestion, overcrowding and traffic management the public debate was conducted amidst uncomfortable racist and classist subtexts. Yet the occurrence of such an episode had a certain degree of inevitability given the frenetic pressures of a globalising world on the city-state, and the government response accordingly developed as one of authoritative persuasion. Essentially, the issue of housing foreign workers has been integrated into the broad canvas of managing and remaking the Singapore identity as more Singaporeans find themselves living in the midst of foreign workers.

Introduction

When we had to put work-permit holders in Serangoon Gardens Estate, there was tremendous unhappiness. But in fact, we’ve fenced it off, made a different entrance, and I think it will work out.
Lee Kuan Yew quoted in *Straits Times*, 11 December 2009.

When Robert Frost (1914) coined the term ‘good fences make good neighbours’ he was writing about American life in rural New England. In the poem ‘Mending Wall’ he describes the ritual of repairing a common wall whilst at the same time questioning its rationale. Frost’s observations go well beyond their rural context as the processes of separation and control have historically been instigated wherever perceived ‘Others’ threatened the sanctity of authoritatively defined spaces by self-serving guardians of order. Most particularly in the urban context the very origins of towns are predicated on the unison of street plan and enclosure, visibly expressed in the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for ‘town’. Thereafter, for millennia, town walls shaped the identities and images of the communities they embraced as ‘not only physical monuments but also ideas-evocative mental constructs integral to the multi-layered self-images of communities’ (Bruce & Creighton 2006, p. 235). Yet, while our attention is inevitably captured by the existence of the external walls which demarcated limits of potenteate power and citizen protection, it is also incumbent upon us to consider the use made of internal walls and gates to separate ethnic or religious quarters, a process so evocatively described by Gideon Sjoberg (1960) in his seminal work on the preindustrial city.

Anthony King (1976) outlines the situation in British Colonial India whereby demarcated spaces known as ‘civil lines’ and ‘cantonments’ were separated from ‘native quarters’, thus establishing a *cordon sanitaire* in accordance with contemporary C19th attitudes towards public health which still perceived epidemics in terms of *miasmatic* air-borne diseases. By this time the planned separation of social groups had been effectively demonstrated in the conception of urban space within colonial Singapore, founded by Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819. His subsequent plan for the settlement provided for the separation of ‘racial’ groups utilising the effective cordon sanitaire of the Singapore River and the allocation of a more-than-generous space allocation for the small number of British colonialists. Such allocations of space reflected the prevailing power structures in the colonial context, thereby creating the ‘dual city’ divided between the coloniser and the colonised, wherein different standards of conformity, congregation and construction were enforced through specifically legislated local ordinance. Terry McGee (1967) writing on the Southeast Asian city developed such a dualistic model of urban structure with both ‘western’ and ‘alien’ commercial zones and the separation of high class and squatter settlements within a sectorally organised city.

Thus, placed in its historical context, fencing off work-permit holders in Serangoon Gardens might appear as an inevitable and perhaps necessary condition of their alien presence within a host community. Such exclusionary practices, however, raise fundamental questions about the nature of Singapore’s ongoing ‘nation building’ project which has stressed the need for an outward-looking approach, extolling the virtues of internationalism through transnational flows of capital, commodities, and people (Ooi & Shaw 2004). The official vision of Singapore as one of the world’s finest and most liveable cities containing all the richness and diversity associated with different cultures and lifestyles seems to be somewhat at odds with the need to quarantine part of its international workforce. But the location of a foreign worker dormitory is only one aspect

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of an insidious process of marginalisation whereby state restrictive practices govern the day-to-day working conditions and lifestyles of foreign workers. Work permits, usually issued for two years, bind the recipient to a sole employer who in *locus parentis* becomes accountable for the worker’s conduct, a responsibility enforced by the payment of a substantial security bond (MOM 2010). Redolent of the colonial practice of indentured labour, such restrictions act to deny foreign workers substantive citizenship and continually reinforce the transient nature of their Singapore existence.

Accordingly, this analysis considers some of the broader issues relating to the accommodation of foreign workers in Singapore, using the Serangoon Gardens incident as a tentative springboard to balance both citizen reactions and government responses. Matters of congestion, overcrowding and traffic management clouded a public debate predicated on uncomfortable racist and classist subtexts, and the Singapore government responded in a managerial manner, implicit in this paper’s introductory quotation. This paper seeks to show how the issue of housing foreign workers has been integrated into the broad canvas of managing and remaking the Singapore identity. But the situation cannot be totally resolved whilst Singapore maintains a growing demand for imported labour and inevitable tensions will resurface from time to time as larger numbers of Singaporeans find themselves living in the midst of foreign workers.

**(Un)welcome Guests?**

In an expanding global economy characterised by transnational flows of capital, commodities and people, it is the latter which have proved less amenable to homogenization. The movement of migrant workers across national borders and the difficulties of their assimilation were highlighted by post-World War II experience in Western Europe, in particular Germany’s *gastarbeiter* (guest worker) programme, designed to overcome domestic labour shortages of semi- and unskilled workers. This practice which has now permeated former ‘peripheral’ economies has resulted in a perceived global hierarchy of donor and recipient countries with some, notably the Philippines, characterised as labour exporters and others, such as Gulf States, as labour importers. While both country categories might be described as winners in the global game of ‘transient workers for hire’; donors by virtue of worker remittances and recipients through the deflationary effects of cheap, readily available labour; it is the migrant workers themselves who bear the brunt of family separation, difficult working conditions and the vicissitudes of fluctuating national and global demand. The International Labour Organization (ILO) recently estimated that the global and financial crisis which broke out during 2008 could result in increased global unemployment of 18 to 30 million workers, with the ultimate prospect of many more lay-offs if the situation continues to deteriorate (Awad 2009). In addition to potential job loss, or deterioration in conditions, individual migrant workers are likely to face increased hostility and xenophobia as growing numbers of unemployed local workers cast around for convenient scapegoats.
After the Gulf States of Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait, Singapore now ranks amongst the second tier of countries with the highest proportion of international migrants (UN 2009, p. 3). This is largely due to a policy shift which relaxed the stricter immigration controls initially imposed after full independence in 1965, in order to encourage foreign labour participation in Singapore’s rapid industrialisation programme. In the early period most workers emanated from neighbouring Malaysia and the South Asian region, but overall numbers were relatively small in comparison with the host population. The 1980 Census recorded a dominantly citizen/resident population of 2.2 million out of a total population of 2.4 million persons (Statistics Singapore 2010). Interestingly, some commentators were questioning the continued benefits of labour importation at that time suggesting that the optimal level of foreign labour may well have been reached (Stahl 1984). Thereafter, and in the light of a comprehensive policy for foreign manpower management introduced in 1987, Singapore’s reliance on imported labour has grown exponentially over the past two decades. The most recent 2010 figures show a Singapore citizen/resident population of just 3.7 million out of a total population of 5.1 million, the non-resident proportion having increased five-fold, from 5.5 per cent in 1980 to 25.7 per cent in 2010 (Statistics Singapore 2010). Today, there are some 1.2 million foreign workers in Singapore, approximately one third of the workforce. Their contribution is vital to the country’s economy.

Successful recruitment of labour in the Singapore case has been predicated upon a dual or segmented labour market which differentiates between the highly educated and highly skilled ‘expatriate talent’ sector and the semi- or unskilled ‘foreign worker’ group. Thus employment passes (P1, P2 and Q1) are granted to foreign professionals commanding high monthly salaries who also qualify for dependent passes to bring family members into the country. This group makes up some 15 per cent of imported labour. At the other end of the scale work permits (R) are issued to skilled or unskilled foreign workers and foreign domestic workers on the lowest salary levels, no dependents are allowed and additional conditions are applied such as regular medical examination, restrictions on marrying Singaporean citizens or permanent residents during their period of employment and immediate repatriation for females found to be pregnant. Employers must pay monthly foreign worker levies, security bonds and for foreign domestic workers personal accident insurance (Yeoh 2007). This group makes up 85 per cent, or roughly one million workers. While additional categories of work permit have been added in recent years the distinction between ‘foreign talent’ and ‘foreign worker’ is still characteristic of the Singapore labour market. By ensuring that its lower skilled migrants remain a transient workforce, subject to repatriation during periods of economic downturn, Singapore has avoided much of the social infrastructure cost associated with housing, schools, social and medical services, recreational facilities and the like. The downside is that the poorest and most vulnerable groups have been denied a true sense of ‘belonging’.

To what extent are Singapore’s foreign workers welcome guests or simply hired hands to be tolerated as a necessary condition of the country’s continued economic success?
Analysis of Singapore’s leading newspaper the *Straits Times* (*ST*) and more locally-focused newspapers such as *Today* can be instructive in revealing the sporadic debates which follow periodic revelations about such matters as foreign worker living conditions, their occasional noisy or promiscuous behaviour, incidents of assault, changes to the foreign worker levy and, more latterly, their accommodation within residential areas. Inevitably these debates touch upon Singapore’s own internal labour hierarchy, which is a microcosm of the global situation. Reports of astronomical salaries paid to top government ministers and civil servants (*ST* 10 April 2007), officially justified in terms of the country’s efficient management and comparison with private sector remuneration, are a subject of public concern as Singapore’s Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, rose from 0.444 to 0.481 during the first decade of the new millennium (*ST* 31 December 2009). Some disquiet can be discerned in regard to the position of foreign talent, the highly skilled executive, managerial and professional classes with dependent privileges and the prospect of future residency. Middle-income Singaporeans may be envious of the exalted position accorded to these elite groups who have not demonstrated allegiance to the country through, for example, national service. Other Singaporeans might take their cue from a government that discriminates between ‘foreign talent’ and ‘foreign workers’, by looking up to one whilst at the same time disparaging the other (*ST* 14 October 2008).

It is the foreign workers, rather than foreign talent, who are increasingly visible to the local Singaporean ‘Heartlanders’ as they go about their everyday lives, not just because of their far greater numbers, but also through the nature of their duties. Waking up to the sounds of the early morning sweeper in the housing block, fearing for a maid precariously cleaning the neighbour’s windows, seeing the ubiquitous construction cranes, being driven on the bus or MRT, buying breakfast at the *kopi tiam* … foreigner’s work usually portrayed as ‘3-Ds’ (dirty, difficult and dangerous) also figures in the ‘5-Cs’ category of caring, carrying, catering, cleaning and construction. Undoubtedly, many if not most Singaporeans value both the services that are offered and their varying degrees of human contact with the providers. However, while the state as a whole benefits from the GDP attributable to foreign workers the day-to-day costs of their presence are felt by the Heartlanders in terms of crowded pavements, congested buses and trains, longer queues and potentially threatening conduct. Media reports of drinking, rowdy behaviour and urination on HDB void decks which initiate citizen reaction in terms of informal vigilante groups designed to ‘catch’ sleeping or urinating workers are testimony to an ongoing problem (*Sunday Times* 25 November 2007). One community response, harking back to Frost’s observation, has been to erect barriers such as fences, hedges and even steel barricades around residential blocks in order to keep out foreign workers.

From the perspective of the foreign worker such actions serve to underline the marginality of their presence in Singapore. Their living conditions are invariably most basic, with on-site accommodation often provided for construction workers within stacked shipping containers, hastily-converted dormitories within industrial areas or through the multiple occupancy of privately rented property. Increased levels of Ministry
of Manpower inspection have revealed overcrowded, squalid and unsafe premises that violate fire safety and land use laws. Conditions such as those recently discovered in a late-night Jurong raid are seen as typical, ‘rooms containing up to 80 workers …packed in triple-decker bunk beds nearly 2m high …rats and cockroaches scurrying about’ (ST 18 May 2010). Relocation to purpose-built dormitories with adequate on-site amenities is obviously one solution to the problem of sub-standard conditions, but the locations of twelve new sites expected to provide 65,000 additional bed spaces by 2010 again confirm the marginality of foreign worker presence within the city-state. These newly designated dormitories are invariably located on the edges of the island’s built-up area, amongst derelict or industrial land often poorly served by public transport links (see Figure 1). Even when facilities are of good standard the foreign workers are treated like inmates, with restrictions placed on the nature of their activities in and around dormitories. Their confined world is a demanding one, in which the occasional frivolous distraction takes on larger meaning. An eloquent local reporter captured one such occasion, a football game in the 2010 World Cup played out on a single television before a grateful audience of 400 foreign workers, gathered together in the words of Tom Wolfe ‘not to desire to escape life but to prevent life escaping you’ (Sunday Times 27 June 2010).

**Managed Visibility?**

*While the authorities have tried to locate dormitories away from residential areas, it was not possible to totally segregate foreign workers from the local community. ‘Singaporeans don’t want to see foreign workers near their residential areas or using common facilities’*

Mr. Mah Bow Tan (*Straits Times* 22 October 2008)

*Lack of human resources has been one of its key problems. It is reliant on foreign workers.*

George Ofori (1994, p. 6)

This reliance on foreign workers in an important economic sector such as the construction industry has always been a matter of concern to the authorities. Through a series of legislations, regulations and administrative monitoring, responsibilities have been shared among the different groups managing the substantial introduction of foreign workers into the country. The dominant official line can be said to be a typical Singapore response in approaching the issue through ‘technical solutions’ (Baey 2010, p. 89) but underlined by a strong controlling streak for ‘managing visibility’ in ethnoscapes that seem to normalize and embed disturbing class and racist perceptions of the Singaporean
‘self’ and the foreign ‘other’. The ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman 1986) of the foreign workers and its attending psychological and physical stigmatisation achieved national validation in the post-2008 Serangoon Gardens NIMBYism.

The flurry of newspaper reports on government actions accumulatively outlined official strategising visibility actions through spatial and bureaucratic tweaking of policies to reflect both firm governance and measured response to the Singaporean concern of the ‘other’. The negotiation of power relations between the authorities, the Singaporean and the foreign worker which takes place on an uneven playing field is a well established phenomenon. In this way the Singapore government, always adroit and reflexive in response to changing economic and social circumstances, has regulated increasing numbers of foreign workers in circumstances which have ranged from on-site living, off-site dormitories, converted building structures and into HDB flats with attending restrictions (Ofori 1994, pp. 17-18).

By 2008, the space crunch and evolving government regulations on standards meant the previous practices of spatial marginalisation in isolated parts were no longer feasible. As Serangoon Gardens has demonstrated, foreign workers are no longer to be merely tolerated in weekend ‘spaces of resistance’ such as Little India, Golden Mile or Tanjong Katong Complex, but are now to be embedded as a living presence in the ‘normal’ life of a Singaporean. The previous invisibility of foreign worker presence (and their contributions to the daily comforts of a Singaporean life) has now been punctured by their living visibility within the ‘normal’ and upper-middle class Singaporeans. Thus, Singaporeans needed to be ‘warned’ to ‘be prepared to see them (foreign workers) and share with them our common spaces’ (Business Times 4 December 2008), a notion of ‘sharing’ and ‘spaces’ that comes replete with uncomfortable questions relating to the nation’s official narrative of multicultural harmony.

Other technical solutions and proposals included the possibility of foreign worker ‘townships’ with self-contained amenities (Channel NewAsia 10 September 2008; ST 21 December 2008), the announcement on the establishment of at least ten sites for temporary dormitories by 2010 (Business Times 4 December 2008)2 and the improved and monitored standards of the dormitories (Channel NewsAsia 25 March 2009), plus other extra-contextual measures to ensure peaceful co-existence between Singaporeans and foreign workers. Preliminary measures include a technical feasibility study of a proposed site with impact analysis, consultations with constituency advisors and grassroots leaders if public concerns are raised (ST 22 October 2008). One Straits Times (4 December 2008) headline on new sites read ‘Margaret Drive to get foreign worker dorm; Ten sites are identified, but most of them are in remote areas’. The story highlighted the fact that ‘…the Queenstown Polyclinic site in Margaret Drive being the closest to residential areas’ was a residential block of flats due for demolition within two to three years. Significantly, it was also noted that as the dormitories would be populated by Chinese national foreign workers, sources of friction would be reduced due to a
common language and therefore the prospect of easier communication (ST 4 December 2008). Alternatively, the Murai dormitory populated mostly by South Asian foreign workers is sited in bleak isolation beside the new Muslim cemetery in Choa Chu Kang, with limited access to public buses, the nearest public recreational link or the MRT system.

Through joint efforts of the relevant government ministries such as the Manpower Ministry, the Housing and Development Board, the National Environment Agency, Singapore Civil Defence Force, the Building and Construction Authority and Urban Redevelopment Authority, checks are made on the adherence to various statutory requirements with possibilities of fines and jail terms for offenders. By 2010, the contention is that spatial marginalisation has been complemented by qualitative improvements in housing standards and enforcement. Employers are expected to know the requirements in terms of minimal living standards which are ‘there in black and white’ with workers found in unacceptable locations relocated into newer better appointed accommodation (Today 17 September 2010; Ministry of Manpower). One such initiative, the Avery Lodge in Jalan Papan, Jurong Industrial Estate, opened in 2009 with amenities such as an indoor gym and outdoor fitness spa (ST 10 October 2008), while the Soon Lee Road recreation centre, built by the Singapore Contractors Association was opened for the benefit of the workers. In 2010, the provision of foreign workers housing by commercially-run organisations has become a significant enterprise within state economic programmes. By mid-2010, the Ministry of Manpower indicated that 30 of the 35 commercially-run dormitories were fully occupied (see Ministry of Manpower) and a reported 40 per cent of foreign workers housing quarters checked (or raided) were deemed to be of unacceptable standards (ST 18 May 2010). Despite these initiatives however, the problem of illegal dormitories still persists (ST 11 May 2009).

Of Common Spaces: ‘Don’t Fence Me In’?

Cole Porter’s (1934) plea not to be ‘fenced in’ was a serenading of the American wide open country by a roaming cowboy. Singapore is a far-cry from such a scenario where the debilitating impact of restricting movement through direct demarcation is distressingly real. By virtue of enhanced international status, Singapore has experienced a massive influx of global capital into its local real estate market. While large mega-developments such as the Casino-based integrated resort projects attract the bulk of public attention the flow-on from these stimulates private sector housing across the city, fostering the process of gentrification which has become a competitive urban strategy within the current global economy (Smith 2002). Once characterised as ‘a seemingly serendipitous, unplanned process’ contemporary gentrification is now ‘ambitiously and scrupulously planned’ by systematized corporate-governmental partnerships (Smith 2002, p. 439). In both cases the displacement of lower income, working class residents by middle class ‘gentrifiers’ has been a resultant inevitability, despite promotional rhetoric which celebrates ‘residential mixing’. Even where mixing does occur, some recent researchers on gentrification have identified a process in which a polarised social
structure can result in distinct classes sharing a neighbourhood, but little else, as society atomizes into groups on the basis of background and income levels. This phenomenon has been described as ‘social tectonics’ whereby people pass each other in the street but otherwise do not socially interact (Robson & Butler 2001; Walks & Maaranen 2008). In Singapore such social fault lines have led to the insulation of middle class lifestyles through the imposition of physical barriers and controlled pedestrian and vehicular movements. This is but a short step away from the scenario of ubiquitous ‘gated communities’ of the type which have blighted neighbourhoods throughout the United States, finding ultimate expression in Michel Foucault’s (1977) carceral city.

Seemingly, Serangoon Gardens was an opportunity for the authorities to formalise and educate Singaporeans on the social cost of foreign labour. The mantra was of a ‘shared burden’ or ‘responsibility’ borne out of economic pragmatism. Increased regulatory measures and enforcement produced media reports which outlined the woes of firms hiring, subcontracting and housing foreign workers. What was not clearly articulated was the tacit acceptance of the disturbing framework and subterranean subtexts of the dialogue. In a self-proclaimed successful multicultural story of diversity and inclusion, the policy of spatial marginalisation and exclusion in secluded parts of the island or of foreign workers ‘hiding in plain sight’ in residential neighbourhood smacks of segregation within and without the ‘normal’ landscape of the country: a physical and behavioural segregation with clear markers of the ‘other’ as social pollutants with differential rights and therefore of expectations.

Approved and managed segregation in common or ‘uncommon’ spaces is a choice of governance options but not without its consequences. Apart from signaling myriad messages on race, culture, language and class to young Singaporeans who are supposedly learning to be multiculturally sensitive in a diverse society, there is embedment of unearned privileging and differential entitlement based on solipsistic assumptions and generalizations. Crude realistic practices as an outcome of economic pragmatism will affect, as noted earlier, whatever pretensions or claims the nation might have as a cosmopolitan Renaissance City or a wannabe global city. Cultivating ‘imagery’ spaces throughout the island to include a Bohemian space or an Art district together with the romanticisation of the HDB heartlanders cannot conveniently erase or fence foreign workers so as not to disturb the Singaporean’s ‘beautiful mind’ without accruing deep-seated social costs. There are undoubted challenges in imagining spaces in a land-scarce multicultural society, but cherry-picking bits of multiculturalism and being deeply selective as to those who shall benefit from inclusion, affirmation and respect, confronts the core of the country’s multicultural narratives. In this, approved segregation, even with attending improvements and regulations does not mask the fundamental operating relationship between the Singaporeans and the ‘other’ which at most times sidelines ‘respect’ and ‘dignity’ for pity and condescension, if not outright racial and class hostility. The work of such Non-Governmental Organisations such as ‘Transient Workers Count Too’ (TWC2) and ‘Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics’ (HOME) invest fundamental messages of respect and dignity in their advocacy work. Such delicate acts of ‘educating’ Singaporeans are optimistic facets of Singapore as a
whole but the fact that these groups exist speaks to some of the credibility gap in the self-proclaimed multicultural success story where segregation is apparently demanded, conceded and normalised.

A recent development to the evolving Serangoon Gardens saga is the September 2010 announcement that a lifestyle hub will be developed 15 metres away from the dorm as a ‘family centric’ space ‘deliberately carved out to form a buffer between the dorm and the residential areas in Serangoon Gardens’ (ST 30 September 2010). ‘Buffer’, although evocative of the aforementioned colonial city, is a softer term than ‘fence’ but it does not mitigate the intended messages of privileging and marginalisation and the psychological realities of accumulative negative pressures for the stigmatized identity of a foreign worker. Selective visibility and invisibility is not just the symbolic and the direct contestation of space and identity but the management of an untenable set of contradictions.

As such, the post-2008 Serangoon Gardens episode has highlighted temporary holding measures until a more permanent ‘solution’ can be achieved or maybe the construction sector cools after the opening of the two giant integrated resorts. However, reliance on vulnerable, cheap, disposable and ‘foreign’ labour whether in construction, cleaning or service industries will still be instrumental to a Singaporean quality of life, so another act of cyclical fine-tuning is inevitable. In mid-2010, the government announced that to ‘slow down the pace’ the number of additional foreign workers would be limited to 30,000, a figure substantially fewer than the earlier 2010 estimate of 100,000 (Wall Street Journal 29 August 2010). Earlier in the year, S$5.5 billion had been set aside over the next five years to improve Singaporean workers’ skill in order to enhance productivity and income levels (France 24 International News, 14 March 2010). The National Day Rally speech by the Prime Minister spoke in reassuring and direct terms of the place of Singapore’s Heartlanders in relation to a demographically changing landscape. Lee Hsien Loong conceded that foreign worker issues would persist, imploring Singaporeans to be patient and bear with the problem whilst at the same time invoking the ‘Singapore Spirit’ (Lee 2010).

Afterthought

A Singaporean in his late 40s and early 50s might still remember the burst of national fervour by Singapore leaders in the 1970s extolling the ‘Use Your Hands Campaign’ in schools. Schools dedicated a day to taking up brooms, mops and other implements to clean classrooms in order to ‘toughen up’ young Singaporeans whom the leaders feared were becoming ‘soft’. There were indeed parents who objected to their children cleaning toilets or parents who sent their domestic worker to do the job in place of their child. Already, at that time, there was a latent concern that in the march towards economic and material success, Singaporeans might not just be unfamiliar with the ‘5-Cs’ category of
‘caring, carrying, catering, cleaning and construction’ but might become totally reliant on external entities. There was also a suggestion that labouring with one’s own hard hand bestowed a certain character-building ethic upon the young, thus continuing the official historical narrative of how Singapore was built on the backs of immigrant forefathers who were undoubtedly made of sterner stuff.

It could be said that all preceding generations tend to lament upon the shortcomings of a new generation while romanticising the past as a vague but glorious age. Singapore is not immune to this habit but in its aspirations for a cosmopolitan, global city, any such reflections must be done on its own terms. But any discordant outcomes in the way it manages the visibility of its sizeable proportion of foreign workers cannot be easily excised from the broad canvas of remaking the Singapore identity in a globalising world. The authorities, without doubt, are treading a delicate and difficult line with few satisfactory ‘solutions’ readily available but the spatial marginalisation and embedment of foreign workers as both necessary but unwanted can become an untenable situation in the long-run.

Joel Kotkin, the noted urban scholar probably expressed it best in a recent visit to this country in October 2010. Observing Singapore’s ambition to be a ‘great city’ he is quoted as saying ‘There must be more dignity of labour and respect’ (ST 13 October 2010).

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1 We owe our thanks to Ms. Sha Najak for this phrase during an interview on 20th July 2010.

2 The vacant state properties include the former Queenstown Polyclinic, the former CAAS office, the existing CPG Corporation Airport Development Division. The vacant state lands are at Mandai Road, Old
A phrase uttered by former US First Lady Barbara Bush in 2003 who claimed not to watch television news with images of dead US soldiers as it disturbs her ‘beautiful mind’.