

CHRISTIANITY AS A CULTURE OF MOBILITY:

A Case Study of Asian Transient Migrants in Singapore

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Abstract

More than ever before, the global and transnational movements of young people for work and study have become part of everyday life. Yet there is very little research on this phenomenon in relation to how actors in transience create strategies to cope with being away from home nation (place of birth and/or citizenship) and from family. As part of the findings of a larger international study on the identities, social networks and media/communication use of transient migrants, researchers found that Christianity featured prominently during life in transience for Asian respondents. This paper thus puts forward the notion that Christianity may well function as a culture of mobility by looking at its significance to Asian “foreign talent” transient migrants in Singapore. Through face-to-face interviews with fifty-seven Asian working professionals and international students, this paper found thirty that not only identified themselves as Christian, but whose social networks were also made up of Asian foreign talent transient migrant Christians. This paper thus suggests that Asian foreign talent transient migrants turn to Christianity as a way of coping with everyday life in transience. The Christian groups they join allow them to create a sense of community while being away from the home nation. This sense of community however is with other transient migrants, rather than with locals.

Keywords

Asian Foreign Talent Transient Migrants, Christianity, community, Singapore

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

Transient migration due to the global movements of people for work, study and lifestyle is part of everyday life, with 3.2 percent of the world's population (232 million people) made up of international migrants (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). In Southeast Asia the circulation of skilled labour together with a growing number of students from within and outside the region has become commonplace, particularly in the rapidly growing economy of Singapore. The presence of these transient migrants has been acknowledged to have favourable economic effects, such as contributing to the growth of host nation industries and remittance to the home nation, while at the same time contributing to a diversity of ethnicities and cultures never before seen. However there is a lack of theorisation in the area of transient migration on the strategies actors in transience make in order to cope with everyday life away from home nation (place of birth and/or citizenship) and from family. Existing work in disciplines such as migration studies and cultural studies on such strategies often, if not always, look specifically at permanent migration rather than transient migration. Meanwhile work on transient migration particularly in Southeast Asia is firmly committed to examining the conditions, treatment and agency of unskilled transient workers such as foreign domestic workers (e.g., Ford and Piper 2006). There is surprisingly very little work on the burgeoning transient migration of the middle class in Southeast Asia. *What then are the strategies created by transient migrant professional workers and international students to cope with everyday life in transience?*

Armed with this question, Gomes travelled to Singapore in 2014 to do fieldwork as part of a broader international project looking at the social and the cultural conditions of transient migrants in the Asia-Pacific's two most popular destinations for the transient migrant middle-class: Australia and Singapore. What stood out for her in the interviews with respondents, who were either working professionals or university-going international students, was the active role played by Christianity in their self-perceived identities and their social networks for a number of them. Here, out of fifty-seven Asian transient migrants interviewed, thirty of them stated that they were Christian. Respondents identified themselves as Catholic or generically as "Christian," and came into Christianity either as practising faithfuls or as converts while in transience in Singapore. Moreover they stated that they were active participants in their respective churches and formed strong friendships with the people they met in the congregation. This paper thus acknowledges the significant role played by Christianity in the lives of the transient migrants interviewed in this project. Here we suggest that Christianity functions as a culture of mobility that allows for connections to the homeland to be maintained and a sense of community within the host nation to be created.

Christians who come to Singapore bring with them the rituals and traditions of Christianity as practiced in the home nation and replicate them in transience. These rituals and traditions serve as reminders of home, while at the same time helping to create unique congregations that are nationally-based. In other words, congregations openly use signifiers of nationality such as language in order to duplicate a significant aspect of their home nation life in transience while feeling a sense of community overseas. In this paper we highlight, for instance, the Indonesian Christians and the Filipino Catholics who are part of congregations that are exclusively based on nationality. In Singapore, the Christian and Catholic Churches have special services and masses in Bahasa Indonesia and Tagalog respectively in order to service the growing numbers of Catholic Filipinos and Christian Indonesians. This sense of community extends to individuals who convert to Christianity in the host nation.

However, unlike those who carry their Christianity from the home nation with them, converts in transience use Christianity as a new self-identifying marker that allows them to be part of a non-nationally-based community with other transients. However, like those who were already Christian from the home nation, these converts too are attracted to identifiers they grew up with from the home nation, in a particular language (e.g., Mandarin). Hence while Christianity may be new to converts, they are attracted to the Christian communities they are part of because of other familiar identity markers as ethnic similarities.

These Christian communities thus provide respondents who identify as Christian, with solid social networks of friends who give support and companionship while overseas. Christianity, voluntarily, arms transient migrants with the tools they need to navigate through everyday life in transience, and thus copes with the traumas of volunteer uprootedness such as loneliness and homesickness. All these are aided by a host nation that is open to Christian faiths since Christianity is the fastest growing religion in Singapore.

As a global and transnational religion, Christianity is in a pre-eminent position to ride the waves of transnational mobility and migration. From its inception, Christianity has always been, and remains a religion that thrives on the mobility of enthusiastic migrants who bear witness to their newfound faith in Jesus. Indeed, the New Testament of the Christian Bible bears witness to the migration of Jewish and Gentile Christians across the Mediterranean world in the early years of the nascent Christian movement – for example, Acts 8:1 on the scattering of Greek-speaking Christians following the martyrdom of Stephen, Acts 18:1-3 on Prisca and Aquila fleeing Rome for Corinth, where they established a thriving house church (Tan 172). Elsewhere in the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul, one comes face-to-face with the apostle Paul, itinerant missionary and migrant *par*

excellence who travelled along trade and migrant routes in the Mediterranean basin, establishing house churches among the upwardly mobile “gentiles,” i.e., non-Jews in the thriving cities of the Greco-Roman world, including Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Rome. While it is true that the apostle Paul was often pilloried for diluting the Jewishness of the teachings of Jesus, in truth, Paul recognized and rode on the wave of migration and mobility within the transnational Roman Empire to establish transnational yet local churches that transcended ethnic identity to be defined by their acceptance of Jesus and his teachings. For better or worse, the nascent Jesus Movement broke away from its historical Jewish ethnocentricity to embrace the mobility and transnational identity of a universal faith that thrived on mobility to reach the ends of the world. Likewise, in the First Letter of Peter, we see the apostle Peter claiming a migrant identity (1 Pet 2:11) and inviting his readers to do the same. For Peter, migration and mobility are not incidental to, but rather an inherent dimension of being Christian.

Beyond the witness of the New Testament, early Christian missionaries travelled across the known world – east and west of Jerusalem, bearing witness to the Christian Gospel, as exemplified by the accounts of Saint Thomas travelling to India and establishing thriving centres of Christianity along the Malabar coast and Assyrian missionaries travelling along the ancient Silk Road to propagate Christianity in Tang-era China (Tan 11-13). The author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* spoke of second-century Christians whose view was that “any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country” (qtd. in Tan 172).

TRANSIENT MIGRANTS IN SINGAPORE

Singapore has been incredibly anxious about its local population growth and has attempted to meet shortfalls by opening its borders to white collar transient migrant workers and to international students from within the region and elsewhere. Known as “foreign talent,” white collar workers are professionals often in management positions and often hold university degrees, while international students inhabit both state and private post-secondary and higher education sectors (Yang 22). Some white collar workers might have previously been international students in Singapore, while current international students may have the intention of taking up local employment. Coming from Mainland China, South Asia, the Philippines and beyond, foreign talent transient migrants have been entering Singapore in droves since the mid-1990s. The Singapore government sees foreign talent transient migrants as an investment in Singapore’s economic future and argues that it has to open the country’s doors to them because Singaporeans are not reproducing enough in order to replenish the workforce and help take care of the ageing Singapore population. Out of the 5.47 million people in Singapore, as of 2014, 3.87 million are Singaporean and permanent residents, while 1.6 million are non-resident migrants (Tham).

1. Singapore as a Destination

Singapore is seen as an attractive destination for foreign talent transient migrants for both economic and lifestyle reasons. Singapore is a nation of full of job opportunities. Singapore has a wide range of established manufacturing and service industries and emerging businesses in order to be world class and competitive.¹ The Ministry of Manpower reports that in the final quarter of 2013, there were over 40,600 people newly employed people, in addition to 59,900 job openings waiting to be filled. The unemployment rate, at 1.8 per cent, is one of the lowest in the world (Ministry of Manpower, "Labour Market Statistical Information").

The Singapore government frequently mentions that Singapore's only resource is its people (e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs). By this, it means people as workers to fill positions at various levels of the employment chain. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Singapore embarked on ambitious modernization projects that saw a great need for unskilled labourers to help build Singapore's infrastructure and to replace the rising number of women entering the workforce to meet labour demands. Enter the unskilled migrant worker and foreign domestic worker, respectively. By the late 1980s and thereafter however, Singapore realised that it was facing a brain drain where (university) educated and skilled Singaporeans were migrating with little or no intention of returning to the homeland. This situation was made worse by an earlier population control policy program aimed at limiting the number of children Singaporeans produced. The *Stop at Two* campaign was a prominent media campaign from 1970 to 1976 which promoted no more than 2 children per family.² In order to address its labour shortage, Singapore started looking overseas as part of its recruitment program to fill an ever-increasing number of jobs available in various industries. While attracting foreign workers to fill skilled positions was one way of addressing the labour shortage, another way was by attracting international students and training them locally. The latter avenue would mean that international students would also be contributing to the economy through the secondary industries connected to the exportation of higher education (e.g. hospitality). At the same time, foreign talent individuals would possibly be acculturating and assimilating into Singaporean society, and therefore be hungrier to take up permanent residence and stay indefinitely in their host nation, or at least remain for a significant number of years.

Unfortunately the move to allow these new white-collar migrants to enter Singapore has caused huge dissatisfaction with the government among its citizens, as seen by the huge amounts of online criticism towards the government regarding this particular issue. This xenophobia takes place even though the Asian foreign talent transient migrants in Singapore, specifically, are ethnic and cultural cousins

of Singaporeans themselves. Singapore is host to a multicultural population that is primarily made up of three broad ethnic groups – Chinese, Malay and Indian – with the Chinese by far being the largest community. Logically then Asian foreign talent transient migrants should be able to fit easily into Singapore society, since many of them come from ethnic cultures closely related to those in Singapore. This, however, is not the case due to the strong xenophobic sentiments expressed by Singaporeans about the foreign talent transient migrants, especially those of Asian heritage.

2. Xenophobic Sentiments

Since the 2000s Singaporeans have been incredibly critical of foreign talent transient migrants – the overwhelming majority of whom come as working professionals while a significant number are made up of international students – entering their country and have been expressing their anger through xenophobic comments online (Gomes 21-37 and Matthews, “Singapore: No Sleep for the Lion City’s Universities”). Despite strict laws against racial vilification, these comments can be seen in some of the more popular online forums such as *Asiaone.com*, *The Online Citizen: A Community of Singaporeans*, *Sam’s Alfresco Haven: Celebrating Singapore’s Golden Period!*, and *The TR Emeritus* formerly known as *The Temasek Review*, as well as in personal weblog entries and on social media platforms.

The online xenophobic comments reveal that Singaporeans view foreign talent transient migrants with great suspicion as many anecdotally feel that they are threatening their livelihood and way of life. Singaporeans feel that foreign migrants are unable to integrate into Singapore because they are not adopting Singaporean culture fully (e.g. always speaking Mandarin rather than English, or Singaporean English, also known as Singlish). In relation to this, Singaporeans believe that white collar foreign talent transient migrants are able to get permanent residence easily yet do not display any form of loyalty to Singapore. By loyalty, Singaporeans state that they want new migrants to disconnect themselves from their homeland (e.g. not return but stay in Singapore indefinitely) and to not engage in their own cultural practices but to embrace Singaporean culture wholeheartedly (Gomes 35-37). In 2014, for instance, Singaporeans became very angry and took to the internet to express their rage at a proposed plan for Filipinos to celebrate their national day in the main shopping district of Orchard Road (Palatino, “Xenophobia and Public Discontent in Singapore”). The event was eventually cancelled because of the fear of violence. Moreover, the comments expose Singaporean displeasure at the People’s Action Party (PAP) whom they hold responsible for the influx of the foreign talent transient migrants as revealed by any online discussion by Singaporeans on the matter. Here Singaporeans note that they are no longer able

to identify with Singapore due to the increasingly overcrowded and changing ethnographic landscape, which they blame on government policies.

The most defining moment of Singaporean anger about the presence of foreign talent transient migrants took place during the 2011 General Elections where the PAP – the only government Singaporeans had ever known – saw the greatest withdrawal of electoral support. The majority of online discussions and comments often hit a crescendo whenever issues concerning foreign talent transient migrants become social media fodder. Of particular note are government actions such as the 2013 White Paper on Population which suggested that Singapore's population should rise to 6.9 million by 2030, the bad behaviour of foreign talent transient migrants such as British-born Anton Casey who wrote disparaging remarks about Singaporeans on his Facebook page and foreign talent transient migrant organised events celebrated in Singapore such as the Philippine Independence Day in Orchard Road's Ngee Ann City.

While face-to-face skirmishes have not happened as yet, real life expressions of xenophobia, unfortunately, have taken place. On Saturday, 16 February 2013, around 4,000 Singaporeans turned up at an organised protest against the White Paper on Population which had already been endorsed in parliament a week earlier. Organised by *transitioning.org* – an organisation that “cater[s] to the emotional needs of the unemployed” Singaporean – the event was billed as an exclusively Singaporean-only occasion with foreign talent transient migrants encouraged not to attend (Goh, “About”). Protesters held up placards such as “Singapore for Singaporeans” and “Stop Gov Unfairly Treatment Singaporean” (Ramesh, “Singaporeans Hold Protest Against White Paper on Population” and Yahoo Newsroom, “4,000 turn up at Speakers’ Corner for population White Paper protest”).

While they are aware of negative Singaporean attitudes against them, almost all of the foreign talent transient migrant respondents – whether they are from Asia or beyond – for this project seemed to be able to see past them. What are the strategies then which they employed in order to live a workable transient existence in a country where they were subject to anti-foreign feelings?

METHODOLOGY

The data collected in this study is part of a wider project conducted by Gomes which looked at the identities, social networks, and media/communication use of transient migrants across Singapore and Australia. The project, which involved qualitative and quantitative data collection, is called “Media and Transient Migrants in Australia and Singapore: Mapping Identities and Networks” (DE130100551), is funded by the Australian Research Council and has ethics approval from RMIT University (CHEAN A-2000827-01/13 and CHEAN B-2000903-05/13). Participants

were recruited in Australia and Singapore through advertisements in student groups, message boards, and through the snowball effect. Respondents were remunerated with shopping vouchers for their time and provided signed consent for the data to be used. Any respondent referenced in this paper is referred to using a pseudonym. Respondents of the online surveys provided consent by taking part in the survey. Table 1 below provides an outline of the data collection process in Australia and Singapore.

Table 1. Outline of data collection process

	DATA COLLECTION	
2013 Australia	Face-to-face ininterviews	100 respondents took part in either small group or individual interviews which were conducted by Gomes in Melbourne. Out of the 100 respondents, 57 were from Asia. Each interview session lasted for anywhere between 30 min to 60 min. All respondents filled in a short survey which captured their demographic information. Questions were the same for interviews in Singapore. Respondents were remunerated with AUD30 shopping vouchers for their time.
	Journal entry and face-to-face interviews	Out of the 100 respondents, 20 respondents were invited to keep a journal (5 entries over 2 weeks) on their media and communication use and to attend a final interview (approximately 30 min) based on their journal entries. The 20 respondents were selected based on their request to take part in the research further. Journal and interview questions were the same for Singapore. Respondents were remunerated with AUD60 shopping vouchers for their time.
	Online survey	An online survey based on the questions and answers provided during the face-to-face interviews and journal entries was launched Australia-wide with 193 respondents. Respondents had the option of entering a lucky draw where they had a chance to win 1 out of 3 AUD150 shopping vouchers. The online survey used may be viewed here: https://rmit.asia.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6GaMuC3XEGnpVIP

2014 Singapore	Face-to-face interviews	101 respondents took part in either small group or individual interviews which were conducted by Gomes and 2 research assistants in Singapore. Out of the 101 respondents, 88 were from Asia. Each interview session lasted for anywhere between 30 min to 60 min. All respondents filled in a short survey which captured their demographic information. A list of set questions for the interviews and the short survey are attached in Appendix 1. Respondents were remunerated with SGD30 shopping vouchers for their time.
	Journal entry and face-to-face interviews	Out of the 101 respondents, 20 respondents were invited to keep a journal (5 entries over 2 weeks) on their media and communication use and to attend a final interview (approximately 30 min) based on their journal entries. The 20 respondents were selected based on their request to take part in the research further. A list of the journal and interview questions can be found in Appendix 2. Respondents were remunerated with SGD60 shopping vouchers for their time.
	Online survey	An online survey based on the questions and answers provided during the face-to-face interviews and journal entries was launched Singapore-wide with 192 respondents. Respondents had the option of entering a lucky draw where they had a chance to win 1 out of 3 SGD150 shopping vouchers. The online survey used may be viewed here: https://jfe.qualtrics.com/form/SV_9uTfHYhJlWxCdvv

As Table 1 above shows, the methodology involves empirical research, as there were 201 face-to-face interviews, 40 respondents for the journal/face-to-face interviews, and 385 online survey respondents. The data in this paper reports only on the face-to-face interviews with Asian respondents that took place in Singapore. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full. Transcripts were then analysed manually and through SPSS software using thematic analysis. Using dual methods of thematic analysis allows for double-checking of the categorisation of the data and the themes. The process of manually analysing the transcripts involved reading and re-reading, preliminary categorising of the data, and further categorising to illuminate recurring themes in the data. The process of using SPSS

software involved coding and categorising data. The accuracy of the data was verified by working backwards and forwards between the manual categorising of the data and the coded categories in SPSS.

In this paper, the data is reflective of the open-ended questions we asked pertaining to respondents' perceived self-identities, social networks, impressions of their host society, plans for the future, and social media use, as well as their journal entries. While the research did not specifically go out to investigate Christianity among transient migrants, we found that the Christian faith featured prominently in the answers of a number of respondents. Here more than third of the participants (30 out of 88) openly stated that they were Christian. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the demographics of the Christian participants who took part in the study in Singapore. Meanwhile, in Australia, almost half of the Asian respondents (25 out of 57) said they were Christian. Christianity also featured prominently during interviews for respondents in both Australia and Singapore when they spoke about their identities, social networks, and even media/communication use.

Table 2. Demographics of Christian Asian foreign talent transient migrants

GENDER	M – 12
	F – 18
AGE RANGE	19 to 24 yrs. (20)
	25 to 29 yrs. (6)
	30 yrs. and more (4)
HOME COUNTRY	India (1)
	Indonesia (18)
	Malaysia (3)
	Philippines (4)
	South Korea (2)
	Vietnam (2)
VOCATION	International Student (20)
	Worker (9)
	Unemployed (1)

LENGTH OF STAY IN SINGAPORE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW	6.1 mos.to 1 yr. (4) 1 yr. 1 mo.to 2 yrs. (3) 2 yrs. 1mo.to 3 yrs. (7) 3 yrs. 1 mo.to 4 yrs. (3) 4 yrs. 1 mo.and more (13)
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A few issues of note in Table 2 include the high numbers of Indonesians (18/30) and international students (20/30) who are featured in this paper. During the Singapore phase of this project, twenty-five Indonesians were interviewed altogether. The number of Indonesian Christians among the Indonesians who were interviewed is very high. The Singapore government does not release any statistical information on the country of origin of the foreign talent transient migrants in general. Hence we are not able to verify if the demographics pertaining to the Indonesian Christians and Indonesians in this study are reflective of the larger Indonesian Christian and Indonesian foreign talent transient migrant population in Singapore. The high number of international students reported as Christian in this paper (almost two-thirds) is reflective of the Asian foreign talent transient migrants who were part of the face-to-face interviews, since close to two thirds (57/88) were international students from Asia.

The results revealed that Asian foreign talent transient migrants who identified themselves as Christian turn to Christianity as a way of coping with everyday life in transience. On one level, the Christian groups they join allow them to create a sense of community while being away from the home nation. This sense of community, however, is with other Asianforeign transient migrants, rather than with locals, such as sharing the same nationality and ethnicity dominate. The results of this study contribute to ongoing intersecting discussions on the (transient) migration experience, community and Christianity.

PRACTISING CHRISTIANITY IN TRANSIENCE

Respondents who came from countries where other non-Christian religions are dominant or were recent converts to Christianity revealed that practicing their faith was incredibly important to them. All the Indonesian Christians Gomes and her research assistants spoke to, for instance, had joined Indonesian Christian congregations in Singapore. These congregations were moreover serviced by pastors from Indonesia with services conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. Orchard Road Presbyterian, which is located in the heart of the central business district, for instance is one such church. For Indonesian information technology professional Charlie, practicing his faith is extended to his online downloads. He openly states that he subscribes to Christian YouTube channels featuring pastors and preachers. Meanwhile a few Indonesian Christian respondents noted that it was easier for them

to practise their faith in Singapore than in Indonesia, where Islam is the dominant religion. They found Singapore a place that permitted them to practise their faith openly since Christianity, as we will discuss later in this paper, is a growing religion in the city-state. Sally, an Indonesian Christian undergraduate student, for instance, explained that she felt that being in Singapore allowed her to actively practise her Christianity even more openly than she did in Indonesia. For Sally, being able to practise her Christian faith more freely than she did in Indonesia provided her with a sense of community in Singapore, particularly since she attended a Christian church where the attendees were primarily fellow Indonesians. Her sense of community in Singapore is enabled, in other words, by being part of a group that not only shares the same faith but the same nationality. This sense of community among Asian foreign talent transient migrants in Singapore through Christianity is an issue we explore in depth later in this paper.

Additionally, those said that their religious identity was important to them embraced their faith wholeheartedly, as Vietnamese Anh who is studying in Singapore passionately explains:

... I am a Christian ... [and I] ... know that God is real. ... is not a decision ... with belong to our social group it's just that God is real and his desire is to save everyone and when I come here then I hear about a Gospel, but before that, before I really find out who he is I already can have this feeling because yeah, because you know I think I will live here knowing that God fought in our heart, that this hole that need to be filled by him and his desire to – his desire to come to him, but at that time when I didn't hear about God I do not know who that person is and what his desire is for and then he ... I can come to realize that it is he who I keep questing for, who I keep feeling the yeah, feeling the desire to like to yeah to turn our [God] ... yeah so that's how I felt too ... this ... I think it is because in Singapore people talk about religion openly, yeah so I have the chance to hear about a Gospel.

While on one level the concept of the Christian God is extremely important to Anh, she also points out that this is facilitated by her ability to learn about the religion in Singapore. Like Sally, she alludes to the notion that Christianity is openly discussed and practised in Singapore – a point we acknowledge and take up later in this paper as a way for her as well as others who identify as Christian to feel a sense of community in transience.

A WAY OF DEALING WITH LONELINESS AND HOMESICKNESS

In Singapore, foreign talent transient migrants are part of the ethnographic landscape, with social encounters between transients and between transients and locals taking place on a quotidian scale. Literature in this area, however, has been limited to unskilled labourers, particularly foreign domestic workers, with

a focus on their lack of rights in the state and the tensions they encounter with employers as live-in maids (e.g. Ford and Piper 1-21). Research on skilled foreign talent, namely white collar professionals and international students in Singapore, meanwhile, is still in its infancy, with research in the area generally concerned with economic and policy issues (e.g. Rahman and Tong 80-98). However, work on transient migrants such as international students in the United States of America and Australia often points to the issues these students face while in transience, with loneliness and homesickness being the primary conditions of their unhappiness in the host nations (e.g. Hendrickson, Rosen and Auen 281-295; Sawir et al. 148-180, Gomes 21-40).

Asian foreign talent transient migrants in Singapore were not unique in this regard, with respondents noting that they experienced loneliness and felt homesick. Respondents also noted that they actively struck up friendships with people in order to help cope with the traumas of their voluntary uprootedness, with Christianity being a key feature in this quest. Of the thirty participants interviewed, a quarter of them alleviated these conditions by making friends with people from their respective churches. While a few participants were already Christian before coming to Singapore such as the Filipino Catholics and the Indonesian Christians, others found Christianity while living in the island-state. Ling, a female Malaysian-Chinese working in the hotel industry, for instance, was once such person.

Ling, who is ethnic Chinese, grew up in Penang, a state in Malaysia which is ethnic Chinese rather than Malay dominated (Penang Institute, "Population"). Thirty-six percent of Penang's population practise Buddhism and 45 percent are Muslims while only 5 per cent are Christian (Department of Statistics, "2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia"). Ling clarified that she was a practicing Buddhist in Malaysia and studied Buddhism in high school. However, after living in Singapore for a little more than a year, she converted to Christianity, and explains that her social network is firmly Christian. She explained that when she came to Singapore, she started making friends with other Asian foreign talent transient migrants who happened to be Christian and diasporic Chinese. Thereafter, she began accompanying them to their church. It was these friends who helped her overcome her loneliness in Singapore. She stated:

Previously as you I know Buddhist but I just converted to Christian last month. . . So most of my friends right now is from church and then because I'm attending Mandarin Church right now so most of my friends is from China but also there's lots of Singaporean and Malaysia is not that much. . . So I find it very good is actually

because when I'm feeling – I won't feel alone and I know this group of people I've got here because there's one time that I would like, I decided to go back to Penang because under stress and then no friends but after I joined this group I feel that I'm very happy because and also very happy that I now converted to Christian because I can pass everything to my God so I can be, I feel that I'm more happier than the past maybe half year . . . Because I just meant to come to Singapore for about one year I mean, before I come but after I attach with this group of people, I mean this Christian organization I feel that I would like to stay more maybe another two years because I feel that I need to improve, I need to learn. Because in Penang there's no church friends so I scared when I go back I will just go back to my previous life style and then not continue to grow, I mean in this Christian organization, so maybe because of this I would like to stay for another two more years.

Ling's above discussion reveals how passionate she is about her faith. For her, Christianity provides her with an emotional anchor while away from home. She also highlights two significant yet intersectional issues: her Christian friends are fellow transient migrants from outside Malaysia and the role played by language in her congregation. At the time of our interview, she had recently converted to Christianity. She explained to us that Christianity provided her with friends from diverse Mandarin-speaking nations since the church she attended only had Mandarin services. She admitted though that since she embraced Christianity, she did not have many Malaysian friends, primarily because there were not many Malaysians who attended her church.

Gomes's findings echo similar insights by North American sociologists studying transnational Asian migrant networks and Christianity in North America. For example, Judith Nagata's groundbreaking transnational 20-year study on Chinese Christians in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Canada on the implications of Christianity for superseding ethnic identity among Chinese Christians in Malaysia, Singapore, and Canada concluded that subethnic Chinese identity is often subordinated to a broader Christian transnational religious identity (Nagata). Likewise, Kenneth Guest's important ethnographic study of undocumented Fuzhounese migrants in the Chinatown of New York City highlights, among other things, the deep involvement of migrant Fuzhounese Christian congregations in nurturing transnational social networks of these Fuzhounese undocumented migrants who find themselves marginalized and disenfranchised within the broader U.S. society by virtue of their irregular immigration status, as well as by their lack of English and economic skills to escape their dead-end jobs (*God in Chinatown*, 201-206; "Religion and Transnational Migration," 159-161). In his words:

For the majority of the Fuzhounese, their transnationalism is much more nascent, grassroots, and fragile; an ocean-borne transnationalism of the working poor, not the

jet-set transnationalism of the elite. . . . As workers, many of them undocumented, they are disciplined by economy and state alike . . . Through these [transnational] networks, they seek to transcend regulated national boundaries and construct broader notions of citizenship and participation. They utilize their emerging transnational religious networks to articulate an alternative existence and identity in the face of the homogenizing influences of global capitalism and the U.S. labour market. Their participation in the life of their home communities – encouraged, facilitated, and rewarded through these religious networks – assists in creating and enhancing a transnational identity which may in fact serve as an alternative to immigrant incorporation in the host country (“Religion and Transnational Migration,” 160-161).

Foreign talent transient migrants, and in this case, those from Asia, have an added dimension where they see Christianity as providing a platform for networks beyond national similarity. Instead they adapt to social networks which provide them with some measure of similarity even though they also contain elements of newness. So while Christianity is a different experience for Ling, becoming part of a Christian community in Singapore is not a totally fresh adventure. While Christianity is a brand new ideology and identity for her, the fact that the Christian group she joins is made up of Mandarin-speaking ethnic diasporic Chinese provides a marker of familiarity. She is, after all, a Mandarin-speaking ethnic diasporic Chinese, and this particular identity provides her with the ability and confidence to navigate through the newness of her Christian faith. In other words, she has found a community which is new on one level (religion) yet familiar on another (diasporic Mandarin-speaking ethnic Chinese). Transience, in other words, fosters the creation of communities which provide fellowship and support while containing elements of familiarity for members.

FINDING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN TRANSIENCE

Transient migration due to the global movements of people for work and study is part of everyday life. Arjun Appadurai correctly notes that the global cultural flows and circulation of people, finances, technologies, media and ideas have created new collectives and thus identities. However, these new collectives are also unique as they become what Benedict Anderson calls *imagined communities* which exist outside their geographical and national boundaries. While Anderson specifically looks at how communities maintain their national and cultural identities outside their homelands, his template allows us to build upon his theory of the imagined community in order to unpack the complex identities which are evolving for international students, as part of the globalisation process. Manuel Castells suggests that identity is evolved, which suggests that identity formation is an ongoing process (8).

Global flows such as the movements of people “can disrupt a sense of belonging to community but create new forms of connectivity and can allow for new kinds of spatial configurations” (Nadarajah, Mulligan, Singh, and Chamberlain 17). The global movements of people in other words, while disruptive, are also creative in the sense that they *allow individuals more freedom to form new communities according to their needs*. Nadarajah et al. further explain that the global movements of people have “actually increased the desire for community precisely because people are obliged to make a more conscious effort to find community in the midst of such complexity” (16). Referring to the work of Gerard Delanty (130), Nadarajah et al. state that “very few people are now born into communities that have a fixed and well defined identity. This means that a sense of belonging to community needs to be ‘wilfully constructed’ (Delanty 130)” (16). Drawing on Giddens’ theorization that an individual’s identity is not merely based on past experience but is an ongoing narrative (1-8), this paper asserts that Asian foreign talent transient migrants in Singapore create a sense of community while being away from the home nation. This away-from-home community is based on commonalities of high significance to respondents. In this study the interconnecting commonalities of Christianity, language, and nation play crucial roles in contributing to respondents’ ongoing narrative in transience as they navigate their shared experiences as transients in Singapore.

Ling’s devotion to the Christian faith, for instance, also reveals that she is involved in a community quite different from those she has been used to while in Malaysia. Ling after all grew up in Malay-Muslim dominated Malaysia in an ethnic Chinese Hokkien-speaking family made up of practicing Buddhists. Like many Malaysian Chinese, Ling is multilingual, able to converse not only in English and Bahasa Malaysia but also in different Chinese languages and dialects such as Mandarin and Hokkien. She seems to be aware of how different the Christian community is for her and expresses a fear that if she ever went back to Malaysia, she would lose her newfound faith because she has no Christian friends back in the home nation. Moreover almost all her friends in Singapore are fellow Mandarin-speaking Christian transients from countries other than Malaysia. While Ling’s Christian church and friends come from countries other than Malaysia, the same cannot be said about other Christians in Singapore who are part of church groups exclusively catering to people from their home nation.

During her fieldwork in Singapore, Gomes spoke with Indonesian professionals Alice and Jim on the grounds of the church they attended. They explained that the church they joined had special Indonesian services on Sundays which was conducted by an Indonesian pastor and that they attended a bible studies group that was specifically for and made up of Indonesians. These services and group meetings, moreover, were held in Bahasa Indonesia. Church for this Indonesian

Christian community thus served as a reminder of home, in addition to helping them cope with the negativities associated with transience such as loneliness, which as we earlier raised, is an effect of transience for respondents. As Jim explained:

Because my parents are away, not in Singapore, so I need a social support – my friends and I don't want to be – probably a sense of belonging, like you know I come from this church and that is my identity, because to me it's pretty important to know who I am, where I'm from and things like that, so . . . I would say yeah . . . [this church gives me a foundation for my Indonesian identity] . . . because it kind of reminds me of things back home, you do have – firstly because the service are in Indonesia, so it is similar to what I had back then and sometimes we do have food fair and things like that where we – there people sell Indonesian food, so that again is a . . . of reminder.

Jim openly stated that Christianity is incredibly important to him on different levels. Besides reminding him of home, the practice of Christian worship and fellowship allowed him to feel a sense of belonging to a community while at the same time allowing him to express his Indonesian identity. This was because he felt that what he did with his church community in Singapore was a replication of what he did with his church community in Indonesia. For Jim, replicating his life in Indonesia while in Singapore provides him with a sense of community as well as connectedness to his home nation. Jim's response provides a different perspective to the practice of Christianity for Indonesians living in transience in Singapore. Unlike Sally, the Indonesian Christian who earlier identified the practice of Christian worship and fellowship in Singapore as an element of freedom which differs from her experiences in Indonesia, for others like Jim, it is a translocal experience. Here we borrow Greiner and Sakdapolrak's definition of translocal as being "phenomena involving mobility, migration, circulation and spatial interconnectedness not necessarily limited to national boundaries" (373). This translocal experience for Jim is the transposition of everyday life from Indonesia to Singapore through the practice of Christianity in terms of community activities. This translocal experience similarly takes place for respondents from the Philippines.

All Filipino respondents stated that they were practicing Catholics who attended Sunday masses, often regularly. Furthermore, they stated that they met other Filipino friends at the masses which often were in Tagalog. Here Shirley, a Filipino working in Singapore explained³:

For me I go with my community of friends and get a bit and then we go to church with the priest there is Filipino and all the person there is also Filipino. My Auntie is invited me to Filipino meals with some outside parties maybe parties or then sometimes she invited me to go to the . . . because all the Filipino have been played volleyball, basketball so yeah, then go to Filipino restaurant

Like Jim, Shirley's translocal experience is not confined to Catholic-related activities such as worship and bible study but also to social activities popularly practised in the Philippines. The nationality-based church community in other words provides nationality-based social networks while recreating certain practices from the home nation which are clearly important to them as ways of connecting to the home nation and coping with the trauma of uprootedness.

Gomes's findings mirror similar trends among immigrant Asian Christian communities in the United States. For example, Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim observed that "among the majority of Korean immigrants [to the United States], the religious need (meaning), the social need (community) and the psychological need (comfort) for attending Korean church are inseparable from each other" (31). In a similar vein, Pyong Gap Min's ethnographic study of Korean churches in New York City reveals the trend of many Korean immigrants joining Korean churches because of the important role that these churches play in promoting Korean culture and identity in the diaspora and fostering social networks among these Korean Christian immigrants:

The major reason Korean immigrants prefer a Korean church is their need for a communal bond. Due to their uprooting experiences, all immigrants seek a communal bond by establishing ethnic organizations. . . . Because of their cultural homogeneity, Korean immigrants try to confine their social interactions largely to fellow Koreans, and stick to Korean language, customs, and values. (131)

Borrowing an insight from Peggy Levitt, who originally made this observation of the close identification of culture, ethnicity, national identity, and faith in the context of Catholicism and Irish and Latina/o immigrants to the United States (please provide page number for Levitt here), one could surmise that the close identification of culture, ethnicity, nationality, identity, and the Christian faith among these Asian foreign talent transient migrants in Singapore emerges when these migrants assert their cultural, ethnic, transnational, and religious identities simultaneously by their participation in religious and community activities in their immigrant Christian congregations. To paraphrase Levitt, these Asian foreign talent transient migrants would be "hard-pressed to distinguish what is 'national' or 'ethnic' about themselves and what is 'religious,'" and therefore, when they "act out these identities, either privately and informally or collectively and institutionally, they express important parts of who they are and pass these formulations along to their children" (397).

CONCLUSION

While transient migration is part of everyday life, it is still a form of uprootedness despite, in the case of this project, its voluntary nature for work or study. In

order to cope with the traumas associated with transience such as loneliness and homesickness, Asian foreign talent transient migrants have turned to creative ways in order to create a sense of community while overseas. Historically, as a universal religion that spread throughout the world because of the transnational migration of peoples, Christianity plays an important role in helping migrants make sense of themselves and their lived diasporic experiences in strange and unfamiliar settings. Indeed, the religious and faith experiences of these Asian foreign talent transient migrants in Singapore echo similar experiences by nineteenth and early twentieth century European migrants to the United States. Recall William Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, commenting on European immigrant communities in the United States: “The church was the first line of defence behind which these immigrants could organize themselves and with which they could preserve their group, i.e., system, identity” (160). Silvano M. Tomasi and Madeline H. Engel spoke of Italian Catholic immigrants in the United States joining Italian parishes that sought to organize the Italian migrant community around “familiar religious and cultural symbols and behavioural mode of the fatherland” (181).

At the same time, one could argue that just because foreign talent transient migrants in Singapore embrace Christianity and make Christianity a part of their identity in Singapore, it does not necessarily signal their assimilation into the broader Singaporean society or acceptance by their fellow Singaporean Christians. David Yoo’s observations of Asian immigrants embracing Christianity in the United States are relevant here. Paraphrasing Yoo’s comments, one could argue that by embracing Christianity on their own terms, Asian transient migrants “have consciously forged religious identities in opposition to the discrimination they have encountered” despite their shared Christian faith with Singaporean Christians because they have “created institutions that reflect their concerns and cater to their own needs” (7). Likewise, Raymond Brady Williams’s insights on Indian Christian immigrants in the United States aptly describe the experiences of Asian transient migrants and their identification with Christianity: “Immigrants adapt their traditional genres to new settings and invent new forms for strategic incorporation. Such stability and change is a dynamic interplay of balancing available cultural and religious resources with demands for relevance. Creative flexibility in selecting symbols and in selecting strategies used to relate these symbols to current contexts is the manner in which ethnicity is shaped and transmitted” (194).

Moreover, for many, if not the majority of these Asian foreign talent transient migrants who embrace their Christian faith and make it a part of their diasporic identity in Singapore, their Christian identity becomes an important and defining aspect of who they are, enabling them to communicate with Singaporean Christians, yet affording them the opportunity to carve out a niche where they can define their own identity apart from their fellow Singaporean Christians. This

has profound implications for these Asian foreign talent transient migrants, leading to heterogenized, hybridized, and conflicting constructions of faith identity that simultaneously connect yet distance them from other Singaporean Christians. It is important to note that when Asian foreign talent transient migrants embrace a Christian faith identity, often with more fervour than they do in their homelands, this goes beyond mere nostalgic longing for home to encompass new opportunities for them to shape their own transnational, hybridized, and often contested multiplicity of identities in Singapore, where they are at best tolerated or at worse vilified by Singaporeans who express varying degrees of xenophobia against them.

In other words, Christianity affords a symbolic framework for Asian foreign talent transient migrants to construct their diasporic social-cultural identity in Singapore. In turn, Asian foreign talent transient migrants' embrace of Christianity also adds to the increasing pluralism of Singaporean Christianity beyond a normative expression toward diversity and pluralism. In the longer term, such diversity and pluralism within Christianity in Singapore also serve to challenge Singaporean Christians on the extent to which they would be willing and able to transcend their xenophobic prejudices to welcome these Asian foreign talent transient migrants as fellow Christians, as their own.

Notes

1. The industries which Singapore supports are aerospace engineering, alternate energy/clean technology, the chemicals industry, consumer business, the electronics industry, the energy industry, engineering, environmental and water, healthcare, international non-profit organisations, infocomm services and products, logistics and supply chain management, marine and offshore engineering, media and entertainment, medical technology, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, precision engineering and professional services. The emerging businesses are automotive, natural resources, lifestyle products and services, safety and security, real-time and space (Singapore Economic Development Board 2014).
2. This campaign was accompanied by government incentives and disincentives such as tax breaks for those with no more than 2 children and large families penalized when it came to public housing, respectively (Library of Congress Library Studies 1989).
3. Since the 1990s, an increasing number of Catholic churches have at least one weekend mass in Tagalog to cater to the increasing Filipino community. While more and more working in Singapore in professional or white collar positions, they were not the first Filipino workers in the Republic. Singapore has seen large numbers of Filipinos since the early 1980s with almost all of them at the time employed as foreign domestic workers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Transient Migrants, Identity and Media Short Survey

Please take a few minutes to fill in this form. The information you fill in here will only be seen by the researchers. This research will not reveal any individual's name or private details.

Your Name: _____

Your Gender: Male / Female

Your Age: _____ years

Your Ethnic background (e.g., Chinese, Malay, Cuban, Arabic etc.):

(You can have more than one)

Is your ethnic background(s) dominant in the country you are from? If not, explain: _____

Your Religion: _____

Your home country (where you have citizenship): _____ **Is this the country of your birth?**

(YES / NO). If no, please **state country of birth:** _____

Countries other than your country of origin you have lived/studied/worked: _____

Country where you completed your previous qualifications:

How long have you been living in Singapore? _____

On a scale of 1 to 10 how important is communication and entertainment media to you? Least important being 1 and most important being 10. _____

How many hours in a day are you actively online? _____

What do you like to do in your spare time? _____

What are your hobbies? _____

FOR STUDENTS

What degree/qualification are you enrolling in at your university/college? _____

How long is your course? _____

Are you doing part-time work? (YES / NO). If so, what? _____

FOR WORKERS

What work do you currently do? _____

Your job is: Permanent Contract Casual

ONLINE JOURNAL

If you would like to participate further in this research by maintaining a journal (5 entries to a set of questions) to track and record your media consumption and engagement, ex-

plaining why you chose, used and contributed to selected media products/outlets over a 2 week period, please indicate here:

YES, I would like to participate in the online. Email address: _____

You will be compensated with a \$60 gift voucher for your time.

Face-to-Face Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in our project. We are interested in your stories of your everyday identities, so who you are and the communities or networks you are part of, and the part media plays in helping you maintain, create and discover those identities.

I hope it is okay if we record this interview and take notes? Please be reassured that we will use no names in any report or publication of this research. Everything said during this interview is for research purposes only.

Thank you for your time. Appendix 2

JOURNAL ENTRY

MEDIA

What movies, television shows, music and/or YouTube videos/websites did you watch/listen to/watch today? Please give as much detail as you can (e.g. title, language spoken, country which produced it, medium you used to watch such online such as smart phone, tablet or computer, at the theatre, on your Ipad, on the radio or on television).

Why did you watch/listen to them (e.g. reminds you of home, to improve your English language, want to know different cultures/languages etc.)? Please elaborate as much as you can.

What are your reactions to them? For example, you felt comforted, entertained, proud, angry, homesick etc. Please elaborate as much as you can.

Do you in some way identify with the movies, television shows, music, YouTube videos and websites which you have chosen? For example do you identify with American or Western culture if you watch or listen to such American entertainment? Please elaborate as much as you can.

Is there anything else that you have watched, read or listened to which you would like to state here? Can you explain your choices and elaborate as much as you can.

COMMUNICATION

Did you communicate with friends, family and/or the general public today? How did you do this? Is it through social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Instagram, Tumblr, LinkedIn etc.), phone calls, Skype, emails, a combination of these or any other means? How much of time did you spend on these communication platforms? Please elaborate as much as you can.

Why did you use these platforms today? For example, they allow you to communicate with more people, it is private, you felt homesick, you needed to communicate with people similar to you (course, work, culture, language, ethnicity, hobbies and so on). Any other reason? Please elaborate as much as you can.

What were your activities on social media (.g. Facebook, Tweeter, Blogs, Instagram, Tumblr, LinkedIn etc.) today? Here please state what you read, watch, post, comment, share etc.

If you participated in Facebook groups, forums, Twitter, blogs etc., please state what they are and why you contributed to them.

Do you in some way identify with the groups you join and/or contribute to? Can you elaborate, please?

Do you identify with the themes (e.g. social causes, political issues, lifestyle, entertainment etc.) that you have on social media? Can you elaborate, please?

Journal Interview Questions

Thank you for coming for the final interview.

1. Can you tell me about your experience writing the journal.
2. From your involvement in the journal, do you think that your entertainment choices and/or communication use reflects your identity/identities?
3. Have you ever thought about yourself or who you are in terms of nationality, culture, religion, language, hobbies, interests and/or friends? When do you think about yourself in these terms?
4. Do you think that being away from your home country affects your identity/identities? Are you more aware of your identity/identities while you are overseas?
5. Do you write/discuss about Singapore in social media or any other kind of communication? Why?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your identities, friendship circles or media & comm use?