Desiring 'foreign talent': lack and Lacan in anti-immigrant sentiments in Singapore

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In recent years, the Singapore government's pro-immigration policy –
specifically, its recruitment of so-called 'foreign talent' – has caused a palpable
rise in anti-immigrant sentiments and discourses among natives of the city-state.
Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, a perspective so far marginal in migration
research, this article offers a provocative reading of Singapore's desire for
foreign talent and the local society's reception of these subjects. The article
focuses on the ways in which frustrated Singaporeans seem to find foreign talent
immigrants, especially those from mainland China, to be lacking and undesirable.
Lacan's theories enable the bold interpretations that: 1) foreign talent is not
meant to fill a lack but precisely to produce it and 2) foreign talent stands for
Singapore's and Singaporeans' unobtainable object of desire, which ultimately
signifies the gaps and inconsistencies in the symbolic order confronting them.
Moving away from existing conceptual frameworks and theoretical approaches,
the article illustrates what a psychoanalytic lens of desire can contribute to
migration and mobility research.

Keywords: Singapore, foreign talent, immigration, psychoanalysis, Lacan,
xenophobia

Introduction

'*We are yours, please make use of us*!' was the extraordinary plea voiced by a

Singaporean chamber music quartet to the city-state's government, as reported in *The*

Straits Times in the late 1990s (Li, 1999). The quartet, which consisted entirely of

locally born and bred members, felt strongly that the Singapore government favoured

so-called '*foreign* talent' at the expense of local talents like themselves. They lamented

how 'it seems that the authorities in Singapore are ashamed of us, ashamed of local

talents. They seem to be afraid that we will disgrace them' (ibid.). In the eyes of these

disheartened local musicians, then, Singapore did not favour or love its own children,

but instead invested its desire in foreigners. This desire for foreign talent was perceived

to be an injustice or even a betrayal – something emotionally and psychologically unacceptable to native Singaporeans who believed they should be the favourite recipient of Singapore's love and attention.

Whilst this vignette may just be another expression of the tension Singapore's pro-immigration policy has caused in recent times (Vasu, Yeap, & Chan, 2014), it is uniquely interesting in its accentuation of the psycho-emotional dimension of anti-immigrant sentiments, revealing the centrality of *desire*. Not only did the statement 'we are *yours*' sound somewhat submissive in its use of the possessive pronoun 'yours', furthermore, '*please make use of us*' leaves much room for interpretation. Although the quartet might dismiss such commentary as reading too much into the statement, psychoanalysis is precisely about reading into the unspoken, and sometimes unspeakable, sub-conscious and unconscious. Here we are appropriately reminded of one basic proposition of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1977, p. 264): 'man's [*sic*] desire is the desire of the Other'. Or, as one of Lacan's interpreters puts it, the subject's 'true aim was the Other's love' (Sheehan, 2012, p. 19). In this case, the 'Other' is represented by the Singaporean state and the subject is the local quartet. The quartet supplicates to the Other, desperately needing the Other's attention and desire.

This article applies Lacanian psychoanalysis to the foreign talent situation in contemporary Singapore. For the present purpose, 'foreign talent' should be understood as a shorthand for immigration and immigrants. In Singapore, pro-immigration policy is justified by the state's rationale that certain types of foreigners are desirable because they possess specific talents and qualities that supplement the locals' lack thereof. However, Singaporean locals contest this rationale. As one often heard snub goes, 'FT' stands not for 'foreign talent' but for 'foreign trash'. Indeed, as I shall argue, anti-immigrant sentiments and discourses in Singapore frequently hinge on establishing the

inadequacy of foreign talent. These subjects are persistently found to be lacking, undesirable and/or bogus. Ironically, this only makes 'perfect' and 'authentic' foreign talent something still desired, thus perpetuating the motion of desiring.

This seeming paradox about *lack* and *desire*, I argue, lies at the heart of the foreign talent situation in Singapore and demands closer examination and innovative analysis. To date, scholarly analyses of foreign talent-related issues in Singapore have not ventured beyond mostly descriptive accounts of locals' anxiety and resentment towards immigration (e.g. Gomes, 2014; Koh, 2003; Vasu et al., 2014; Yap, Koh, & Soon, 2015; Yeoh & Lin, 2013) and/or ethnic, national and cultural identity politics (e.g. Liu, 2014; Yang, 2014a). These accounts may be regarded as more mainstream, with their conventional approach focusing on issues such as competition for economic and symbolic resources. Although undoubtedly useful, mainstream studies in this vein overlook the city-state's more elusive psycho-emotional undercurrents of trouble with foreign talent, this article's opening vignette being an example par excellence. Thus, my first objective is to fill the lacuna in existing scholarship by delving into the psychodynamics around lack and desire in Singaporean society's reception of foreign talent. Lacan's psychoanalysis is employed because of its pertinent theorisation of desire and lack.

Relatedly, and in line with the broader aim of this special issue focusing on 'aspiration, desire and the drivers of migration' (Carling and Collins *this issue*), my second objective is to explore how psychoanalysis can contribute to ethnic and migration studies in general. Scholars of these fields have in recent years begun to study the emotional and affective dimensions to human mobility. This concern with emotions may be further subsumed under the more general category of psychosocial research. Whilst this angle is relatively common and widely accepted, the *psychoanalytic*

perspective – a distinct yet related approach – remains marginal. This article explains the distinction and is itself an attempt to illustrate what the much less common psychoanalytic lens can reveal about ethnicity and migration.

The next section elaborates my foregoing arguments before briefly introducing core ideas in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Following that is a background section on Singapore and its desire for foreign talent, touching on the historical, economic, sociocultural, linguistic and ethno-racial aspects to this desire. I then offer some notes on the methodology and data underpinning this study. Subsequently, the main analytical part unfolds in two thematic sections, each containing elaborations of Lacan's theories in conjunction with their application to the empirical case. Finally, the conclusion summarises the paper's main arguments and the relevance of a psychoanalytic approach to the broader field of migration studies.

Feeling ethnicity and migration: the emotional and affective, the psychosocial vs. the psychoanalytic, and Lacan

As Conradson and Mckay (2007, p. 172) noted, '[f]ar from being a secondary or unimportant dimension of mobility […] affect and emotion are central aspects of international migration'. Indeed, in the decade since this statement, social research on migration has increasingly paid attention to emotion and affect (Svašek, 2010).[1] A 2010 special issue in this journal entitled *On the move: emotion and human mobility* dealt with precisely this topic, defining emotions as 'dynamic processes through which individuals experience and interpret the changing world, position themselves vis-à-vis others, and shape their subjectivities' (Svašek, 2010, p. 868). Using this definition, the special issue explored migrants' emotional experiences as well as emotive responses and reactions of migrant-receiving communities in various empirical contexts.

This inquiry into the emotional and affective aspects of migration and mobility can be viewed as a subset of the broader field of *psychosocial* research, which explores human psychic experiences in close conjunction with sociological analysis about social structure, power and inequalities. Reay (2008, p. 1075), who takes this approach when researching education in Britain, defines psychosocial studies as that which 'bring together the interior processes of the human mind, both individual and group emotions, with those that relate to the exterior, the public arenas of the social world, in order to examine structure and power'. Particularly concerned with the question of social class, Reay's (2005) work has explored the various psychic experiences and responses characteristic of distinct class positions. Although they do not fully overlap, the scholarship on migrant emotions shares with psychosocial studies the view that larger social forces (class structure, gender, geopolitical inequalities, power, etc.) are experienced as emotions and affects on the most intimate and subjective levels by human agents. The approach I take in this article is not unconnected to psychosocial studies; in fact, similar to Hall's (2010) and Wise's (2010) contributions to the 2010 *JEMS* special issue, this article largely also deals with the receiving society's reactions to immigrants. However, the article departs from the aforementioned studies in a notable way: my approach is explicitly psycho*analytic*.

A key distinction between psychoanalytic and psychosocial approaches is that the former entails the imaginative, perhaps provocative, use of theories rooted in the clinical psychoanalytic tradition.[2] This intervention of psychoanalytic theories can often seem metaphoric or highly abstract, sometimes demanding leaps of imagination from both researcher and reader. This is one possible reason why psychoanalysis has been scarcely applied in social science thus far. The leap of imagination, however, is essential because psychoanalysis is precisely about foraying into the sub-conscious and

unconscious. By contrast, psychosocial studies appear more closely grounded in the empirical, using terminologies of emotions (anxiety, fear, desire, fantasy, etc.) in a more or less descriptive manner as they are used in everyday speech, without invoking the metaphoric or abstract concepts typical to psychoanalysis. One of Walkerdine's (2010) articles illustrates just this. In the same spirit as Reay's interest in the psychic experience of classed subjectivities, Walkerdine's study (ibid.) about a degenerating industrial town in Wales explores community members' senses of insecurity, loss and nostalgia following the closure of a steel plant. Studying these psycho-emotional experiences and linking them to a sociological analysis of neoliberal globalisation and local deindustrialisation, Walkerdine invokes the notion of 'psychic skin' – a concept borrowed from psychoanalysis' object relations theory. With it she argues that affective community relations provided a 'skin' to give people a sense of being held together, like the epidermis of the biological body. The case details are of less concern here; the point is that by bringing in a seemingly external psychoanalytic concept to the empirical case, Walkerdine offers an imaginative, insightful analysis of a sociological issue.

In this article, I similarly look through a psychoanalytic lens, focusing specifically on anti-immigrant sentiments, discourses and imaginations. Although a decade ago, Healy (2007) observed in the Irish context that receiving communities' anti-immigrant feelings and attitudes were under-researched due to misplaced political correctness, such studies have become more prevalent recently (e.g. Heizmann, 2016; Hellwig & Sinno, 2016). This article is unique by virtue of its psychoanalytic framing from the very outset. To date, psychoanalysis (though see Kuntsman, 2009) and particularly its Lacanian strain have seldom been used in migration research (Shubin, Findlay, & McCollum, 2014). One recent exception is a study by Shubin et al. (2014), which explored the identity production of migrant workers in Latvian labour

recruitment agents' discourses and imaginaries. Specifically, Lacan's theories about the nature of lack, fantasy and subjectivity were used to explain the 'unachievable figure of the "ideal" worker' (ibid., p. 466).

Parallels exist between Shubin et al.'s study and mine. I also examine how, in the Singaporean discourse and imagination, the '*ideal*' foreign talent never materialises; it remains desired yet its obtainment seems perpetually deferred. At the centre of Lacan's theory of desire is a *subject of lack* – a subject that 'in the process of acceding to meaning, […] loses something of its being' (ibid., p. 467). Here, 'meaning' refers to the realm of language and discourse or, in Lacanian terminology, the *symbolic*. Due to this loss, the subject of lack constantly desires *something*, but that *something* never seems to arrive because, as Shubin et al. (ibid., p. 468) explain, '[t]he loss is anterior to what is lost: the power of coherent expression granted by the symbolic induces the very lack that it promises to make good'. In other words, when a pre-subject emerges as a subject through acceding to the symbolic, a loss or void is created. In short, for Lacan (2006), subjectivity and loss are two sides of the same coin, and the subject's desire is always directed at 'something else' (ibid., p. 431). Thus, lack is perpetual and could even be said to be normal; it structures the desiring subject's relationship with social others.

This cursory look at Lacan will be elaborated and fleshed out in my empirical analysis. However, I must note that my reading of Lacan is necessarily partial and selective. Geared towards providing a provocative interpretation of an empirical social issue, my reading does not claim to be an exegesis of the Lacanian corpus, which is highly complex and wide-ranging. Arguably, there are as many ways to apply Lacan as there are interpreters and issues under interpretation. Bullock (2014), for instance, offered a rare analysis of the societal discourses surrounding the Singapore

government's controversial decision to construct two casinos in early 2000s, using Lacan's concepts of 'the four discourses' and 'the mirror stage', nether of which I invoke here. Like Shubin et al. (2014) and Bullock (2014), I tend to rely more on Lacan's lucid contemporary interpreters (e.g. Sheehan, 2012; Žižek, 1989) than on his original texts.

Before applying Lacan to the analysis, however, it is necessary to lay some groundwork, accounting for why and how the Southeast Asian city-state Singapore has come to desire foreign talent – and foreign talent of specific kinds.

Background: Singapore and the desire for foreign talent

Modern Singapore was founded by the British in the early 19th century as a colonial trading post in the largely Malay-Islamic southeast Asia. However, significant inflows of sojourning labour from China throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries meant that by the end of World War II, Singaporean society comprised a three-quarter ethnic Chinese majority, with Malays and Indians forming the main ethnic minorities. In 1965, due significantly to its 'Chineseness', Singapore was forced to leave the Federation of Malaysia, with which it had merged two years earlier, and became an independent state. As often said in the vernacular, Singapore was 'kicked out' of Malaysia. It could be said that a constitutive paranoia was germinated at this traumatic *birth-by-rejection*. This paranoia about its profound vulnerability and its *lack* of resources to survive on its own arguably became a defining trait of the government led by the People's Action Party (PAP).

After independence, the PAP state, headed by British-educated Straits Chinese of elite backgrounds, such as Lee Kuan Yew, pursued developmentalism based on attracting foreign investment and export-oriented manufacturing (Rodan, 1989). The PAP put in place a 'soft authoritarian' (Roy, 1994) political system to ensure general

socio-political stability. Through suppressing the trade union movement and leftism in general, it kept down labour costs and created a favourable environment for foreign capital. As a result, Singapore's initial industrialisation was a success and, by the late 1970s, it was clear that the vulnerable independent island state had not only survived – it was on its way to becoming one of Asia's 'tiger economies'.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the PAP began to fear 'Western corruptive influences' on Singaporeans' moral values due to rising material affluence and increasing internationalisation (Kong, 2000). In response, the pedagogical PAP state propagated a set of discourses organised around the notion of 'Confucian values' and 'Asian values' in the 1980s. This coincided with the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign – an official campaign rooted in the idea that for the majority Chinese Singaporeans, Mandarin, as their Chinese 'mother tongue', was the subconscious repository or source of their 'Confucian values' (Hill, 2000; Kuah, 1990; Thompson, 2000). This was ironic because it was southern Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Teochew, not Mandarin, that were the mother tongues spoken by most ethnic Chinese in Singapore up to that point. Put in simplistic terms, since the 1980s, Singaporeans were, on the one hand, expected to continue to be competent participants in an internationalising capitalist economy and, on the other hand, pressed by their state to stick to or reemphasise their putative 'Asian' (notably *Chinese*) roots and values. This latter expectation was to be institutionalised through bilingualism (Lee, 2011) and moral-religious education introduced later into the school curricular (Kuo, 1996).

Launched in 1979, the Speak Mandarin Campaign also coincided with China's momentous post-Mao 'reform and opening up' programme. China's then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, credited to be the 'chief architect' of the reform, was said to have sought inspiration and advice from Lee Kuan Yew during a visit to Singapore late

in 1978. Thus, one might view the Singapore state's abrupt favourable turn towards Mandarin as a pragmatic response to changing external geopolitico-economic circumstances. China presented great investment opportunities for Singapore and subsequently provided a huge market and a deep pool of human resources. Meanwhile, as the motherland of Confucianism and the 'middle kingdom' where Mandarin originated, China (or 'the PRC' as referred to in local parlance) started to loom culturally and symbolically large over Singapore. Whether Singapore's interest in China was utilitarian or otherwise, some scholars (e.g. Lai, 1995, p. 142; E. K. B. Tan, 2003; Teng, 2005) have observed how Singapore since the 1980s began to be 'Sinicised'. Goh (2014) argued that China's ascendance has exerted reorienting influences over Singapore's governing elites' imaginaries of the island state's cultural and political self-identity.

Also during the 1980s, as local wage levels and living standards rose dramatically, the ever paranoid Singapore government began feeling pressure with regards to the country's economic competitiveness. It was imperative to develop a more skilled workforce compatible with the dawning knowledge-based global economy (Low, 2002). Furthermore, rapid industrialisation had led to declining fertility rates (Hudson, 2013) and 'brain drain' due to emigration (E. S. Tan, 2005), both of which threatened to undermine Singapore's talent pool. Facing these challenges, the state responded by attracting foreign talent, seen as indispensable to the country's continuous economic prosperity and fundamental long-term demographic survival.

Since state-initiated foreign talent scouting first began in 1980 (Quah, 1984), and particularly in the 1990s and the following decade, various policy measures were implemented to ease the path for skilled foreigners to work, study and settle in Singapore. These included general, passive measures such as liberal immigration and

visa rules and low barriers for local employers to recruit foreign personnel (Yeoh, 2013), as well as more specific, proactive measures such as state-sponsored programmes to recruit foreign sports talent (Yang, 2014a) and tertiary science and engineering students (Yang, 2014b, 2016). These skilled foreign subjects are generally considered as desirable candidates for naturalisation. They come in sharp contrast with the 'undesirable' foreign workers of lower skill and/or education level that Singapore nevertheless relies upon heavily (Montsion, 2012). This division led Yeoh (2006) to characterise Singapore's foreign labour regime as 'bifurcated'. From inflows of both kinds, Singapore's population increased from the 1990 level of three million – 90% of whom were citizens – to the mid-2016 level of 5.53 million, less than 61% of whom were citizens (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2016). Not all foreigners in Singapore are 'foreign talent' per se, yet the term has nevertheless become a catchall.

The recent rise of local 'anxiety', 'resentment' and 'xenophobia' towards foreign talent has been well documented (Gomes, 2014; Leong, 2011; Yap et al., 2015), with several accounts (Liu, 2014; Yang, 2014a; Yeoh & Lin, 2013) specifically noting the ways in which immigrants from the PRC have figured centrally in these contentions. Although official statistics are lacking, PRC citizens no doubt make up one of the largest immigrant groups in Singapore, possibly the largest (Yim, 2011). Since the Chinese are the local ethnic/racial group with the lowest reproductive rates, foreign talent from China is desirable because such subjects help shore up the status quo ethnic composition in Singapore (Yeoh & Lin, 2013; Yim, 2011). In addition, the Singapore state's self-consciousness as an Asian society with Confucian values and Chinese language forming the 'cultural ballast' to its Western facade puts ethnically Chinese immigrants in a uniquely favoured position. Foreign talent from China thus provides arguably the most productive case for analysing – and psychoanalysing – anti-

immigrant sentiments and discourses in Singapore, which are indeed often directed at PRC immigrants.

Notes on data and methodological approach

The data underpinning this study comes from 1) secondary sources drawn from existing literature, 2) information gathered from official sources, such as ministerial speeches and government websites and 3) qualitative content collected from the mass media, especially that which is available on the internet. Concerning the third type of data, as Gomes (2014) has pointed out, xenophobia in Singapore is found predominantly online due to the internet's accessibility and anonymity. Thus, online content uniquely records psychic and emotional outbursts concerning foreign talent, which often contain discourses, narratives and imaginations not given outlet and/or deemed unacceptable in mainstream media channels.[3] The discursive content found on the internet may not be statistically 'representative', but this does not undermine this article's objective of providing a fresh and provocative psychoanalytic reading of Singapore's foreign talent situation.

Consequently, instead of a more conventional approach to content extraction and analysis, my data collection was carried out in a purposive rather than systematic manner, which is above all informed and directed by theory. The Lacanian psychoanalytic lens helped filter and single out certain facts and discursive events about foreign talent as particularly relevant; conversely, specific events or discursive materials suggestive of desire – of the psychic – pushed me further in thinking about the relevance of Lacan's theories. Such an iterative process took place over a period of several years, during which I observed Singapore society online and offline in the dual capacity as a scholar and a student-turned-foreign-talent-migrant in the city-state. In fact, I do not deny that I occupied a particular position within the social field that is my

object of study. This positionality, I believe, has been a significant strength, if not an indispensable element, to this study.

Of mainland Chinese background and having received a tertiary scholarship carrying a service bond from the Singapore government a decade-and-a-half ago, I may be regarded as a beneficiary of Singapore's foreign talent policy, in particular via the student recruitment route (e.g. Yang, 2014b, 2016). For the same reason, however, as immigration became increasingly controversial and scandals specifically surrounding 'PRC foreign talent' drew online flak from time to time (Yang, 2014a; Yeoh & Lin, 2013), it was hard for me to remain unaffected. How PRC foreign talent and foreign talent in general, were talked about and imagined in Singapore held my attention, leaving me to mull over these observations regularly. As such, my analyses below have been informed by the knowledge I gathered organically as well as with the psycho-emotional experiences, observations and insights I collected over a long period of time.

Foreign talent as the production of lack

In official discourse as well as general knowledge, foreign talent is said to be injected into Singapore by the state to fill a lack – the lack of human capital. It has also become common to say that the arrival of foreign talent engenders *anxiety* amongst Singaporeans, which, in turn, accounts for the increasingly prevalent anti-immigrant discourses and behaviours in Singaporean life online and offline. However, these notions could be radically rethought in light of Lacan's counterintuitive insight: 'Anxiety is an affect… that appears when there is no possibility of desire, when there is a "lack of a lack"' (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000, p. 45). In Lacan's own words:

> I would just like to point out to you that many things can appear which are
> anomalous, that is not what makes us anxious. But if all of a sudden all norms are
> lacking, namely what constitutes the lack – because the *norm is correlative to the*

> *idea of lack* – if all of a sudden it is not lacking – and believe me try to apply that to a lot of things – it is at that moment that anxiety begins. (Lacan, quoted in Seshadri-Crooks, 2000, p. 37, emphases added)

Lacan suggests that anxiety does not arise from lack because lack is the condition for desiring, and to be desiring is normal; instead, anxiety arises precisely when there is a lack of a lack, whereby it becomes impossible to desire and normality is disrupted as a consequence.

In Singapore, it can be argued that the resentment towards foreign talent is in fact not often about *anxiety*. Rather, revealing feelings of victimhood, a superiority complex or, at worst, visceral hostility, this resentment seems to be more accurately characterised by self-righteous indignation and egotism.[4] Such affective states differ from anxiety in that they involve a degree of aggression and certainty, which are not typical of anxiety. To the extent that these affective responses often appear to be very powerful, they might be regarded as the outward manifestations of a certain *desire* incited by the presence of foreign talent. Recalling Deleuze and Guattari's (2004, pp. 29-30) pithy remark that 'Lack is created, planned, and organized in and through social production', it may be similarly argued that foreign talent in Singapore really serves to *produce and reproduce a sense of lack* at the core of the nation-state's psyche. Compared to this function, its ostensible role to supplement local manpower is secondary. The sense of lack, renewed and heightened each time foreign talent is desired and invited in by the state, reproduces a local desiring; and desiring, as Lyotard (1993) points out, is nothing short of the core ingredient to the competitive capitalist economy.

This logic is in fact somewhat openly acknowledged by the Singapore state itself. One of the declared objectives for importing foreign talent – students, professionals or entrepreneurs – is precisely to prevent local students and workforce

from becoming 'complacent' by introducing competitive pressure (Fahey & Kenway, 2010, pp. 53, 54). In other words, foreign talent makes the locals desire more for themselves, from themselves.

In his first National Day Rally speech as Singapore's Prime Minister in 2004, Lee Hsien Loong (quoted in Oswin & Yeoh, 2010, p. 170) spelt out what 'we' envisioned for the city-state, stating: 'I think this will always be work-in-progress because we will never be satisfied. We always want to move on, do better!' Foreign talent is revealed here as a concept conjured up by the state to serves as evidence and a reminder that Singapore is always 'not there yet' and should 'never be satisfied', which means it needs even more foreign talent. In short, foreign talent is desired so that Singapore can keep desiring.

Foreign talent as Singapore's *objet a*, or the unobtainable object of desire

As touched on in this article's introduction, in Lacanian theory, the subject is characterised by a loss that results from its accession to meaning, to language, namely, to the *symbolic order*. This symbolic order – 'the fabric of socially defined knowledge and the set of rules governing our behaviour and speech' (Sheehan, 2012, p. 16) – is also known in Lacanian terms as the 'big Other'. Subjects are supposed to fill subject positions within the symbolic order; in other words, the big Other casts a demanding gaze of expectation at the subject. However, the Lacanian subject is never fully at ease with the symbolic position it has been assigned; it feels a loss. The process of loss is what Lacan calls a 'symbolic castration', performed by the big Other, subsequent to which the subject is always a subject of lack, incessantly desiring *something*. This something, in Lacanian terminology, is the *objet petit autre* (meaning 'little other object', henceforth *objet a*). Because the desiring subject came into being precisely through loss, the true attainment of *objet a* is impossible, for that would spell the

dissolution of the subject altogether. The *objet a* is thus continuously desired but never attained. This paradox lies at the heart of Lacan's theory of desire. As Sheehan (2012, p. 21) explicates this unattainable *objet a*:

> It is a fantasy object that fills out the fissure in our sense of being, arising from the way our libidinal investment gives it a sublimity that it does not and cannot possess. An abiding attractiveness is attached to the object because it represents something that is felt to have been lost and which will bring closure if only it can be found.

But, as just explained, it can never be found. This *objet a* is not really the *object of desire*, but rather the *object cause of desire* (Fink, 1997/1995). In other words, *objet a* is that on account of which one desires, not that which one desires in the simple sense of possessing or consuming it.

I propose that foreign talent is Singapore's *objet a*. In the foreign talent situation, two distinct yet interrelated scenes can be identified, each involving a specific big Other and a correlative moment of symbolic castration; in both scenes, foreign talent embodies the void or loss and assumes the place of the *objet a*.

Scene 1: foreign talent as the Singaporean state's objet a

The first scene involves Singapore's accession into the post-Fordist global knowledge economy, whereby the big Other is the globalised economic system of financial capital, knowledge-intensive industries and digitalised production and consumption. This system involves a new set of game rules or a new grammar – a new symbolic order. It is *symbolic* in a double sense: firstly, it was the emerging big Other confronting nation-states worldwide, demanding they play by its new rules to stay afloat; at the same time, as Reich (1992) pointed out, the current global knowledge economy is literally *symbolic* because value is created largely through the manipulation of symbols (digital signals,

computing codes, etc.) to be carried out by what he calls 'symbolic analysts', i.e. knowledge workers.

Eager to be fully compatible with this new economic mode – in other words, to accede to this emerging symbolic order – the Singaporean state suffers a symbolic castration, traumatically realising its lack of *something*. Foreign talent was identified as that something, the *objet a*, that will do the magic *if only* it could be found and brought to the city-state. Recall that Singapore's economy in the 1980s still largely consisted of low value-adding manufacturing industries. As recently as his 2015 Labour Day speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong identified low productivity as a major threat to Singapore's future economic health (Prime Minister's Office, 2015). The local workforce's skill level is identified as the main problem and foreign talent as the solution.

For some two decades now, Singapore has operated what is very much an open-door policy to foreigners deemed talented and of added value to the city-state. In the first years of the 2000s especially, official rhetoric about foreign talent became ubiquitous, being reflected in the rise of granting permanent residence statuses, which peaked at close to 80,000 in 2008 (population.sg, 2015). No doubt the foreign talent policy proved effective in generating economic prosperity, and it was set to continue. Only in response to growing popular dissatisfaction – evidenced in the PAP's poor performance in the 2011 general election and a rare popular protest in 2013 following a whitepaper about population (population.sg, 2013) – did the PAP state most recently start to tone down its rhetoric and slow down the admission of foreign talent. However, it is crucial to realise that this by no means indicated a policy U-turn, and there is no evidence that the government has stopped desiring foreign talent. In fact, the governing elites in Singapore continue to persuade the public, if only in a more subdued fashion,

that highly skilled immigration is necessary for the greater good. For instance, although it was barely one year after the 'watershed' general election in 2011, as it had since come to be known, Prime Minister Lee Hsiang Loong addressed the Singapore Manufacturing Federation in 2012, remarking 'of course we need to continue to welcome foreign talent' (Prime Minister's Office, 2012). Clearly, for Singapore, foreign talent remains highly desirable, and the endeavour to recruit such subjects remains a work in progress – a mission that is unlikely to be declared 'accomplished'.

If for the Singapore state, desiring foreign talent is an on-going concern and having enough foreign talent an as yet unachievable objective, it is even more apparent that from the perspective of the Singaporean public, the 'right' foreign talent had never been obtainable. Recall, *objet a* is 'a fantasy object… [that] does not have the quality attributed to it' (Sheehan, 2012, p. 21). Indeed, there is abundant empirical evidence that the Singaporean public has been vociferously trying to establish the defects and undesirability of concrete foreign talent subjects found in their midst. In local social media and online tabloids of various kinds, foreign talent subjects have been portrayed as, among other things, too inadequate (therefore 'foreign trash'), too 'talented' (therefore clever by half and devious) or deficient in one way or another, such as lacking moral fibres or cosmopolitan sociability and sensibility.

For example, foreign students receiving Singapore-funded scholarships but not performing academically well and foreign professionals doing medium- and low-pay work are seen as proof that much foreign talent is mediocre or downright bogus (Yang, 2014a). For some locals, this perception was so disturbing that expressions such as 'third-rate foreigners' (Wong, 2001) and 'liabilities, not assets' (Wee, 2001) were used to describe inferior 'foreign talent'. Even for those who are credited as being truly talented, there remain constant suspicions from Singaporeans that these foreign talents

possesse neither gratitude nor loyalty to Singapore (e.g. He, 2008), and merely use it as a 'stepping stone' (Chong, 2015) or treats it as a 'hotel'. Furthermore, scandalous cases such as those of Ma Chi,[5] Anton Casey[6] and Sun Xu,[7] all seem to illustrate how arrogant and obnoxious some foreign talent might be. Above all, such individuals are often perceived to lack the will or ability to integrate into the local society, as shown from the momentum gathered by the 'Cook a pot of curry' Facebook event in 2011.[8]

It is crucial to realise that whenever anti-foreign talent sentiments and discourses have been expressed by the Singaporean public, rarely at issue was the abstract idea of foreign talent, but rather human beings in flesh and blood. It is not so much a question of foreign talent being undesirable, but rather that the real foreign talent Singapore desires has yet to materialise. In this scene at least, the Singaporean public and state seem remarkably aligned: foreign talent as an *ideal* remains desirable and thus must continue to be desired because the concrete talent thus far imported is unsatisfactory.

Scene 2: PRC foreign talent as Chinese Singaporeans' objet a

In the second scene, the subject is the native Singaporean, and his big Other is the Singapore state. The state is an appropriate figuration of this, for it is the author of laws and rules – the symbolic order – as well as the paternalistic and pedagogical authority who never tires of telling its children-citizens how to behave and how to desire (Heng & Devan, 1995). The Singapore state demands that its citizen-subjects embody certain qualities that define the subject position within the symbolic order. In acceding to this demand and trying to fill the position, the Singaporean subject undergoes a symbolic castration, thus acknowledging a lack, which then gives rise to the *objet a* of foreign talent.

Consider foreign talent from China – and these subjects' highly ambivalent significations for the majority Chinese Singaporeans – against the backdrop of the

Singapore state's enduring valorisation of 'Chineseness' through the emphasis of Chinese language and the inculcation of so-called Confucian values. Apart from English, the Singaporean education system requires all students to learn a 'mother tongue' which correlates to a student's officially registered 'racial' identity, regardless of whether the student actually identifies with that language and/or race. Chinese Singaporeans' mother tongue is officially designated to be Mandarin. However, with English increasingly becoming the de facto native tongue spoken by younger generations (Lu, 2013), many Chinese Singaporean students today struggle with learning a language, and its accompanying culture, which little interests them. Students who excel in their mother tongue are regarded – unfairly, some argue – as more talented; those who do not are often forced by their parents to get private tutoring because it is a prerequisite to have a certain proficiency level in one's mother tongue to qualify for government-subsidized local university education. It is not unheard of for Singaporean students to opt for more expensive higher education overseas because they have failed their 'mother tongue' subject in school. Thus, to some Singaporeans, the so-called mother tongue is anything but maternal or intimate, becoming an '(m)other tongue'. This irony – of having to actively learn a mother tongue – is a telling aspect of Singaporeans' experience of symbolic castration as they comply, willingly or by force, with their Sinicised (or self-consciously 'Asian') state, the big Other.

In this vein, PRC foreign talent becomes Chinese Singaporeans' object of envy and desire for being able to speak 'proper' Mandarin – the '(m)other tongue' which Chinese Singaporeans are expected to be competent at but have lost grip of. (One might add: this loss is an imagined loss founded on a fantasised possession that never really was). Revealingly, a notable number of '(m)other tongue' Mandarin language teachers in Singaporean schools nowadays are foreign talent from mainland China. To share

more auto-ethnographic evidence, I have regularly heard in my own interactions with Chinese Singaporeans that they believed their Chinese would never be as 'natural' or 'fluent' as mine and that their vocabulary would always be limited in comparison. Broadly speaking, the PRC Chinese supposedly embody more authentic Chinese values and culture, which Chinese Singaporeans have supposedly lost due to Westernisation and colonialisation and are now enjoined to rediscover by their big Other state. In this fashion, in a Singapore state-orchestrated symbolic order where Chineseness is extolled, PRC foreign talent is desirable because ideally it represents for the Chinese Singaporean 'some missing component of the subject's self', which is how Silverman (1983, p. 156) explains the abiding pull of the Lacanian *objet a*.

However, *objet a* is by definition unattainable. Parallel to how foreign talent in general fails to materialise in scene 1, the truly desirable ideal PRC foreign talent also dramatically fails to materialise; in fact, it oftentimes ends up in real life as an undesirable, even detestable, figure for Singaporeans. In Singapore, the mainland Chinese have acquired a reputation for being loud-mouthed and woefully uncivilized. In certain ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatown and Geylang, the Chinese spoken by the migrant workers of rural or urban working-class backgrounds and by those hard-working but suspected-to-be-cunning small business owners from China is emphatically not the pristine or stilted Mandarin that Singaporeans are accustomed to hearing through classroom learning. Instead, it sounds 'strange' and unsettling (S. Tan, 2011) due to the regional accents and slang.

Even more prominently, despite hailing from the homeland of sage Confucius, the mainland Chinese are often seen by Singaporeans as the epitome of moral degeneration and behavioural indiscipline. Falling under this theme are more examples than space allows me to detail here. For instance, the image of the female Chinese gold

digger who uses sexual allure to gain material advantages, wrecking local families, is deeply entrenched in Singaporean imagination, be it about those bogus student visa holders (*xiao long nü*) or 'study mamas' (Huang & Yeoh, 2005). A recent high-profile case in the gold digger genre involved a male tour guide from China who manipulated an elderly Singaporean woman to get his hands on her substantial fortune. Over the years, numerous cases of rude or uncivilised public behaviour by PRC nationals have been recorded on people's mobile phones, with the images/videos subsequently going viral and generating many heated emotional exchanges.

One such instance in 2015 involved a Chinese woman who was filmed acting aggressively in an argument with a Singaporean man.[9] What was most intriguing about this case, however, was that soon after, on the same tabloid website that first carried the video, a post appeared under the sensational title '7 reasons why PRC women are better than Sg women'.[10] The seventh reason states: 'PRC women are good in bed. If they decide to play nice for the day and take a shower, they do offer more than the tame Singapore girl.' Here, the implicit correlation was between PRC women's stereotypically aggressive, loud behaviour and superior sexual energy and performance. For Singaporeans, an ambivalent calculus of PRC immigrants' desirability and undesirability is revealed here through imagining the figure of 'the PRC woman': she has more to offer, but it is contingent on her compliance with Singaporean morals and hygiene practices ('play nice for the day and take a shower'). In other words, she is potentially desirable, but always marred by a certain *excess* or *deficit.* This example, I argue, captures again how for Singapore and Singaporeans, the desired PRC foreign talent and foreign talent in general, are never quite 'right' when they actually arrive. This only makes the fantasied, ideal foreign talent yet more desirable, albeit perpetually unattainable.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented a psychoanalytic reading of Singapore's recent immigration tensions by applying Lacan to the local society's discourses and imaginations about foreign talent. Drawing particularly on Lacan's ideas that lack is normal and fundamental to a desiring subjectivity and that desire revolves around a paradoxically unobtainable object (*objet a*), I suggested that foreign talent mainly serves the function of producing lack and stands in as the *objet a* of both the Singaporean state's and Singaporeans' desires. As Žižek (1989, p. 158) has put it, *objet a* is 'the original lost object which in a way coincides with its own loss, [it is] precisely the embodiment of this void.' For a Singapore state inevitably confronted with the global knowledge economy – a symbolic order, 'foreign talent' stands for the structural void or loss in the symbolic order. This void or loss is structural to the extent that the capitalist knowledge economy can see no limit to value/wealth generation through creativity and innovation by talented knowledge workers. In other words, there is always a lack of knowledge workers; and for the Singapore state, such knowledge workers take the shape of 'foreign talent'. Secondly, for Singaporeans unavoidably interpellated into an impossibly ideal subjecthood by their paternalistic and pedagogic state, foreign talent stands for whatever qualities the local citizens are supposed to lack. In both scenarios, the actual foreign talent subjects arrive as disappointments, unable to satisfy the desire that Singapore and Singaporeans have invested in this object. As something that Singapore can never have enough of and yet always finds wanting when it actually obtains it, foreign talent shows itself to be the sublime object of Singapore's ideology (Žižek, 1989) – a fantasy object impossible to materialise. Thus, the arrival of foreign talent in flesh and blood does not make Singapore somehow complete, wholesome or perfect, but only serves to make it even more of a work-in-progress and desiring-in-process.

In arriving at this reading, I mostly relied on PRC foreign talent in the city-state because this group seems to provide the most fertile analytical case. Nevertheless, this is not meant to be a reductionist reading of foreign talent, which is a necessarily disaggregated and unstable figure. Foreign talent of other ethnic or cultural backgrounds may have different significations for Singapore/Singaporeans, but similar arguments could be made, though this lies beyond the scope of this article.[11] Recognising the complexity and variability in Singapore's desire for foreign talent further helps highlight the inconsistencies in the big Other's demand and the unobtainability of the Lacanian *objet a*.

Finally and more broadly, in this article I have sought to contribute to and advocate a diversification of ways to approach migration and mobility research. Mainstream migration studies have been dominated by a governmental approach that accentuates state and state regulations (de Jong, 2016) and a 'rationalistic' approach (see Carling and Collins, this issue) rooted in neoclassical theories. Whilst the subjective and humanistic experiences in migration, such as affect and emotion, have received increasing attention as of late, this effort still remains limited. By prying open the black box of 'desire' with the theoretical tool of Lacanian psychoanalysis, this article shows that much more can be said about migration and mobility than merely policy and push-pull factors. It shows that novel and provocative explanations about mobility-related social phenomena can be made when migration scholars seriously consider fantasy, desire, and emotion.

Notes

1. Following Svašek, I use 'affect' and 'emotion' interchangeably, although I acknowledge that in other contexts the distinction between the two is crucial (see Pile, 2009).
2. It is worth recalling that psychoanalytic thinkers such as Freud and Lacan regarded themselves primarily as clinical practitioners.

3. In Singapore, the state retains strong influence, arguably ultimate control, over the press and media through state-owned holding companies.

4. Various examples could be found on prominent websites carrying dissenting opinions in Singapore, such as The Real Singapore (now defunct), All Singapore Stuff (http://www.allsingaporestuff.com) and States Times Review (http://statestimesreview.com).

5. Millionaire Chinese national Ma Chi's reckless driving (of a red Ferrari) cost him his own life and those of a Singaporean taxi driver and a Japanese visitor. The Singaporean public's reactions to this accident, however, seemed notably inflected by Ma's wealth and nationality (see Yeoh & Lin, 2013).

6. In 2014, wealthy British businessman Anton Casey ridiculed the less well-to-do in Singapore, causing a public furore (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/anton-casey-fired-and-flees-singapore-in-economy-class-over-poor-people-comments-9088199.html).

7. Sun Xu, a student from China on a Singapore government-funded tertiary scholarship, offended the local public by making a statement of ill judgment and poor taste, saying that 'there are more dogs than human in Singapore' (see Yang, 2016, p. 1).

8. In 2011, Singaporean netizens initiated a Facebook event called 'Cook a pot of curry' to protest the fact that a migrant family from China had requested their local Indian neighbour limit the cooking of curry and obtained favourable mediation from the housing estate council (http://www.allsingaporestuff.com/article/7-reasons-why-prc-women-are-better-sg-women).

9. For instance, Western and/or white foreign talent in the Singaporean schema of desire is often taken to signify creativity, entrepreneurship and individualism, which is in some ways the obverse of Confucian and Asian values but still highly desired.

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