RESEARCH REPORT

Immigration Integration in Singapore: A Perception Study

Chin Ying Jie, Business ‘21
Tan Kwan Wei, Kevin, Business ‘21
Ng Si Min Rachel, Business ‘21
## Contents

01 About Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre .......................... 01

02 About the Project .................................................. 02

03 Method ............................................................... 03

04 Findings ............................................................ 04

05 Recommendations ................................................ 06

06 Conclusion .......................................................... 07

07 Student Fellows’ Reflections ..................................... 08
ABOUT SINGAPORE CHINESE CULTURAL CENTRE

The Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) aims to nurture and promote Singapore Chinese culture, and to foster mutual understanding among all ethnic communities of multicultural heritage.

Opened by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on 19 May 2017, SCCC strives to become a hub for high-quality performances, exhibitions and cultural activities, and a lively and interactive platform for all ethnic communities to gather and interact with one another. New immigrants may also acquaint themselves with our local Chinese traditions and customs.

The Centre aspires to be a community institution for everyone to participate in and appreciate our distinctive Singapore Chinese culture, and to establish itself as a cultural landmark locally as well as in the region.
ABOUT THE PROJECT

Immigration policy has played a fundamental role in Singapore’s economic development. Since the 1960s, Singapore implemented a class-based migration policy to attract immigrants of varying skill levels.

Today, immigration policy serves as a strategy to tackle Singapore’s demographic issues - ageing population and declining birth rates. Nonetheless, immigration remains a tenuous issue as governments have to strike a balance between fulfilling the aspirations of the domestic population whilst achieving the nation’s economic development. Hence, immigration integration plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and harmony.

Empirical observations suggest that there is a gap in understanding between Singaporeans and the Mainland Chinese. This exploratory study sought to gain insights on the perception and views of Singaporeans with regard to integration programmes involving new citizens hailing from Mainland China.

We then distilled this understanding into several suggestions in order to improve the reception and effectiveness of current integration programmes.
METHOD

To obtain a more comprehensive view of the current perceptions of Singaporeans towards the Mainland Chinese, we conducted a survey with 105 Chinese Singaporeans and 15 semi-structured interviews with Chinese Singaporeans to gain deeper insights into their perspectives.

Our survey questions were informed by the Indicators of Integration Framework\(^1\), which was originally developed to identify the elements central to perceptions of what constitutes successful integration of refugees and migrants (see below). This framework comprises four groups of indicators – means and markers, social connections, facilitators and foundation. We included indicators that are relevant to our study.

\[\text{Figure 1.}\]

FINDINGS

1) Differing expectations of Singaporean Chinese and new citizens

Through the survey, we found out that respondents expect new citizens to understand the Singapore Chinese culture more than they expect the Singaporean Chinese community to understand Mainland Chinese culture (see Figure 2). This mismatch in expectations might have serious implications on the effectiveness of integration programmes as integration requires two-way interaction between locals and new citizens. New citizens have to attend compulsory activities as part of their citizenship package. However, locals who believe they do not really need to understand the new citizens have close to zero incentive to attend integration activities. As such, this increases the difficulty of integrating new citizens into the local community.

![Figure 2.](image-url)
2) **Strongest indicators of integration are Singlish and multiracial interactions**

Through our interviews, we found out that “Singlish” is identified as the strongest indicator of integration by majority of interviewees (60%), followed by “being able to interact well with people of different races”.

3) **Superficial interactions between Singaporean and Mainland Chinese**

While 91.4% of our survey respondents indicated that they have Mainland Chinese friends, the interviews suggest that interactions between Singaporeans and Mainland Chinese friends may often be superficial as their interactions are limited to work or dining together. We believe that the lack of in-depth interaction, as suggested through the interviewees’ responses could possibly hinder the integration process.

4) **Use of arts and cultural programmes, festive celebrations to boost integration**

We also asked our interviewees for their opinion of current integration programmes. Majority feel that arts and cultural programmes are a great way to promote integration and understanding between both Singaporeans and the Mainland Chinese. However, a third of the interviewees disagree as they feel that having new citizens and locals at the same location may not necessarily result in any interaction and people might just “attend for entertainment itself.” Interviewees are also split in their opinion on festive celebrations as a means of integration. More than half of the interviewees view festive celebrations as useful integration tools. They perceive festive celebrations as ways to “broaden awareness” and “used as starting ground to spark off interest of local cultures and traditions”. The remaining interviewees feel that “the way both [parties] celebrate [are] very different” and that in the end, the “festivity also becomes a showcase, rather than a platform for integration” as Singaporeans would go there to “celebrate with their families” and not with the intention of making new friends.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, we made five recommendations to Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre:

MICRO – Recreation

1. Organise arts and cultural classes to create a platform that jumpstarts deep interaction between new citizens and locals. As one of our interviewees accurately pointed out, classes are a good platform for interaction between new citizens and locals compared to a one-off concert or event because during the course of learning, both locals and new citizens have a common goal in mind – to further develop their interest in a certain area. We believe such classes provide higher quality and more sustained interactions, making it a better integration platform.

2. Facilitate the formation of arts and cultural interest groups to continue the relationships built during classes. Interest in Chinese Arts and Culture are commonly side-lined in Singapore. By being the sole provider of niche interest groups in areas such as crosstalk (相声), SCCC can pull locals out of their inner circle and into a bigger social circle including the new citizens.

MICRO – Career

3. Establish a career mentorship programme, whereby working adults (whether they be local citizens or new citizens hailing from Mainland China) can engage and guide youths. From our research, we found that short-term programmes are ineffective in attracting and sustaining meaningful interactions. A career mentorship programme that is longer term in nature may help sustain interactions.

4. Establish a professional fellowship programme centred on cross-cultural exchange through industrial visits and networking events to utilise an individual’s professional interest as a jumping-off point for sincere, meaningful engagement. Members of this programme can leverage on the fellowship network, to embark on industrial visits or engage in dialogues with local business leaders and politicians.
MACRO – National Education

5. Social Studies classes to cover the integration of immigrants and new citizens to inculcate an accepting mindset in Singaporeans from young. Social Studies classes are currently only covering racial diversity and its importance. However, cultural diversity plays an increasingly significant role in defining Singapore’s identity. Therefore, there is a need to relook national education so that Singaporeans will grow to be more accommodating towards cultural differences.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, the subject of immigrant integration remains a complex and tenuous issue. Attempts to bridge the division between locals and the new citizens are mired by the lack of cross-cultural understanding and reluctance to participate in interaction events.

Our research project has highlighted the problems of utilising arts and cultural activities as well as festival celebrations. Essentially, such programmes are not perceived by Singaporeans to be suitable avenues for interaction. Instead, they are seen as leisure activities whereby they can engage in their personal interests (i.e. hobbies or family time). This may explain the low participation rates of locals for such activities when they are organised for the purpose of engaging the new citizens. A combination of both short-term and long-term strategies, aimed at targeting various needs and interests of locals and new citizens as recommended by our team, might be better able to achieve the objectives of integration.
STUDENT FELLOWS’ REFLECTIONS

“Embarking on this project has widened my perspective on immigrant integration. After completing this project, I learnt that immigrant integration is an extremely complicated issue, that requires the collaboration of many stakeholders. The SCCC cannot strengthen the levels of immigrant integration by themselves.

We need individuals from both sides (both the Singaporean Chinese and Mainland Chinese) to take active steps to integrate. If not, top-down efforts from organisations will only be futile.”

Chin Ying Jie
School of Business ‘21

“Embarking on the community development practicum has been an equally challenging and insightful experience. As Singaporeans, we are all members of a migrant nation. Further, immigration and xenophobia have manifested as hot button issues all over the world. They have precipitated in the rise of right-wing, nationalist movements such as France’s National Front and the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

Our research results were heartening as they taught us that individuals were not, by nature, discriminatory towards migrants. Essentially, we are still bound by our common humanity. Though this does not make the problem of integration any easier to solve, it does give us hope by pointing us in the right direction.”

Tan Kwan Wei, Kevin
School of Business ‘21
This project got me reflecting on my perception towards new citizens. The lack of interaction between us and them, might result in us forming a stereotype about them.

We must understand that those people who are vilified on social media might just be a black sheep from their community. As such, we should not treat the whole community with bias. Stereotypes are hard to eradicate, and integration efforts which includes Singaporeans, are necessary.

From our project, we understand that we still have a long way to go before we can consider ourselves an integrated society and our current integration efforts will need a lot of improvement. Eventually, I hope that Singaporeans will become more discerning and open towards new citizens, who also view Singapore as their home too.

Ng Si Min, Rachel
School of Business ‘21
About Chua Thian Poh Community Leadership Centre

Located at NUS University Town, the Chua Thian Poh Community Leadership Centre is named in recognition of Dr Chua’s generous gifts to the University. At the Centre, we aim to nurture Singapore’s next generation of community leaders, who will not only be intellectually engaged in social and community issues, but will also be passionate about addressing social and community challenges in Singapore.

Each year, we admit a select number of NUS undergraduates from different disciplines as student fellows. Together with faculty members and organisational partners, the student fellows learn to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach and conduct social research such as needs assessment, asset mapping, programme evaluation, social impact measurement and identification of sustainable solutions.

To date, our student fellows have worked with over 100 organisational partners serving different communities in Singapore; healthcare, family service, disadvantaged individuals, and many more. The programme has also inspired our student fellows and alumni to continue initiating ground-up community projects involving a wider NUS community. We hope to inspire young community leaders within and beyond NUS to contribute to a more caring, and resilient society.