“Foreign Talent”
Desire and Singapore’s China Scholars

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Thesis submitted to the University of Oxford

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Trinity Term 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before thanking people, I would first like to express my gratitude towards the University of Oxford and the Pacific Alliance Group (PAG) for awarding me one of the two inaugural Pacific Alliance Oxford Scholarships in 2010. The scholarship exempted me from financial pressure, and allowed me to focus on research. It has been a privilege studying at Oxford.

I'm very grateful to my supervisor and friend Dr. David Mills, without whose support I couldn't have begun or completed this thesis. David's intellectual sympathy has been crucial in allowing me to pursue this project the way I did. The interdisciplinarity of this work makes it somewhat unconventional at our department, and I really appreciate this considerable degree of freedom David gave me. David always encouraged me to be independent and never came across as interventionist; he had been a most gentle, kind, and understanding supervisor throughout, and it has been a great pleasure working with him. I thank David too for securing me some professional development opportunities in the upper years of the doctoral course, for example, in recommending me to teach a tutorial course on the anthropology of education for the Sarah Lawrence Program at Wadham College, and in guiding me through organizing a themed workshop in the Michaelmas Term of my fourth year.

Mentor and friend Dr. Xiang Biao has taken a sustained interest in my project and my development as a scholar throughout my time at Oxford. Biao sat on both my Transfer and Confirmation exams, and provided helpful suggestions and criticisms on both formal and informal occasions as I developed this work. I particularly thank him for always reminding me to ground theoretical interpretations in the empirical data emerging from the real world. Reading his written works, listening to him speak, and dialoguing with him has always been a great source of inspiration and pleasure. Not only am I tremendously grateful for his time and interest, I'm also touched by his enormous generosity in seeming always ready to affirm what he thinks are my strengths and in encouraging me to develop those strengths. Such encouragements meant a great deal for a junior scholar.

Professor Amy Stambach's arrival at our department in my third year has had important positive impacts on the development of my work. I'm very grateful to her for the comments and criticisms she offered on the occasion of the Confirmation of Status exam, and also for her close reading of an earlier version of chapter 3. Knowing junior academics these days face an increasingly competitive job market, Amy also helped me gain more teaching experience by inviting me to share with her 2013 MSc Comparative

and International Education class whatever little I knew about education in China; I thank her for this wonderful opportunity and the MSc students for their indulgence.

It was a great privilege to have had Dr. Johanna Waters and Dr. Yoonhee Kang—two experienced, rigorous but also really kind senior scholars—as respectively the internal and external examiner of this thesis. Jo and Yoonhee's careful reading of the thesis and their various thoughtful suggestions for final amendments were deeply appreciated. Not only have they helped me improve the final "product," the oral examination itself turned out to be a great pleasure: I felt challenged but not threatened; with their constructive way of approaching the exam, I was able to give my best shot at elaborating and defending the thesis, without succumbing to nervousness in the slightest. I'm very grateful to Jo and Yoonhee for helping me finalize this thesis in such a pleasant and reassuring way.

On the Singapore side of things, Professor C. J. Wee Wan-Ling did me a huge favour in helping me secure a Visiting Researcher position at the English Division of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), hence making my fieldwork in Singapore possible. At the National University of Singapore (NUS) and its Asia Research Institute (ARI), I am very grateful to Professor Brenda Yeoh and Professor Ho Kong Chong who generously included me in the "Educational Mobilities in East Asia" conference in May 2012, an occasion on which I had the opportunity to present an early version of chapter 6 and receive many constructive feedbacks. It was also an honour to be co-panelist with Professor Gracia Liu-Farrer of Waseda University. Dr. Zhao Litao's subsequent invitation to me to give a talk at the East Asian Institute led to a great opportunity for me to present and consequently rethink and revise an inchoate early version of chapter 5. I must thank Dr. Zhang Juan at ARI for her moral support and practical suggestions while I initially struggled with fieldwork. Juan's detailed comments on an early version of chapter 3 were helpful, and I really appreciated the most kind and most sympathetic ways in which she offered me various advices on scholarly and career matters.

During the post-fieldwork writing at Oxford, I had the opportunities to present different portions of the thesis in different shapes at various conferences and workshops, which either gave me useful feedbacks or offered interesting opportunities to meet people, or both. To just partially mention: Project Southeast Asia provided the forum for me to present a version of chapter 2 at the 2013 Southeast Asian Studies Symposium. I enjoyed my May 2013 trip to Finland to participate in the "Chinese Students, Teachers and Scholars Abroad" conference organized by Professor Fred Dervin and the Confucius Institute at the University of Helsinki, where I also met many scholars who shared my research interests, especially Wang Xuan, Anni Kajanus, Herby Lai, and Regis Machart. I'm glad I submitted various chapters of this thesis in the shapes of journal articles or book chapters prior to the thesis submission, as such attempts allowed me to receive

some penetrating criticisms and very useful comments from anonymous reviewers. In particular, I wish to thank Dr. Michael Montesano, editor of *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, and Dr. Vineeta Sinha, editor of the *Asian Journal of Social Science*; both editors and anonymous reviewers at these two journals provided comments that I believe substantially improved chapters 2 and 6.

I'm grateful also to Dr. Julie Chu who kindly accepted my invitation and traveled all the way from Chicago to be the keynote speaker for the "Imaginary, Desire and Educational Mobility" workshop that I co-convened in November 2013. Julie's ethnographic craftsmanship deeply inspired me and set me a high standard that I aspire to learn from. It was also a great pleasure to get to know a number of colleagues who were doing interesting research on related topics at this workshop, but I'm especially indebted to my co-convener Ka-Kin Cheuk. Shortly after my doctoral viva, a conference on Chinese students abroad held at Aarhus University in Denmark brought a number of old and new colleagues together, and I really enjoyed the collegiate and friendly conversations with Jamie Coates, Ole Kaland, Anni Kajanus, Michael Li, Cora Xu, Yajing Chen, among others.

Throughout my doctoral studies, I have benefited from the social support and intellectual company—oftentimes Facebook-based (!)—from various friends and colleagues, some in Oxford and others not, who helped to make my time as a graduate student more enjoyable and rewarding. They are, apart from those already mentioned earlier: Anjie, Yi'en, Antonia, Patrick, Shan (Huang), Tinghe, Aaron (Koh), Sin Yee, Haoran, Desai, Jonathan (Tam), Lijun, Lincoln, Ting (Guo), Teng (Xu), Selena, Zhao Ming, Jun and Hafi. Franz Mang helped me obtain a useful source of reference weeks before the thesis was submitted. The generosity of Yasu's friendship greatly touched me, and taught me very important things. Feiya and her parents' most generous help was not for a moment forgotten throughout these six years, and my feeling of gratitude towards them goes on. I have also belatedly come to appreciate the frank conversations and insights my colleague and friend at Cardiff University Dr. Roderick Galam generously shared with me about being a scholar/academic when I was then just embarking on this path. I also thank all the people whom I must have left out here, for having made big and small positive impacts on me along the way.

I thank Dad and Mum in China for always being there to provide an unconditional kind of support and love that constitute the greatest source of strength for me. I feel guilty towards them for not being able to be with them or speak to them as often as I should over the timespan of more than a decade that I've been mostly away from China. I thank Dad for teaching me Chinese calligraphy when I was little, which hobby saved me from some depressing moments in a journey of solitary reading and writing.

At last, my greatest debts in relation to this doctoral project are owed to my many

research participants in Singapore. Although their names shall remain unrevealed, one day I hope this message can get to at least some of them. Some of these participants were close friends that I have known for over a decade now, with whom I have shared literally months and years of overlapping life trajectories. Others, on the other hand, were younger people whom I met for the first time during the fieldwork. With most of the latter category, I was sadly not able to keep in touch afterwards. But in both cases, I remain touched by their generosity in letting me temporarily peep into their life-worlds and to allow me to ask inquisitive questions. It gradually became clear to me that I could not take their willingness to share for granted. Often, they were willing to share with me about their lives only because we had known each other for years or only because they knew me as their "senior" (*xuezhang*), to whom they felt they could talk relatively openly. They have done me a big favour, and I remain troubled by the thought that I won't have much to reciprocate them.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the "foreign talent" situation in Singapore with an ethnographic account of the lived experiences of immigrant PRC students on scholarships, or "PRC scholars." For some two decades, the Singapore government has annually recruited middle school students from China in their hundreds, selecting them through tests and interviews, granting them full scholarships at either pre-undergraduate or undergraduate level, and, very often, "bonding" them to work subsequently in Singapore for a number of years. Wooed and appropriated in such a way as prized potential human capital, PRC scholars exemplify the Singapore state's desire for "foreign talent."

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the influx of all manners of "foreign talent" into the small city-state gathered pace, local sentiments and discourses of resentment arose. The local-vs-"foreign talent" problem became a serious strain on a city and people proud of their cosmopolitanism. This thesis analyzes the "foreign talent" situation through the ethnographic "macro-trope" of *desire*. It argues that "foreign talent" is a site of convergence and divergence, collusion and collision, accommodation and contestation, fulfillment and failure of various individual, sociocultural, and political desires and longings.

Through the lens of desire, and its psychoanalytic undertones and insights, this thesis looks ethnographically into the PRC scholars' "foreign talent" journeys in nuanced ways. Based on ethnographic fieldworks carried out in a Chinese middle school and a Singaporean university, the thesis shows how Chinese students are constituted as specific subjects of desire, and how they subsequently develop certain perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes about the local "other" as well as about themselves after arriving in Singapore as "foreign talent." Infused with multifarious desires, the PRC scholars' experiences are often characterized by angst and dissatisfaction; yet it is also argued that generative subjective transformations take place precisely amidst these dynamics and pragmatics of desiring.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to make possible an ethical re-imagination of the "foreign talent" situation in Singapore from the perspective of desire; to provide an account of the so far little-studied Chinese migrant students in the context of Singapore; and to speak more broadly to the cultural and subjective dimensions of human experiences in the context of educational mobility, identity politics, and globalization.

1 Introduction

[The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available through ORA because of copyright.The image was sourced the Facebook portal "The Real Singapore" on 9 September 2012. It originally appeared on *The Straits Times* of the same day.]

Figure 1.1 "Foreign Talent" (downloaded from Facebook portal "The Real Singapore" on 9 September 2012)

The cartoon above (Figure 1.1) refers to the fact that in September 2012, Singapore received two new immigrants—two giant pandas, "Kai Kai" and "Jia Jia," loaned by the Chinese government to Singapore for the next ten years, in order "to mark two decades of strong ties" between the two countries.[1] In this humorous depiction, first seen on Singapore's national English daily broadsheet *The Straits Times*, the newly arrived pair of pandas are greeted by two orangutans on the other side of a barrier; with ambiguous expressions, the orangutans murmur: "foreign talent." This thesis is the story about the "foreign talent" in Singapore.

In the Southeast Asian city-state, the phrase "foreign talent" is one capable of instantly inciting a diverse array of responses and sentiments, ranging from the positive, to the ambivalent, to the downright hostile. Referring to foreigners who are regarded as having talents, desirable skills and/or such potentials that the Singapore state has welcomed and sometimes proactively recruited since the 1990s, "foreign talent" has in

the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century become a riveted and ubiquitous presence in the social discourse and public consciousness of this densely populated small island. If the phrase is used more liberally to refer to all kinds of foreigners—as it has indeed often been by Singaporeans more lately—then "foreign talent" is physically ubiquitous too. (More will be said about this ambiguity pertaining to the definition of "foreign talent".) In 1990, the beginning of the decade during which the "foreign talent" policy kicked in, the total population in Singapore was 3 million, of which 90 per cent were citizens; by mid 2013, the total population had grown to 5.4 million, out of which Singaporean citizens accounted for only about 62 per cent.[2]

From the perspective of the Singapore state and its policy makers, "foreign talent" is what Singapore desperately needs, because it is believed that as a tiny "red dot" of a country endowed with virtually no natural resources and facing a low fertility rate that had been falling since the late 1980s (Hudson, 2013; S. H.-L. Sun, 2011; Yeoh & Lin, 2013, p. 35), human talent is at the core of Singapore's survival and prosperity. For many ordinary Singaporean citizens, however, "foreign talent"—especially since their arrival in droves since the 2000s—is something to be put up with: *they* make *our* country so crowded for *us* to live in; *they* aggressively grab jobs from *us* and press down the wages; and *they* use the tax money paid by *us* to *their* own advantage… In the 2011 Singapore General Election, the People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore ever since 1959, faced unprecedented challenges from opposition political parties, and one of the main discontents voiced by the electorate was PAP's "foreign talent" policy (Gomes, 2014, p. 22). In the Presidential Election a year later, independent candidate Tan Cheng Bock lost the contest with PAP veteran Tony Tan by a very thin margin; the former's election slogan was "Think Singaporeans First!" In February 2013, when the PAP government released a Population White Paper which proposed infrastructure building plans based on a projected population of 6.9 million in 2030 (see *population.sg*), it felt as if it was the last straw. A few thousand (some estimated 5,000) people took to Hong Lim Park to protest,[3] during which an iconic photo of a punk style-clad young man carrying a placard saying "Singapore for Singaporeans" emerged and made headlines around the world (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 "Singapore for Singaporeans" (Hong Lim Park demonstration, February 2013)

On the other hand, for those to whom the phrase refers, "foreign talent" stands for physical and social mobility, educational and career opportunities, and, in general, the possibility of a better future. Thousands upon thousands of foreigners from all over the world, including myself, have benefited from Singapore's "foreign talent" policy measures in one way or another. Being chosen as a "foreign talent" is a recognition, and it confers privileges as well as obligations. As time goes by, many "foreign talents" change their accents and then their passports to become "Singaporeans." The expectation is that both Singapore and the "foreign talents" are the better for this.

As such, in the context of Singapore, "foreign talent" is a fascinating and controversial term loaded with a shifting multiplicity of meanings: an obstinate state policy catchphrase, an occasional quasi-swearword, and a quick byword for transnational aspiration and human mobility in the age of globalization. Writing a thesis about "foreign talent" in Singapore is not straightforward, because the more the term takes on daily controversiality and tendentiousness, the less easily it lends itself to coolheaded scholarly examination. I vividly remember a fleeting moment during my fieldwork in Singapore: one evening, at a bar in my field-site university campus, I was having a friendly chat with a few Singaporean graduate students that I had just became acquainted with; one of them happened to ask what my research topic was; I replied—without giving it so much as a thought—"foreign talent." The conversation

suddenly halted, as the Singaporean friend didn't seem to know what to say in response; he looked at me for one or two seconds too long with an awkward and faint smile, and changed the topic. Already knowing my own biography as a former "foreign talent" hailing from China, the Singaporean friend was being cautious. For different people in different social positions in Singapore, the term "foreign talent" seems to invoke one of several sets of standard scripts: the government and the elites are supposed to discourse in a balanced and judicious manner, arguing for the merit and necessity of having "foreign talent" while stressing the importance of social cohesion and "integration;"[4] the non-elite and the disenfranchised mass (which may or may not include the above-said friend who attended a *local* university[5]) usually complain and protest about the sheer number of "foreign talents" and the competition and/or the troubles they supposedly bring; and, the "foreign talents" themselves usually hide in a cautious, or indifferent, or perhaps triumphant, silence.

These sets of standard scripts have proven to be remarkably stable and resilient—for a number of years they have continued and are still continuing to be reiterated past each other, in an ongoing repetitiveness. This thesis attempts an intervention in this ongoing concern in Singapore about "foreign talent." Based on an ethnographic research concerning the "foreign talent" students who were and still are proactively recruited by the Singapore government from the People's Republic of China (PRC), this work seeks to disarticulate and rearticulate our understandings of the protean "foreign talent"-related phenomena in Singapore.

Though "foreign talent" continues to be discussed in the everyday context and, to a lesser extent, the academic context in Singapore, it seems fresh light could be shed upon this topic from a unique interpretive angle. This interpretive angle, as I develop in this thesis, is *desire*. I propose that the signifier "foreign talent" is one overloaded and overflowing with desires, and that the complex and controversial social processes, human experiences, subjectivities and intercourses may be accordingly understood as forms of "libidinal dynamics" (borrowing a felicitous expression from Tadiar, 2004) or "libidinal politics." As I articulate later, one theoretical goal of this thesis is to highlight notions such as *desire* and *imaginary* in social research's perennial concern with

sociocultural identity, and to argue for an analytics founded on ethnographically observing and describing the kinetics of desiring that often underpin social agency and action in contested social situations.

"Foreign talent"

Talent is desired. Everywhere. Whether it represented a genuinely new paradigm in our understanding of human socioeconomic development or simply a reinvention of the wheel (Srinavasan, 1994), there is little doubt that the advent of the "human capital" theory (e.g. Becker, 1964, 1994; Keeley, 2007) since the 1960s—in conjunction with epochal sociological discourses suggesting that the world had entered a post-industrial phase (Bell, 1973), an "information age" (Castells, 2000), and the era of the "knowledge economy" (Drucker, 1969)—has had profound and widespread impacts on nation-states, corporations, and individuals across the globe in the past few decades. In this new paradigm, it is argued, "knowledge, training, and skill possessed by humans might be as important as, if not more important than, physical capital in the determination of [economic] output" (G. C. Chow, 2007, p. 208). The arrival of this what has more recently been called "cognitive capitalism" (Boutang, 2012) has prompted many scholars and policy makers to emphasize the importance of developing, attracting and retaining talented, knowledgeable, creative human subjects for the socioeconomic development of cities, regions, and nation-states (Castells, 1989; Florida, 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Reich, 1992).

In Asia, one of the most dynamic regions of world economic growth in the past four decades, many nation-states have eagerly embraced the discourse of human capital development, and implemented specific policies to that end (Chowdhury & Islam, 1993; Hoffman, 2010; Long, 2011, 2013; Siu & Lau, 1998; Xiao & Tsang, 1999; Yusuf & Nabeshima, 2006). Among them, however, perhaps few countries can match the intensity of the dedication given to developing and attracting human talents by the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore. In 1997, the then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said in that year's National Day Rally speech, "In the information age,

human talent, not physical resources of financial capital, is the key factor for economic competitiveness and success. We must therefore welcome the infusion of knowledge which foreign talent will bring" (quoted in Yeoh, 2013, p. 103). Indeed, the 1990s saw the initiation of various policy moves aimed at attracting "foreign talent." In addition to generic measures such as a highly calculated regime of immigration and naturalization (S. Huang & Yeoh, 1996; Yeoh, 2006), various scholarship schemes that "bond" the recipients to work in Singapore for a period of time as a "service" after they complete partially or fully funded education came into being, including three such schemes specifically targeting students from China. In chapter 2, I shall say more about Singapore's "foreign talent" policy and some of its most recent social repercussions; suffice it to mention here, envisioning no alternative for the city-state to becoming a competitive, human capital-rich global city in an emerging world of knowledge economy, Singapore's policy makers have made extraordinary efforts in attracting and securing human talents from beyond the island's shores.

In this thesis, however, I am not so interested in "foreign talent" as a policy practice from the perspective of the state. After all, developing talent-fostering, talent-attracting policies and using contractual instruments to retain talents and recuperate the state's investments in talents, be they home or foreign, is far from unique to Singapore.[6] Instead, I am more interested in "foreign talent" as a socioculturally constructed, imagined, and contested figure; as a point of convergence as well as divergence of multifarious desires. I am interested in the social lives, experiences, and affects of the various parties to these tangled relations of desire.

A contested figure that does not exist

Inspired by Walter Benjamin's famous depiction of the *flâneur* as a *figure* that analytically bespoke the sociocultural milieu of nineteenth-century Paris, Joshua Barker and colleagues (2009, p. 37) exploit the analytical values of "figures" as "creatively constituted subject positions that embody, manifest, and, to some degree, comment upon a particular historical moment in the complex articulation of large-scale processes that are not always easy to grasp in concrete terms." These figures reveal the larger

societal and epochal conditions to their existence. In this sense, "foreign talent" is arguably one of the most central figures to Singaporean late modernity. Seen as indispensible to the city-state's economic, social and cultural vitality, the figure of "foreign talent" evokes an array of memories, discourses, and aspirations: from Singapore's complicated colonial histories as a "child of diaspora" (Yeoh & Willis, 1999, p. 359), to its multiracial cosmopolitan present reality, to its vision of its future place in the twenty-first century world. Understanding the "foreign talent" figure shall tell us a great deal about Singapore.

However, unlike the "figures of Indonesian modernity" that Barker and colleagues (2009) observe and venture to depict, Singapore's "foreign talent" figure seems much more difficult to pin down. Just who is a "foreign talent?" I argue that "foreign talent" exists only as an ideal construction, an imagination. The Singapore state, the Singaporean public, and other interested parties may have ideal-type or idealistic imaginations regarding what a genuine or typical "foreign talent" is like: what qualities he/she possesses, what values he/she holds, what behaviors he/she observes. But in reality, as the ethnographic vignettes in the next section and the materials throughout this thesis will show, the "foreign talent" figure is always vigorously contested, unmade as quickly as it is made; it slips away as soon as it is pinned down.

There has never really been a technical or officially given definition of the "foreign talent," even though the term is such a common currency in Singapore now. In fact, if there is a characteristic feature to the term, it is the elasticity and flexibility, perhaps also the irony. "Foreign talent" can be whomever the speaker uses the term to refer to, to whatever discursive effect the speaker intends to achieve by invoking it. It does not so much signify a social reality than it represents a site of rhetorical struggle. In the perspective of the Singapore state, "foreign talent" is a foreigner with desirable talent or skills. Someone must be in possession of *some forms* of valued talent or skill before the Singapore state considers her a "talent;" and the presence of this "talent" justifies the "foreign," i.e. in allowing someone alien to come to work and potentially settle in Singapore. Foreign domestic workers or construction workers on transient work visas without the prospect of immigration are not "foreign talent." However, to many

Singaporeans, any foreigner is a "foreign talent," especially when the foreigner is found to be undesirable in some way. By calling the undesirable foreigner "foreign talent," the aim is to subvert the Singapore state's "pro-immigrant" policy, which itself is encapsulated in and justified through the expression "foreign talent." For the disaffected Singaporean public, every foreigner is a "foreign talent" yet nobody is, depending on whether sarcasm is intended or not. Some "foreign talents" are accused of being not talented enough, while others are apparently too "talented" to stay in Singapore and are therefore considered morally bogus or lacking in "loyalty." This irony is perhaps most clear from its flipside: namely, often Singaporeans protest about the excessive presence of "foreign talent" and yet they simultaneously accuse them of not remaining in Singapore to fulfill their "bonds." As the focal point of all such manners of rhetorical tug-of-war, the "foreign talent" is a figure that more often than not fails to *be*. It does not exist.

Hence, even though some working definitions of "foreign talent" may be provided,[7] in this thesis I refrain from doing so, because one of my main points is precisely to show how this term is contested, which is also why I almost always put quotation marks around the term. However, though "foreign talent" as a figure can hardly be defined abstractly, "foreign talent*s*" as real human subject-objects caught up in Singapore's "foreign talent" policy and politics can be ethnographically studied. This is what this thesis is about. When I use the term in its singular form I tend to be referring to the abstract figure at the level of discourse, but when I use the term in its plural form, "foreign talent*s*," I tend to mean concrete social agents and actors who, under the circumstances, can be understood as falling into the category.

The production of "lack"

In common sense understanding, "foreign talent" is injected in Singapore by the state in order to *fill* a lack—the lack of human capital that is perceived to stand in the way of Singapore's aspiration for economic growth and prosperity. Common sense also suggests that, for obvious reasons, the arrival of the "foreign talent" engenders *anxiety* amongst local Singaporeans, which then accounts for the often negative semantic

valence and acrimonious social efficacy of the phrase. However, I challenge both these common sense formulations by drawing on French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan's counterintuitive insight that "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)

In other words, Lacan suggests that anxiety does not arise out of a sense of lack, because to lack is to desire, and to desire is the normal condition of life; instead, anxiety arises precisely when there is a "lack of a lack" whereby it becomes impossible to desire and consequently normal life becomes impossible.

In the Singapore context, one could argue that the negative social sentiments and attitudes toward "foreign talent" are in fact characterized not so much by anxiety, which ought to involve doubt, uncertainty, restlessness; on the contrary, tending to be accompanied by feelings of victimhood and sometimes visceral disdain and hostility, these sentiments and attitudes seem to be characterized more by egotism, assuredness and sturdiness—very much the opposite numbers of anxiety. I suggest that these non-anxious negative social sentiments and attitudes are the very manifestations of desire, because the real function of "foreign talent" is not to fill a lack, but precisely to *produce* a lack in the social subconscious, so that desiring is set in motion. More than it ostensibly contributes to filling the lack in the island-nation's talent pool, "foreign talent" really serves to reproduce a sense of lack, and consequently reproduces desire/desiring which, in turn, is the core ingredient to the capitalist economy (Bennett, 2010; Lyotard, 1993).

This is not an outlandish theory to contemplate once we recall, as is in fact openly acknowledged, that one of the main motivations for the Singapore government to

import "foreign talent"—especially "foreign talent" students like the PRC scholars that I shall examine in this thesis—is to prevent the local students, and citizens in general, from becoming complacent by introducing competitive pressure. A sense of lack is invoked and renewed every time more talented foreign subjects are spotted, desired and wooed; this sense of lack then fuels the incessant desiring-machine that Singapore is (Montsion, 2012, p. 471; Yao, 2007). Revealingly, in his first National Rally Day speech as Singapore's Prime Minister in 2004, Lee Hsien Loong (quoted in Oswin & Yeoh, 2010, p. 170) spelt out what "we" envision for the city-state, "I think this will always be work-in-progress because we will never be satisfied. We always want to move on, do better!" In short, "foreign talent" is desired so that Singapore can keep on desiring.

Thus, "foreign talent" is not merely a direct government measure to supplement local human capital, it is more importantly an indirect governing technique through which the Singapore state conducts the citizens' conduct through producing a lack that incites their desiring. It must also be noted, even the "foreign talents" themselves are not exempted from the effect of this "conduct of conduct." This thesis is about the multifarious consequences of this "foreign talent" governing technique, expected and unexpected; it examines the local sociocultural responses to the arrival of the "foreign talent," but more importantly, it investigates the experiences and desires of the "foreign talents."

Crossroads of promises

"Foreign talent" is an object of desire for Singapore, or at least the state. On the other hand, insofar as those people who are offered the opportunity to be Singapore's "foreign talent" treasure this opportunity and value studying, working and living in the city-state, Singapore is also an object of desire for them. The transactional relationship inherent in any "foreign talent" scheme presupposes this relationship of mutual desirability. According to Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 23), "When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us." Indeed, "foreign talent" should be

more accurately understood as a crossroads of a cluster of promises coming from a variety of perspectives that intersect, converge, and diverge. For the Singapore state, "foreign talent" promises a human capital-rich, economically competitive and culturally vibrant society; yet the arrival of too many "foreign talents" threatens the PAP government's promise to local Singaporeans of a country with high living standards and quality of life—a promise on which the "soft-authoritarian" (Roy, 1994) regime derives much of its legitimacy; for the "foreign talents" themselves, Singapore promises better opportunities, a better future. But as the materials throughout this thesis will show, these promises seem to fail as often as they are fulfilled. Thus, this thesis is also about the mundane fulfillments and failures of "foreign talent" promises and desires. "Foreign talent" is imagined to be the solution to some of Singapore's problems, but it also inevitably becomes the source of other new problems.

The unhomely libidinal politics—"foreign talent" moments

In the same 1997 National Rally Day speech by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong that I quoted earlier, he also urged his audience, "Singapore must become a cosmopolitan, global city, an open society where people from many lands can feel at home." While Goh may be applauded for foreseeing local resistant sentiments and encouraging Singaporeans to be more hospitable[8] to the "foreign talents" that were about to arrive at Singapore's doorstep, an ironic flipside to his remark, in hindsight, is that a sense has now widely developed among Singaporeans that their home country has been made "unhomely" because of the influx of "foreign talents" (Jones, 2012).

My focus in this thesis on "foreign talents" from China presents a unique theoretical opportunity, given that Singapore is a society with a three quarter Chinese ethnic majority and new Chinese immigrants make up with little doubt the largest group of "foreign talent" in Singapore—while no official statistics are available, some estimates the number of Chinese immigrants in Singapore to be as high as one million (see Liu, 2014, p. 4). The PRC "foreign talent" may be a "stranger" who "comes today and stays tomorrow" (Simmel, 1971, p. 143), but he/she is also in a sense a familiar stranger, by

virtue of her ethnocultural affinities to those aspects of Singapore that still make it somewhat a "Chinese place." As Yeoh and Lin (2013, p. 43) observe, "the most vocal contentions have come not from the 'non-Chinese' quarters of the city-state but from Chinese Singaporeans, who have been especially critical of their new found compatriots." Following Sigmund Freud's idea of "the narcissism of minor differences," Anton Blok (2001, p. 115) suggests that "the fiercest struggles often take place between individuals, groups and communities that differ very little." While I disagree with Blok on the point that smaller differences *necessarily* translate into heightened tension, Bourdieu (1979/1984, p. 479) is instructive in pointing out that "Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat."[9] This arrival of a stranger that is at the same time somehow close and not that strange arguably gives rise to an experience that Freud called the "uncanny," or "unhomely (*unheimlich*)" (Freud, 1963/1919). For the Singaporeans, especially the majority Chinese Singaporeans, it is as if "one's home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar; one has the experience of, in other words, of being in place and 'out of place' simultaneously" (Gelder & Jacobs, 1998, p. 23). In what follows, I offer snapshots of three unhomely "foreign talent" moments[10] in Singapore, narrated through the perspective of desire.

"Singaporean" medals by "foreign talent" mercenaries

In the summer of 2012, Team Singapore participated in both the Olympics and Paralympics Games in London, and won medals in both, which was no small feat for a country the size of Singapore. But when good news arrived in Singapore, the response was not unalloyed celebration. The two Olympic medals—a bronze in women's singles table tennis and a bronze in women's team table tennis—were clinched by three "foreign talent" sportswomen who were all originally from China but who had converted to Singapore citizenship some point prior to their participation in the Games. The two Paralympics medals—a silver and a bronze, both of which in equestrian—on the other hand, were won by Singapore-born Laurentia Tan, who had nevertheless been resident in the United Kingdom since the age of three. Soon, a digital poster began to

circulate on Singapore's social media (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3 "Know the Difference" (downloaded from Facebook, my version posted by Facebook portal "I don't like to squeeze on the MRT" on 3 September 2012)

What meanings reside in those inverted commas added onto the term "Singaporean" in the case of the China-born sportswomen? Why should there be those inverted commas again on the phrase "talent-spotted?" What sentiment is conveyed in describing these China-born sportswomen as having "abandoned motherland to represent Singapore?" And why was there a comparison of the amounts of the cash awards as well as the perks? Are the two Olympics medals not just as desirable as the two Paralympics medals?

"No" would be the answer if the following poll result is anything to go by. Singapore-based online forum Temasek Review initiated a Facebook poll in early August 2012 (Figure 1.4), asking people "who do you feel more proud of?"—"Malaysian Lee Chong Wei who won an Olympic silver medal in badminton [for Malaysia]" or " 'Singaporean' Feng Tianwei who won an Olympic bronze medal in table-tennis [for Singapore]." Given that Temasek Review caters mainly to a Singaporean audience, who presumably also made up the majority of the poll respondents, the poll result suggests that some Singaporeans would rather see a "true" Malaysian winning a medal for Malaysia than see a "fake" Singaporean winning a medal for Singapore.[11] What is the logic of preference or desirability here? Is not a medal for one's own country desirable

and worth being proud of? Singapore desires excellence and recruits "foreign talents" to compete for her in global games; but is the desire for excellence the only logic that matters? Those inverted commas that obstinately haunt the label "Singaporean" when "foreign talents" are in question, and the different orthographies of the athletes' names—"Lee Chong Wei" vs. "Feng Tianwei" (the former being characteristic of Southeast Asian Chinese and the latter *Hanyu Pinyin* style being typical of PRC Chinese)—seem to index a subtle semiotics of social desirability.

Figure 1.4 Temasek Review Facebook poll
(downloaded from Facebook, posted on 9 August 2012)

The undesirable desiring "PRC woman"

The social sentiments and attitudes in Singapore toward Mainland Chinese "foreign talents" and immigrants more broadly do not come out of the thin air. In Singapore, a "globalising city-state where the social fabric of urban life is being rapidly transformed by high rates of transnational migration from a kaleidoscope of nations" (Yeoh, 2013, p. 97), the increase in daily contact between the local self and the foreign "other" is inevitably accompanied by the increase in unpleasant experiences of encounter. These unpleasant encounters tend to be virally circulated, turned into small spectacles in today's hyper-connected context of social media and personal electronic devices, which in turn feed into tendentious social opinion formation.

One such small spectacle in Singapore was captured in a short video clip uploaded onto Youtube in July 2012, which attracted over 100,000 views just a few days since its appearance. This four-minute clip, entitled "Chinese Woman and Elderly lady quarrel,"[12] shows a young woman from China quarreling ferociously with an old

Chinese Singaporean lady in a bus. The cause of the quarrel seemed to be that the Chinese woman was sitting on a priority seat (reserved for the elderly, pregnant and disabled) while there were other empty seats in the bus. The elderly lady had apparently been "irritatingly" telling off the Chinese woman for this, but the latter refused to give up her seat, arguing that there were other seats available in the bus anyway. At the beginning of the video, things had already heated up, and the Chinese woman, being young and energetic, is seen ranting in a high-pitched voice under a fit of hysteric rage. While this petty conflict might be otherwise unremarkable, I was intrigued by the verbal contents of the quarrel, and what they seem to reveal in relation to desire and immigrant politics in the context of Chinese Singapore.

The Chinese woman accuses the old Singaporean lady of discriminating against Chinese—"You are just discriminating against the Chinese (*zhongguo ren*), you are discriminating against you ancestors (*zuxian*)! Weren't you born of Chinese parents yourself?!" In a few moments, the Chinese woman calls the old lady a *qiongminggui* (Chinese, meaning "doomed poverty ghost"), alluding to the fact that even at such a senior age the latter still needed to take a bus to go to work. The old lady, also deeply provoked, retorts by suggesting that the Chinese woman was not any better-off because she, presumably like many other young Chinese female sojourners in Singapore, has to work in dubious foot massage parlors (*kaijiao*). This remark provokes the Chinese woman even further, and she is seen to be pleading to the onlookers in the bus by shouting, "She thinks every Chinese woman in Singapore works in foot massage parlor! Has she got any self-respect (*buyaolian*)?!" She carries on ranting at the old lady, and before long came up with a rather bizarre statement—"You look down on me only because you can see that I'm young and pretty!" The old lady then suggests that Singapore society is being corrupted by "your kind of women from China," on hearing which the Chinese woman threatens to sue her for insulting Chinese nationals. The video ends.

What is playing out here, apart from a ferocious young Chinese woman not knowing how to behave herself respectfully in public? The hysterical behavior of the Chinese woman makes a case for comparing her quarreling state of mind to that of a

dream or trance, in which the unspeakable, repressed unconscious finds its way into language; and we may accordingly ask: Are the Mainland Chinese discriminated against in Singapore? What so quickly made her think the old lady's telling her off is a sign of ethnicity/nationality-based discrimination?[13] To what extent do the Chinese seriously entertain the idea (or perhaps *fantasy*) that they claim "ancestry" over the Chinese Singaporeans? And to what extent do Singaporeans subscribe to or revolt against this idea? Why would somebody who is taking a bus herself insult somebody else by this very fact? What are the collusion and clash of desires that resulted in certain stereotypes about Mainland Chinese—in this case, women—in Singapore?[14] Finally, why on earth did the Chinese woman claim that the old lady discriminated against her because she was young and pretty, i.e. desirable?

The bad "PRC scholar" subject

In this thesis, my explicit focus is on the "foreign talent" Chinese students who receive scholarships (sometimes partial, but often full) from the Singapore government to study at pre-/undergraduate levels in Singapore and who subsequently remain to work and live there. Known in Singapore parlance as "PRC scholars," these "foreign talents" are just as implicated in the unhomely libidinal politics. The following incident pertaining to one such PRC scholar introduces the "foreign talent" figure at the center of this thesis, albeit in perhaps one of its most controversial moments.

One day in February 2012, a Chinese undergraduate engineering student at a prestigious Singaporean university posted on his Chinese social networking website "RenRen" a statement after apparently having had some trivial unpleasant experience with (a) Singaporean(s). The unfortunate statement read: "There are more dogs than humans in Singapore (*zai xinjiapo gou bi ren duo*)!" Clearly, he didn't imagine the troubles this line would get him into.[15] After the post had been spotted and relayed by Singaporean netizens, the student, who turned out to be a PRC scholar in receipt of a Singapore government scholarship, came under severe, widespread condemnation in a string of traditional and new media channels. For days if not weeks, this "incident" became a topic that anyone living in Singapore who reads a newspaper or uses social

media had something to say about; and "How could someone who is obviously benefiting from Singapore be so ungrateful?" was the rhetorical question being bandied about. Voices calling for him to be dealt with were many and strong. In March, the university authorities investigated the case, and as a result, ordered the scholar to pay a fine of 3,000 Singapore Dollars, to perform three months of community services, in addition to revoking his final year scholarship. When these disciplinary measures were publicly announced, some felt it was too lenient and demanded no less than scholar's expulsion from the university (Au Yong, 2012).

In a way, the PRC scholars in Singapore exemplify what social anthropologist Nicholas Long has called the "appropriated people" (Long, 2011). Their talents are spotted, nurtured, but are also ultimately intended to be appropriated by the benefactor state; consequently, there is a publicness and symbolicality to their status as "foreign talents" and "scholars." As Long (ibid., p. 45) writes,

> People recruited to act as public symbols are constructed and disciplined in such a way as to ensure that the state feels it has made them its own: it feels comfortable with them, has a monopoly over their meaning, and can use them to do something or advance its own position.

It is partly PRC scholars' such quality of being a public symbol—symbolizing academic/intellectual excellence and legal/moral duty—that accounts for the frustration of the Singapore public when scholars exhibit inappropriate speech or conduct. Falling short of the extra expectations and moral scrutiny that came in one package with their "foreign talents" privileges, scholars like this one become "bad subjects" (to borrow a phrase in Torpey, 2000, p. 39) whom the sponsoring state and receiving country's public struggle to feel completely comfortable with.

However, the more direct reason this otherwise insignificant verbal transgression aroused such consternation in Singapore and led to punishments for the perpetrator that the liberal-minded might see as disproportionately harsh was perhaps that it confirmed a simmering suspicion in many Singaporeans' minds over the PRC "foreign talents'" moral integrity and loyalty—a suspicion that many also saw as not entirely unsubstantiated (Zhu, 2012). Thus, an individual's injudicious "speech act" (Austin, 1962) may, by

virtue of the speech act's author's position as a "foreign talent," invoke certain interpretive "frames" (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). As "principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of *little tacit theories* about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6 emphases added), frames naturalize certain interpretations and categorizations while foreclosing others. According to Richard Kearney's reading of Derrida's philosophical discussions of *hostipitality* (a portmanteau word combining *hostility* and *hospitality*, both of which are highly pertinent to the question of "foreign talent"), "If hospitality is to remain absolutely just, all incoming others must [...] remain unidentifiable and undecidable" (Kearney, 1999, p. 260). While I do not follow this precept to the letter, in the sense that my writing this thesis is precisely an effort to make the PRC "foreign talent" aliens more recognizable and understandable, Derrida's proposition does highlight how the possibility of *hospitality*—in this specific case, perhaps also *magnanimity*—might easily be foreclosed by too readily and quickly identifying and judging the aliens through certain "little tacit theories" that are hostile. In this thesis, I seek to expose and challenge such implicit theories that inhere in hidden social-discursive frames.

In re-framing "foreign talents" from the perspective of desire, I find Singaporeans' rhetorical question "How could they be so ungrateful?" worthy of more serious consideration. Indeed, how is it that Singapore's PRC scholars have come to be perceived as "ungrateful?" What is the state of mind or course of action that is called being "grateful?" As an affective state of appreciation *after* one has already attained something desirable, which then negates that thing's initial desirability, can this retrospective affect hold out against the strength of an ever future-oriented, overflowing desire directed at some new objects that one is yet to obtain? Needless to say, motivated by their own expectations and calculations to enter into Singapore's "foreign talent" schemes, the PRC scholars are as much *appropriating* subjects as they are *appropriated* ones. Appropriation involves desire; so what do they desire? This thesis tries to answer this question. Social anthropologist Henrietta Moore (2011, pp. 58-59) writes, "The desire for the other, the desire to be the object of desire for the other, is a process at work in all circumstances, but one that finds specific valence and character in particular

context." In light of this, is the "ungratefulness" of the Chinese "foreign talents" perceived as a sign of their not desiring Singapore (any more)? If so, can the adamant expectation that "foreign talents" be "grateful" also be interpreted as a desire for being desired on the part of the Singaporeans?

A central aim of this thesis is to argue, through an ethnography of the PRC scholars' desirings in the educational context, that desire cannot be contained in the instrumental and transactional frames of a contract, but must be interpreted and empathized with as something extra-contractual.

On the face of it, the phrase "foreign talent" comprises two distinct notions, each describing a characteristic of the people in question; but in practice, as the above three small cases show, tricky cross-valorizations and slippages take place between the two descriptors. While the "foreign" is not always "talented," the former may become susceptible to criticism, possibly hostility, both when it suffers a deficit *and* when it boasts an excess of the latter quality. Another danger is when talentedness becomes a quality associated exclusively with the "foreign;" one significant dissenting voice against the official "foreign talent" discourse in Singapore is that it results in an alienating, if not also insulting, devaluation of the "local," castigating the "local" to the categories of "untalented" and "undesirable" (cf. Montsion, 2012).

Here, I hope my use of three contentious cases to illustrate the unhomely libidinal politics over "foreign talent" in Singapore will not be simplistically construed as implying that Singaporeans as a people are xenophobic[16] or that the "foreign talent" policy is a failure; instead, I chose these cases wherein the "foreign talent" ideologies and practices seem to be in crisis because of the provocative insights they offer. Comitas and Dolgin (1978, p. 175) argue that, "For the anthropologist, insights gained in situations of crisis speak to the character of the social order as it appears in the more 'normal' course of things." Accordingly, looking at these limiting, "extreme" cases helps to sensitize me to the "normal," less controversial ethnographic materials that I present in the rest of the thesis. On the other hand, whenever social tension and contention do arise, I also believe that one must be able to look them in the face, instead of tiptoe

around them. Despite our wish to the contrary, in social life often it is the "extreme" that really matters, in good and not so good ways. Thus, throughout the thesis, I have not shied away from offering potentially controversial data and interpretations. My desire to explore the intellectual opportunities promised by opening up this sensitive topic takes precedence over fears of being misunderstood as exaggerating the antagonisms and negativities surrounding PRC "foreign talents" in Singapore.

Desire, agency, imaginary—via unpicking identity

Desire infuses the social life of identities. Although much of the "foreign talent" politics in Singapore as I describe above may be spoken of in the familiar term of *identity*—indeed this thesis may seem very much about identities—I wish, however, to move away from this time-honored yet by now deeply problematized notion,[17] toward looking at the social life of, or indeed, the "pragmatics of identity" (Chun, 2009). Allen Chun argues that what underlies identity and its construction and articulation are "geopolitics," or the "processes of modernity, nationalism, colonialism, state formation, class struggle and globalization" (ibid., p. 344); this is no doubt true, and the theorists that I discuss in this section have indeed all engaged with identity and its deconstruction in these very contexts. However, the notion of "geopolitics" arguably carries macroscopic and realist epistemological assumptions ill-suited to the ethnographic project I am pursuing here; instead, I chart a more subjectivist route of unpicking identity via the notion of *desire*.

Highlighting terms such as *desire*, *agency* and *imaginary* allows me to enlist more readily and eclectically theories and analytical tools from a wider range of social science and humanities disciplines, particularly those of sociocultural anthropology and psychoanalysis. Desire, as it is conceived of in the psychoanalytic tradition, has explicit sexual meanings. But it need not be. Following anthropologist Lisa Rofel (2007, p. 3), I use the term "desire" to "gloss over a wide range of aspirations, needs, and longings." As with Rofel (as well as Chu, 2010), my focus on desire is primarily its *pragmatics* and *practices*, yet I do not take a thoroughly constructivist approach to desire, as Rofel,

following Foucault, seems to do. As I proceed to do next, by untying desire from its sexuality-related moorings while retaining some of its abstract philosophical qualities, I hope to see how this concept might enrich the analytical vocabularies of identity-related social research. Insofar as the folk-sociological or laymen's use of "identity" seems after all necessary and convenient, while the scholarly critiquing of "identity" increasingly resembles making a straw man and fighting it, my purpose here is less the unpicking of identity *per se* than the articulation of desire via doing so. In a sense, my agenda in this thesis is in fact more methodological than theoretical: to see how this study might generate unique interpretive insights and styles when one moves away from speaking of identities to speaking of desires.

One of the most important legacies of the sociocultural identities research literature[18]—a legacy which has by now become an implicit assumption for virtually all ongoing scholarship on identities—is that identity was recognized as fluid, relative, open, constructed, contested, hybrid, etc., instead of static, essential, closed, indisputable, immutable, or pure. This led scholars to prefer the term *identification* to *identity*, in order to mark the tentativeness and the processsual character of identity (e.g. Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; du Gay & Hall, 1996; Hall, 1996). While "identification" successfully deconstructs and moves beyond the artificial fixity of "identity," at the same time it seems to presuppose and accentuate the social cultural subject's capacity and agency in *identifying with* something. Thus, an unpicking of *identity* can perhaps start with a discussion of the idea of *subjectivity*, not least because there can be overlap as well as confusion between these two concepts. Below, I briefly contrast two understandings of subject/subjectivity which share significant common grounds but differ chiefly on their respective positions on the status and source of agency; by way of this contrast, I articulate my own take on the interrelationships between subjectivity, identity, desire, agency, imaginary, and otherness.

In a broadly speaking structural-linguistic/psychoanalytical tradition, a *subject* can be simply understood as that which says "I." The very act of saying "I" sets up a relationship or relationships between oneself—"I"—and the other/object. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, subjectivity is said to emerge in the first instance in the mirror stage

through reflection—by looking into reflective surfaces (which may be literally a mirror or metaphorically the adult's face) that confirm the existence of the "I," allowing the subject to pronounce "I" (Fink, 1997/1995; Homer, 2005). Identity, then, pertains more specifically to the question—who am "I?" In other words, it pertains to self-recognition. Importantly, the psychoanalytic tradition characteristically assumes the existence of a primal drive or desire (e.g. the Freudian *id*) that is the deepest source of agency through its incessant striving for satisfaction. The articulation and mediation of this primal desire in terms of socially constructed language/law is the emergence of the Real into the Symbolic, in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 158; Žižek, 1991). Because desire is pre-symbolic and unsymbolizable, whereas language/law, and sociality in general, is symbolic, this emergence is regarded as always incomplete because what necessarily exceeds language/law has been reduced to precisely that (Žižek, 2005, p. 241). Language/law produces subject-positions with which subjects "identify," but subjects can never be fully subsumed into subject-positions.

In a second understanding of subject/subjectivity—roughly speaking the Foucauldian tradition—however, there is a tendency to see subjectivity and subject-positions as coterminous. In the Foucauldian tradition, as Nikolas Rose (1996) explicates, the subject/subjectivity is *tout court* a product or effect of *subjectification*—a process defined as the "formation of 'our relations to ourselves' " (p. 129). The subject here is one that is in a specific relationship and rationality with regard to itself, and subjectivity signifies those self-relations and self-oriented rationalities. The formation of subjectivity is achieved through what Foucault in his late years was fond of calling "technologies/techniques" (Foucault, 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 1997b, 2005)—those mundane practices in people's daily lives that orient themselves in particular ways toward themselves and others. Significantly, speaking for the Foucauldian schema and implicitly critiquing the psychoanalytic tradition, Rose (1996, pp. 140-141) dismisses the need for a theory of originary agency to account for subjects' apparent resistance to subjectification, because to him a subject is always a site of contestation between different regimes of subjectification. This position is echoed by Sherry Ortner (2006, p.

6) who asserts that hegemonic subjectifications "are never total in a historical sense" because the present is always in contestatory coexistence with "residual" and "emergent" regimes. "Resistance," for both Rose and Ortner, can be explained in terms of a subjective "turf war" without needing a theory of originary agency.

Stuart Hall, aligning more closely with the psychoanalytic tradition, conceptualizes identity/identification as "an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position" (1996, p. 6). He emphasizes in this conceptualization, "not only that the subject is 'hailed' [invoking Louis Althusser], but that the subject *invests* in the position," and that the "suturing has to be thought of as an *articulation*, rather than a one-sided process" (ibid. p. 6, first emphasis added, second emphasis original). Hall's evident insistence on the self-agentic character of the subject—evidenced by his use of the terms "invest" and "articulation"—is consistent with his main critique of the Foucauldian perspective on subjectivity (ibid., p. 10), namely that Foucault does not accord any agency or negotiating potential to the subjects who are targeted by regimes of subjectification.

However, I wonder if these two traditions are as irreconcilable as they appear; instead, I would like to propose adopting a synthetic position between the two. The linchpin here is the idea of *desire*—the primal agency—and its detachment from the narrow sexuality-related meanings in psychoanalysis. Once "desire has become freed from its dependence upon the law of an inner sexuality and been transformed into a variety of passions to discover and realize the identity of the self" (N. Rose, 1996, p. 136), the Foucauldians' strongest protest against the psychoanalytic theories, i.e. that the latter unwarrantedly give too much essentialist and irreducible primacy to sexual difference, becomes largely redundant.[19] While freeing desire from its sexual determinations in psychoanalysis, I suggest that we may still retain the notion of desire as a kind of unsymbolizable primal drive or originary agency—more broadly conceived of now—that *cannot* be deconstructed or reduced to technologies of subjectification. In fact, desire is desire precisely because it cannot be so reduced, for otherwise it would simply be a conceit of power and control (Biehl, Good, & Kleinman, 2007, p. 14; Biehl & Locke, 2010). In other words, I argue that desire is simultaneously constructed and originary, simultaneously effect and cause, and above all, that desire always overflows

all the elaborate secondary infrastructures that are constructed to channel it, shape it.

As this pre-symbolic desire overflows and emerges into the symbolic realm and interacts with socio-symbolic systems, *agency* results. Conceived of as desire in real action (Swell, 1992), or desire pursuing social/cultural "projects" (Ortner, 2006), agency translates the amorphous and multifarious *potentials* of desire into more concrete, observable, in short, more *real* forms. This propinquity to the social realm means that agency is most appropriately seen as attached to "things," manifested in "things," dispersed onto "things," and moves through "things," as Kathleen Stewart (2007) poetically argues in her writings on "ordinary affects" in the context of contemporary America. Importantly, "things" need not be only material objects; they can be symbolic objects, human subject-objects, as well as imaginary objects; they could be the names of persons, names of universities, academic credentials, consumer products, racial/nationality/ethnicity labels, and so forth. These "things" provide the subject of desire with a grammar and a vocabulary—or, as postcolonial literary theorist Rey Chow (1991, p. xiii) puts it, "codes of fantasy"—with which now the subject can speak and express its desires in concrete terms. What the subject does to "things," through "things," or, rather, what "things" enable the subject to do, is where agency is located.

In an evocative essay, Stuart Hall offers the following personal reflections which, in my opinion, not only give some concrete images to the overflowing quality of desire but also articulate the relationship between desire, identity and imaginary:

> If you live, as I've lived, in Jamaica, in a lower-middle class family that was trying to be a middle class Jamaican family trying to be an upper-middle class Jamaican family trying to be an English Victorian family... I mean the notion of displacement as a place of 'identity' is a concept you learn to live with, long before you are able to spell it. (Hall, 1987, p. 45)

Identity seems to be a "place" that is paradoxically *dis*-placement, driven constantly by a sense of "lack" that is characteristic of desire. This ongoing deferral, ongoing chain of desiring that links a "lower-middle class Jamaican family" to an "English Victorian family" is sustained by the act of *imagining*.[20] If desire is that unspecified/unspecifiable overflow of originary agency, then imagination is the concretization, the taking-shape of

that shapeless agenticness in response to concrete sociocultural configurations.

Perhaps no scholar has done more to highlight the centrality of the imagination to the theorizing of late modernity than Arjun Appadurai (1996). His observation that "[m]ore persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before" (ibid., p. 53) is certainly more true today than when it was first made some two decades ago. Indeed, "the work of the imagination," as Appadurai notes, has become "a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity" (ibid. p. 3). More importantly, Appadurai asserts that the intensification of imagination due to the advent of electronic media and mass migration means that it "has now become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies," and that this form of work "has a projective sense about it" (ibid. p. 7). In short, Appadurai sees "the imagination as a social practice" (ibid., p. 31). There can be little doubt that imagination as a social practice closely correlates to what we are accustomed to calling "identity formation" and/or "identity politics."[21]

Here, I propose to make a fine distinction between *imagination* together with the word *imaginary* as its adjective form on the one hand, and *imaginary* as a noun, a distinct concept on the other. Imagination, following Appadurai, can be defined as the projective mental work and social practice initiated by agentic subjects. In contrast, I see *imaginary* as something more of a social given that tilts toward the structural end of the agency-structure divide/continuum. Although there is no doubt of it being a constructed entity too, it is often experienced or encountered as a *given*, and it often shows hegemonizing effects. Drawing on Cornelius Castoriadis (1987a, 1987b), I thus define imaginary as an ideationally constructed form and/or image/imagery and/or vision that is embedded in specific sociocultural-historical conditions and enmeshed in the attendant power relations.[22] An imaginary almost always carries certain normativity, and therefore is capable of engaging with and being engaged by social actors in their navigations of social lives and relations.

Setting aside the normative evaluation of how the imaginary effects social hegemony, it is crucial to point out that imaginary often, if not always, appears in the form of *otherness*. The subject's relationship with the imaginary is often essentially a(n)

(imagined) self-other relation. The figure of otherness may be an object of desire as found in the Hegelian tradition of philosophy (J. Butler, 1987; O'Shea, 2002) and Lacanian psychoanalysis, or an object of horror and undesirability (Ahmed, 2000; Said, 1978), or both at the same time, such as it seems to be the case between Singapore and its "foreign talents." Nonetheless, the fact remains that imaginations of otherness and social imaginaries about otherness are at the core of the problem of self-identity/identification. In the words of philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1992, p. 3), "the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other;" or, as Stuart Hall (1997, p. 21) puts eloquently, "Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its position through the narrow eyes of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself."

In his work *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 1994, 2004), cultural theorist Homi Bhabha explicitly asserts that the process of identification should be understood in terms of an "analytic of desire," of which he provides three basic characterizations. "First, to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 63). Secondly, he asserts, "the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of *splitting*" (ibid., p. 63, emphasis added). In other words, prefiguring Stuart Hall's argument about the impossible suturing between the subject of desire and subject-positions, Bhabha argues that identification is never "the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision" (ibid, p. 66), but always results in an "in-betweenness" (Bhabha, 1996)—a hybridity. This connects to his third characterization, which is that "the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 64).[23] Through thus dissolving the question of identity in the "analytics of desire," Homi Bhabha echoes Stuart Hall in understanding identification in terms of investment and articulation.

This thesis investigates both Singapore's and its PRC "foreign talent" scholars' various investments and articulations of desires. This investigation could have been a

study of "identity politics," but as I try to argue in my brief theoretical forays above, *desire*, *agency*, *imaginary*, and *otherness* are the concepts that I work more closely with when examining identities and their social formations, circulations and contestations.

I ought to spell out the ethical and political grounds on which I stand in this thesis in view of my foregoing treatment of desire. Recognizing otherness/othering and dialectical processes as manifestations of desire does not necessarily commit or confine one to the orthodox Hegelian conception of desire as negativity. In fact, by seeing desire as an indeterminate, overflowing, multifarious, originary agency, I find myself aligning more closely with the Deleuzian approach which regards desire as profoundly positive and productive (Biehl & Locke, 2010).[24] Desire in this positive sense correlates to the notion of the *multitude* as formulated by Hardt and Negri (2000), who maintain that an endlessly creative desire is the key characteristic of the multitude, and is the condition for the "self-production of the subject" (ibid., p. 63)—in other words: freedom and self-determination. By seeing desire as constitutively amorphous, unspecifiable and resistant to fixture, an analogy could be drawn between desire and, via a philosophical-spatial metaphorization, the "nowhere"/non-place that is Utopia (Ricoeur, 1986), which, by virtue of being a "nowhere," empowers us to critique the realities of a concrete "somewhere." Finally, just as for Anna Tsing (2005) the "frictions" between universal claims/discourses and local differences are productive of emergent creative cultural forms and practices, similarly in my case, giving an originary primacy to desire puts desire in the position of a universal, whose frictional encounters with specific disciplinary forces and local sociopolitical formations should be understood as generative of creative forms of practice and culture. In short, I maintain, while desire negates much, it creates even more.

In thus conceiving of desire, I find myself sympathetic to Henrietta Moore who insists in *Still Life: Hopes, Desires and Satisfactions* (2011, p. 29) that "no absolute definition of desire is possible," despite it being a central concept to this work of hers. Her strategy, instead, was to "explore them [i.e. hope, desire, satisfactions] as a series of different affective and evaluative dispositions and/or orientations that animate the ethical

imagination, as well as resulting forms of agency, both conscious and unconscious" (ibid., p. 23).[25] These affects, dispositions, orientations, imaginations and agencies, from the perspective of anthropology, can be expressed and conveyed only through the "thick description" (Geertz, 1993) of ethnography writing. For this study of Singapore's PRC "foreign talents," desire is the key theoretical trope that sparked my "ethnographic imaginations" (Willis, 2000); but dialectically, desire only ever emerges through and in the form of ethnography. Although I draw inspirations from desire-related theories, these theories assist but not confine my ethnography, because I am aware that the "tendency for anthropologists to deploy their work only as illustrative cases for philosophical trends or concepts threatens to make anthropology into a sterile intellectual exercise" (Borneman & Hammoudi, 2009, p. 17). In this thesis, I may be seen to be using desire as an ethnographic "macro-trope"—a figure of speech, an organizing conceptual thread that operates "across the span of an entire ethnographic text" (Rumsey, 2004, pp. 268-269).[26] In doing so, I see myself as joining a number of anthropologists who have recently engaged with the social, cultural, political lives of desire in a variety of contexts (e.g. Brenner, 1998; Chu, 2010; Fong, 2011; Kipnis, 2011a; Long, 2013; Ma, 2012; Moore, 2011; Rofel, 2007).[27] In this work, I shall borrow the insights offered by some of these scholars.

The constancy of desire's overflowing quality as an originary agency and yet the indeterminacy of its shape, the generality of its philosophical essence and yet the multiplicity and flexibility of its situated manifestations, allow me to traverse a wide range of social, institutional, temporal and spatial domains (the different chapters in this thesis) in which Singapore's PRC scholars are subjects, objects, and agents of desire. To ethnographically study desire is to, in Henrietta Moore's (2011, p. 29) words, examine "broader calculations and configurations of desire within societies, communities, bureaucracies and polities" and to pay attention to "the way we displace desire onto other things, and invest objects, situations, fantasies and people with affect."

An ethnography of "foreign talent" by a "foreign talent"—the research

In November 2002, as I awaited with not a little excitement and trepidation my impending journey to Singapore—in fact my first journey abroad—as a PRC "foreign talent" scholar, I had never imagined that more than a decade later I would actually be writing a thesis about "foreign talents." Had I not been the PRC scholar that I was, however, I would never have written this account either. There is no doubt that my personal journey in Singapore, and the complex attachments that I have since developed for that place are the main reasons why I pursued this project. The close to six years I spent in the city-state as an undergraduate student was perhaps not just a long period of incubation for this study, but also a kind of protracted, unconscious ethnographic fieldwork, even before I knew what "ethnographic fieldwork" was. My personal experience greatly informed what I write in these accounts to the extent that I believe I know better than many other people the experiences, trajectories and desires of the PRC scholars, by simply having been one of them. But on the other hand, I also wish to stress that this is not an auto-ethnography.

Underpinning this thesis are ethnographic fieldworks conducted over two sites between April 2011 and July 2012. At the end of March 2011, I returned to my hometown, Nanchang, capital city of Jiangxi Province (Figure 1.5), with a view of using this locale as the setting for documenting Singapore's practice of recruiting Chinese students and for examining the students', schools', teachers' and parents' various reactions to the "foreign talent" schemes. Choosing my hometown for this stage of the fieldwork was obviously due first to logistic and access considerations, but given that Singapore recruits from some twenty provinces and localities in China, choosing sites would have been inevitable in any case. In such light, Nanchang/Jiangxi as a very "average" Chinese city/province perhaps conveniently offers the advantage of capturing the "foreign talent" recruitment in its most average and typical.[28] Nevertheless, during this stage of my research, I chanced upon some opportunities to carry out an "online ethnography" of sorts that helped me transcend the limitation of staying put in one geographical locality. I realized not long after starting fieldwork that a dedicated online

forum had actually been set up by PRC scholars already in Singapore to share with prospective scholars in China about all kinds of information relating to the scholarships (see chapter 4). Not surprisingly, this forum was visited by many scholar-aspirants from the various parts of China that supply scholars to Singapore, and contained some lively discussions that revealed the perspectives of the would-be scholars. Plowing through the conversations on this forum convinced me that the scholarship recruitment processes and stakeholder reactions were indeed very much similar across different places in China.

Figure 1.5 City of Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China

In my Nanchang fieldwork specifically, which lasted from April to July 2011, I followed two lines of inquiry. The first consisted in following closely the 15th batch "SM2" recruitment—"SM2" being one of Singapore's three major PRC scholarship schemes (see chapters 2 and 4)—in the province. My own experience as someone who went through essentially the same process nine years before allowed me to establish contacts with people and obtain access to institutions relatively easily. I managed to meet 19 out of the 24 pre-interview candidates who had passed the written exams weeks earlier, and asked them to complete a simple qualitative questionnaire survey (see Appendix I). In addition, with a subset of these candidates who were at that time studying at my own former senior middle school, "School A," I held a small focus group discussion. Through doing these, I became well acquainted with over half a dozen of the Nanchang SM2 candidates and their parents, and kept talking to them until well after

the final scholarship interviews in May. In addition to the repeated informal interactions and conversations throughout this time, I also attended the scholarship awards ceremony, which took place the very day after that of the interviews. Running alongside this first line, my second line of inquiry consisted of a broader ethnographic examination of the Chinese middle school milieu, based on the case of School A, which was and is arguably the most academically successful public middle school in Nanchang, if not also in Jiangxi. Thanks to my old-boy's connections, in the three months' stint at this school, I was assigned the role of an "assistant headteacher," which gave me ample opportunities to interact with teachers, students, school leaders and to observe lessons and participate in some student activities.

Having wrapped up the China stage, I moved on to Singapore in August 2011 to carry out the second and the major stage of the fieldwork. Based at the "University Institute Singapore" (pseudonym) or "UIS"—a large public comprehensive university in Singapore with a focus on engineering that has been in recent years regarded as one of the fastest growing higher education institutions in Asia—I continued in the mode of participant observation and ethnographic interviewing, amongst two broad categories of informants: (1) those PRC scholars (from "SM1/2/3" programs) who were current undergraduate students at UIS (aged 19-24), and; (2) those scholars who had completed their undergraduate education and had moved on to professional work in Singapore (aged 25-30). I count those who were pursuing postgraduate research degrees at UIS, usually PhDs, under this second category too, because these interlocutors tended to see their academic pursuit more in terms of a professional career than as simply a prolongation of university education.

Again, being myself a former PRC scholar who graduated from UIS not only greatly helped me navigate the field and obtain access to informants, it also meant that empathy and trust between me and my interlocutors flew more readily. Much of my work in Singapore consisted in, on the one hand, catching up with old friends and acquaintances who were around my age and, on the other hand, getting to know younger scholars, who often nicely called me "senior" (*xuezhang*) and welcomed me into their worlds, no matter how temporarily. Our conversations were in most cases natural

and frank: They didn't have to switch to a Singaporean Chinese accent when speaking Mandarin with me—as they often did when conversing with the locals (see chapter 5)—and they didn't seem to shy away from sharing their thoughts about Singapore and about being "foreign talent." The presumption was that I was "one of them"—so indeed I was and still am—and I would understand and sympathize with them—so indeed I did and still do.

I estimate, in the numerous gastronomic gatherings, home visits, coffee/chat sessions and a verity of other social occasions (such as birthday parties and wedding banquets), I came into contact and interaction with up to two hundred PRC scholars, current or former. Though not all these contacts and interactions were deep, this process which ran pretty much the entire length of my Singapore fieldwork nevertheless filled my notebooks—both physical and mental—with many little life stories, fragments of narratives and specimens of affects that, when put together into a collage, afforded me a good overall sense of the experiences, ethos, and outlooks of these PRC "foreign talents." In addition, I conducted one-to-one or group interviews, in Mandarin, with 29 UIS undergraduate PRC scholars and 20 former scholars who were already into postgraduate professional life. (See Appendix II for a pseudonymized list of the 49 interviewees.) This collection of in-depth interviewees was inevitably the outcome of complex negotiations between multiple factors and processes, of which only some lay within my control: the informants' willingness or eagerness to share, their levels of sincerity and articulacy when sharing, the snow-balling technique used in informant recruitment, the pressure to handle long hours of interview data and the constant need to re-prioritize and revise research questions and strategies…and, above all, serendipity. (See Appendix III for a reflexive account of some of the major problems I encountered in the fieldwork and how I dealt with them.)

Another significant aspect of my Singapore fieldwork took place in the (digital) textual realm. As the three cases I analyzed earlier in this chapter indicate, much of the "foreign talent" libidinal politics may be and has to be explored amidst the production and circulation of discourses, images, and texts in public forums, especially that of the digital media. Hence, during as well as after the fieldwork, I paid close attention to

various Singaporean print and online media, including social media, both English and Chinese, on a frequent basis and made notes whenever I found necessary. Facebook, Youtube and such like, not only presented to me in the first instance some of the vignettes I use in this thesis, but continue to help me stay in touch with Singapore and what goes on there. To investigate more thoroughly "foreign talent" related discourses in the city-state over time, I also carried out an archival research into Singapore's major English daily broadsheet, *The Straits Times*, using LexisNexis Academic database, searching for "foreign talent" related articles and entries across a span of twenty years (1992-2011).

Lastly, it should be mentioned that *The Straits Times* is not just a good place to be looking for information on Singapore, often, unfortunately, it is also the only source from which a researcher without official patronage can obtain key information, no matter how scant. Especially when it comes to facts and statistics that are deemed sensitive, such as those pertaining to immigration and "foreign talent," even researchers in Singapore sometimes have no option other than relying on the typically broad-stroke figures announced by the government and then disseminated through the state-owned *Straits Times* (for one recent such example see Yeoh & Lin, 2013). In this thesis, key facts and statistics are drawn only from my research fieldwork, published academic literature, and other publicly available sources.

Overview of the chapters

The chapters in Part One combine painting backgrounds and offering analyses. In chapter 2, I first adumbrate the historical, political and socioeconomic conditions that on the one hand continuously trouble Singapore's identity as a nation and a people and on the other purportedly made importing "foreign talents" imperative. Through the conceptual lens of *authenticity*, I then proceed to argue how "foreign talents" might be understood—via examining the ways in which both the PRC "foreign talent" athletes and PRC scholars have been recently discursively constructed—as a negative and relativist solution to Singapore's constitutively bedeviled desire for authentic

nationhood. Chapter 3 temporarily leaves Singapore for China and delves into the world of the Chinese middle school. Doing so offers insights into the desire formations of students under the Chinese education system, and explains where the PRC scholars come from, both metaphorically and literally. In chapter 4, Singapore's "foreign talent" scheme meets the Chinese school students. Fleshing out the sketchy descriptions of the "SM1/2/3" PRC scholarships in chapter 2, in this chapter I provide detailed information about the SM2 program, which is in turn embedded in a broader ethnographic account of the recruitment of the SM2 scholars in Jiangxi Province in 2011. In addition, I also explore what various stakeholders, such as the Chinese school, teachers, and parents, but most importantly, the burgeoning "foreign talents" themselves, thought and said about becoming "foreign talents" for Singapore.

Part Two focuses on the PRC scholars' experiences as undergraduate students in a Singaporean university, the "UIS." Chapter 5 deals with the micro cultural politics of their adjustments through examining the PRC scholars' encounters and engagements with "Singlish" and the Singaporean as a figure of otherness. It attends to the ways in which the multicultural university campus could be a potentially hazardous terrain where traps of stereotyping and otherizing lie hidden amidst the desire for intercultural connection and its frustration and failure. Chapter 6 explores the scholars' inner subjective transformation via an experience of self-consciousness and other-desiring organized around the idiom of "very China"-ness. Both chapters may be seen as dramas of desire enacted through otherness/othering. In chapter 7, I turn to look at the PRC scholars' complex and sometimes self-contradictory attitudes and discourses regarding the meaning or purpose of the undergraduate education, as they encountered it at the UIS. I explore on the one hand how PRC scholars exhibit certain idealistic educational desires that are met with mismatch and disillusionment and on the other hand how the local pedagogical context reshapes their educational subjectivities and discourses.

Part Three is dedicated to the PRC scholars in postgraduate professional life in Singapore. Chapter 8 explores these scholars' musings over various world countries and places as alternately desirable and undesirable potential homes and workplaces, when subject to different sets of criteria. It shows how desire translates into a discourse of

“regime shopping” for these educated, cosmopolitan and ambitious subjects, who negotiate between the need for stability in life and a normative assumption of transnational flexibility. In chapter 9, I use the technique of drawing “ethnographic portraits” to present mini accounts of five PRC “foreign talent” individuals’ life trajectories in Singapore. I show the ways in which, for these PRC professional subjects living in twenty-first century Singapore, the *self* becomes an object of intense desire and care. Such desiring and caring, in turn, seem to be couched in a neoliberal language that intimately ties self-worth to achievements in education and professional work.

PART ONE

The Production of Desire

The "production of desire lies at the heart of global processes" (Rofel, 2007, p. 1). As already stated in the Introduction, I do not see desire as ontologically a fabrication *ex nihilo*, but see it as an irreducible originary source of agency. However, this does not mean that desire in its specificity is not subject to being shaped socioculturally; it is this secondary shaping that I call the "production of desire" here. Williams's statement—explicating Lyotard (1993)—"the entrepreneurial side of the capitalist economic system, or Capital, sees the energy of each feeling or desire as an opportunity, as something to be exploited" (J. Williams, 1998, p. 60) precisely hints at this quality of desire. Desire can be shaped into forms (e.g. consumerist) that essentially fuel the capitalist world system and buttress systems of power and discipline (Foucault, 1978), but it can also be the very force that potentially subverts it (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Hardt & Negri, 2000).

This first Part of the thesis is about the production of desire as well as desire's productive consequences. But instead of dwelling in the realm of theory, my examinations here are empirically grounded in Singapore's "foreign talent" situation. The Singapore state's desire for "foreign talent" introduces many foreigners into the city-state, who are figures of otherness. This elicits from the local Singapore society an interesting politics of identification and un/desirability in relation to nationhood and authenticity; in other words, it triggers an identity-production process. This is one way in which I see desire as a productive force, and is my focus in chapter 2. The protagonists of this thesis, the Chinese middle school students desired by Singapore as future "foreign talent," were born to a postsocialist "desiring China" (Rofel, 2007). They as subjects of specific desires, especially educational desires, are produced or shaped under specific circumstances, through specific "techniques" in the Chinese schooling

system. This is a kind of production of desire, and shall be my focus in chapter 3. Finally, I also mean "production of desire" in a much more contingent if not also transient sense. Chinese students may generally have a strong desire for studying abroad (Fong, 2011), but to desire or not to desire studying overseas in *Singapore* under its "foreign talent" scheme is quite a separate and much more specific question. Ethnographically examining the scholar recruitment process and the stakeholders' experiences, chapter 4 is focused on this specific and contingent production of desires in relation to Singapore's recruitment of scholars in China.

2 Singapore: the desire for "foreign talent" and the desire for "authenticity"

While foreign personnel has never been a strange figure to Singapore, "foreign talent" as a specific discourse and the figure of public imagination as we know it today could probably be traced back to 1980, when the Singapore government began self-consciously attracting talented foreigners by forming two dedicated state organs for that purpose: the Professionals Information and Placement Service (PIPS) and the Committee for Attracting Talent to Singapore (CATS) (Quah, 1984). These two agencies were subsequently superseded by various other organizational arrangements,[1] not least the well-known "Contact Singapore;"[2] but it was the 1990s that saw most "foreign talent"-related state policy measures coming into existence. Continuing into the 2000s, these policies gave rise to the "foreign talent" situation in Singapore today. In this background-setting chapter, I shall look at two particular types of Mainland Chinese "foreign talent" that the Singapore state has put in much effort to recruit since the 1990s—the sports professionals and the "scholars"—and the socio-discursive responses and reactions of the Singapore society to their arrival. To do so, however, first requires a necessary detour through examining the question of Singapore's nationhood and national identity, which is deeply intertwined with the "foreign talent" libidinal politics, as the Introduction shows. Thus, I first dwell on national identity and nationhood in Singapore at some length, before turning to use the notion of "authenticity" to interpret the Singaporean discursive constructions of the Chinese "foreign talents;" I show how Singapore's desire for "foreign talents" is held in tension with its desire for "authentic" nationhood and cultural identity.

Background: Singapore the nation

National identity has always been a problematic issue for Singapore. Situated in maritime Southeast Asia, historically the island had been part of various pre-modern Malay polities and was an integral, albeit marginal, part to the generally speaking Malay-Islamic civilization of the region. The starting point of modern Singapore is commonly taken to be 1819, when it was established by the British as a trading post. Since then, this originally sparsely populated island thrived, continuously attracting migrant populations from around the region and beyond, most notably from the coastal regions of southeast China. Into the mid twentieth century, Singapore was a "'settler' country" (Chua, 2003, p. 59) whose population was virtually all descended from migrants. What made Singapore stand out from its largely Malay-Muslim vicinity was that it had become a predominantly Chinese society, with ethnic Chinese accounting for around three quarters of its population, in addition to ethnic Malays, Indians, and a small category of "Others," hence the classic "CMIO" formulation. Under the "divide and rule" policy of the British colonial administration (T. W. Tan, 1994, p. 62), a *laissez faire* approach applied to education (K. C. Ho & Ge, 2011, p. 265) and social interaction, and there was limited social, cultural, and linguistic integration between these various ethnic groups. Given such a social and geo-political setup, coupled with Singapore's lack of land and natural resources, it was believed that Singapore would be untenable as an independent nation-state. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party (PAP), which has governed Singapore since 1959, successfully forged the merger of Singapore with the Federation of Malaya in 1963, in the hope of securing a future for the island and its dwellers. However, two years later when the merger fell apart due to Singapore's undesirability to Malaysia, again because of its Chineseness, "the unimaginable had become reality" (Chua, 1995, p. 9). As Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat (ibid., p. 69) puts it, "Singapore as an independent nation-state was first and foremost a political reality foisted on a population under conditions beyond their control. Once this was a *fait accompli*, a 'nation' had to be constructed."

Thus, from its moment of birth, there has been a sense that the Singapore nation

was not intended to *be*. It lacked the various normal attributes for a people to be considered a viable nation, such as deep-rootedness in a relatively stable cultural tradition, relative ethnic homogeneity (or at least tight integration among ethnic groups), a common language, and so forth (Kymlicka, 1995, chapter 2). As such, it may be said that as a nation, Singapore lacked a sense of constitutive *authenticity*.

Given the precarious circumstances of its inception and its geopolitical vulnerabilities, post-independence Singapore was initially very much preoccupied with survival, which made imperative the principle of economic pragmatism (A. Koh, 2007). Singapore embarked on an aggressive project of modernization that is by now a well-told well-known success story (Chong, 2010; Lee, 2000; Sandhu & Wheatley, 1989). However, the city-state's remarkable economic success, which relied fundamentally on international trade and global flows of capital, knowledge, and people, continues to present challenges to the state's efforts in the areas of symbolic and cultural nation-building. It is widely observed that the official discursive construction of Singapore's national identity has rested on the principles of pragmatism, fluidity, and self-renewal; yet this elite discourse does not go uncontested by other voices coming from both elite and non-elite levels, that seek to anchor the Singapore nation in some "regime of authenticity" (Duara, 1998), which in turn hopefully give rise to stable senses of national identity. Various projects, both official and grass-roots, of "manufacturing authenticity" (Chong, 2011) have been documented, yet the troubled nature of the island-nation's authentic identity remains.

Since the arrival of the "foreign talent" from the 1990s onward, it has often been asserted that the influx of these new immigrants only makes the emergence of a unique Singaporean identity even more precarious (e.g. A. Koh, 2003). In this chapter, I hope to add some nuance to this view via examining the recent local socio-discursive responses to two types of PRC "foreign talents." Focusing on the ways in which they are constructed as figures of otherness and "inauthenticity" in Singaporeans' imaginations, I suggest that "foreign talents" should not be simplistically viewed as a threat to the Singapore national identity, but can also be regarded as the very site from which some senses of national togetherness and belonging emerge in a relative and negative logic. To

call this identity-making logic *relative* and *negative* is because no positive assertion or essentialist claim to a Singapore national identity is made; instead, by casting off the "foreign talent" *other*s as inauthentic—inauthentic talents, bogus moral subjects, and ultimately, inauthentic citizens ineligible for incorporation into the national body—a *sense* or *feeling* of belonging to each other is achieved amongst Singaporeans. Echoing what Frederik Barth (1969, p. 15, orginal emphasis) said decades ago regarding ethnic identity, namely, that it is "the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses," I propose that in regard to Singapore's national identity today, the "foreign talents" may be regarded as the margins that make a "core" possible, even though that "core" remains emergent and undefined.

Singapore's "Catch-22" national identity: the pragmatic and the cultural

Discussing national identity in any context opens a can of worms; in the specific context of Singapore, I propose to examine its national identity problem by focusing on the tension between its two contestatory thrusts: the pragmatic and the cultural. "Culture" or "the cultural" is another loaded concept (see, for example Appadurai, 1996, p. 12), and indeed it has been argued that the ideological pragmatism of the Singapore state is itself a kind of "culture" (Yao, 2007). Here, I use "culture" in its more restricted sense to refer to the particular customs, practices and value systems that are seen as enduringly related to particular groups of people. Adopting this somewhat orthodox and old-fashioned definition links to the notion of authenticity and, as I do in the next section, helps me to deconstruct and re-appropriate the notion of authenticity for the purpose of my subsequent arguments.

The paramount urgency of economic survival, whether real or perceived, meant that Singapore's identity as a nation was predominantly couched in terms of pragmatism and economic realism, to the neglect, or indeed, with deliberate suppression of the cultural dimensions. While Chua's (2006, p. 470) statement that "there was no past to be resurrected when Singapore became an independent island-city-state in 1965" was obviously meant to be a rhetorical exaggeration, he notes usefully that, in the early

decades after independence, "The promotion of a disciplined work-force was [...] given precedence over the promotion of other cultural practices" (Chua, 1995, pp. 105-6). Thus, although the island society's ethno-cultural complexity has been acknowledged and enshrined in the country's founding ideology of "multiracialism" (Chua, 2003), which, among other things, accords Malay the status of "national language," and Chinese, English, Tamil that of "official languages," in actual fact, English was promoted with singular energy for its utilitarian value in connecting Singapore better to the world economy. In a similar fashion, various dialect tongues originally spoken by the Singaporean Chinese groups were also suppressed in favor of Mandarin, initially in order to address intra-ethnic fissures between these dialect-speaking Chinese groups, but later also as a vehicle for the Confucian value education program on the one hand, and to take advantage of the rise of China on the other. Under such a "linguistic instrumentalism" (L. Wee, 2003), languages, together with what they serve as a most salient index to, namely, authentic grassroots cultures and identities, are treated as a residual category to be revamped in the pragmatic interest of economic nation-building.

Singapore's pragmatism and economic realism also manifested in the enshrinement of certain ideological principles that, in contrast to the problematic spheres of ethnic cultures, have effectively become the cornerstones to Singapore's identity as a nation. For instance, as Singapore positioned itself as an export-oriented manufacturing economy in the 1960/70s (Bercuson, 1995), a semi/soft-authoritarian (Roy, 1994) or state-corporatist (D. Brown, 1994) political setup was deemed most suitable to guarantee the cost competitiveness of the local labor and a stable political environment for foreign investments. This "disciplinary modernization" (C. W.-L. Wee, 2001) of Singapore's entailed, among other things, the cooptation of the trade union movement, resistance to the introduction of the welfare-state, and more generally, limitations of certain forms of political freedom. Not unrelated to anti-welfarism, an ideology of meritocracy and elitism is assiduously inculcated in the Singaporean collective subjectivity through the education system (Barr & Skrbis, 2008, chapters 6-10).

In agreement with Aaron Koh, I maintain that these above-mentioned themes, namely, crisis/vulnerability, survival, meritocracy, pragmatism, and continuous

progress, all in the context of a formal recognition of the multicultural reality of the society, remain "the dominant and privileged political rhetoric and discursive markers of Singapore's national identity" (Koh, 2005, p. 75). Although in the most recent state discourses about a "new way forward" for Singapore, some emphasis was given to notions such as compassion and fairness (AsiaOne, 2013), the core identity of Singapore as a radically pragmatic, forward-looking, self-renewing country has remained intact.

A major drawback of such a national identity based heavily on ideological pragmatism and economic realism is that although it is supposed to hold together a nation/people that is indeed otherwise separated along cultural and ethnic lines, it still does not seem to provide a sufficient basis for strong senses of belonging and togetherness to develop, whether between the citizens and the state or among fellow citizens. For instance, the instrumentalist language policies eroded those more authentically felt dialect-based community identities and replaced them with broader but arguably much weaker forms of identification among citizens; similarly, meritocracy and elitism in the realms of education and employment encouraged a competitive individualistic ethos, at the cost of lateral social empathy and solidarity. As a result, some have argued that there is "a weakening of social bonds [...]" (Randolph Kluver & Weber, 2003, p. 380) among Singaporeans as a nation. Former Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong seemed to be referring precisely to this weakened social bonding when he suggested in a 1997 speech that Singapore to many still felt more like a hotel, rather than "a Home for a People" (Goh, 1997).

In short, the Singapore national identity problem is a catch-22 situation: because of the country's constitutive cultural hybridity, the Singapore state emphasizes a national identity that is more pragmatic than cultural; without the cultural elements, however, a weakened social bonding seems to be the result; yet, when authentic cultural traditions are invoked, they seldom promise to create a common identity that all Singaporeans can comfortably assume, but in fact poses the danger of further entrenching ethnic and cultural divisions among the multiracial population (see also George, 2000). Put simply, the problem is that there lacks a cultural authenticity that may be considered uniquely "Singaporean." Social anthropologist Geoffrey Benjamin observed in 1976 that "many

Singaporeans seem still to be looking for the grand cultural foundation of a 'Singaporean Singapore'" (Benjamin, 1976/1997, p. 79), despite which,

> It is commonly held to be futile, even meaningless, to talk of the national culture of a country that has no great historical depth. Many Ministerial speeches in Singapore over the years have taken this line, normally by projecting the emergence of a homogeneous and distinctive Singaporean culture indefinitely into the future. (ibid., p. 68)

This statement is admittedly dated, and it is possible to argue the case now that a unique Singaporean identity in some shape has indeed grown out of the heterogeneous population's decades of coexistence in peace and prosperity. Uniquely local cultural forms such as "Singlish" do verily invoke feelings of belonging to the island-nation regardless of ethnic or other divides. But the paucity of "authentically Singaporean" identity markers, such as "Singlish," still strongly points to the fragility of national belonging in the island-nation; dissenting voices alluding to institutionalized disadvantages faced by certain ethnocultural groups continue to stretch thin the glosses of a common Singaporean identity. And as I show in the next section, this problem is not effectively addressed by successive projects of "manufacturing authenticity" either, each of which is shot through with contradictions and problems.

The problematic quests for authenticity

Cultural authenticity is a cornerstone to modern, but especially postcolonial, nation-states (Skurski, 1994). Nation-building seldom lacks a cultural and symbolic dimension. According to historian Prasenjit Duara (1998), the sacrality of the nation hinges on the "regime of authenticity," which seeks to inscribe the nation with timeless values and traditions, thereby distinguishing the nation from other nations, giving it an orientation, an anchorage, in short, an identity. At the same time, Duara points out through the historical case of Manchukuo (2003) that authenticity is a social construction often motivated by political calculations. Thus, instead of the everyday reified understanding of authenticity as quintessence, genuineness or originality (see

OED definitions), in the context of socio-political representation, authenticity must be understood as imagined, constructed and negotiated. In the words of Vannini and Williams (2009, p. 3), "Authenticity is not so much a state of being as it is the objectification of a process of representation, that is, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar." Nonetheless, just as Benedict Anderson's (2006) "imagined communities," i.e. nations, are not any less the momentous socio-historical forces simply because they are revealed to be imagined, nor does authenticity lose its sociopolitical efficacy because we recognize its constructedness. In fact, arguably all nation-states engage in projects of manufacturing authenticity in some manner or other; what I attempt to show below, however, is that these projects seem particularly problematic in the case of Singapore.

Social discourses bespeaking a quest for authenticity became prominent in Singapore as early as the 1970s, as the country emerged triumphant from a decade of challenges to its survival. The development of an internationalized economy and the rise of a population with Westernized educations prompted fears in the PAP government that Singaporeans were succumbing to negative "Western" values such as liberalism, hedonism, and individualism (Chong, 2011, pp. 887-891). Lily Kong (2000) notes that the state cultural policies in the 1970s were geared toward a quest for a "truly Singaporean art" (ibid., p. 412) to counteract the "decadent" cultural influences coming from the West. Then Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Culture, Inche Sha'ari Tadin, said in 1973, "It is important to have a rich, established cultural tradition particularly at this time of Singapore's development" (quoted in ibid., p. 412)—a statement that is not faulty but most revealing because of the contradictions in terms it contained: it was as if "a rich, established cultural tradition" were something that could simply be brought into existence timely to serve the interest of Singapore's development "at this time."

Terence Chong (2011) examines several what he calls "cultural impulses" (p. 877) in the history of Singapore through the prisms of "authenticity manufacturing" and national identity making. The first such cultural impulse was a Malay literary movement in the 1950s which sought to locate authenticity in the rustic Malay identity, posited

against European colonialism. The second impulse emerged in the 1970s, as touched on above: the fears of "Westernization" translated into a series of cultural and educational policies that included the initiation of "religious education" in schools, a high-profile "Speak Mandarin Campaign," and the famous "Confucian Values" discourses of the 1980s (Hill, 2000; K.-E. Kuah, 1990; H. C. Tan, 1989). In this cultural impulse, authenticity was located in what were asserted to be genuine Asianness (Thompson, 2000, p. 664) and Asian values. The third cultural impulse which Chong also believes to be the "regime of authenticity" that currently "offers the most popular symbols of national identity in Singapore" (Chong, 2011, p. 877) is a romanticized portrayal, conveyed through local cinematic representations, of the Singaporean "heartlander" identity. In this romanticized portrayal, the authentic Singaporean is a good-hearted, dialect- or Mandarin-speaking, working-class *Chinese* male (ibid., p. 894) who is a victim of "global capitalism and/or the PAP state's education, bilingualism and foreign talent policies" (ibid., p. 892). He is alienated by Singapore's capitalist knowledge economy and by the middle-class English-educated and English-speaking Singaporeans, who in contrast are portrayed as "rootless and inauthentic" (ibid., p. 895).

Further highlighting the urgency of finding an authenticity to enable a sense of national bonding, in May 1999, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong urged Singaporeans to become "a Singaporean tribe" (A. Koh, 2005, p. 77). Aaron Koh interprets this as a discursive attempt to "rekindle the loss [*sic*] of an 'authentic' Singaporean 'culture' and 'identity' through nostalgia" (ibid., p. 77). Indeed, the first two authenticity manufacturing cultural impulses analyzed by Chong (2011) both drew from pre-modern Asian value systems as moral resources. Yet, the fundamental contradiction that characterized both these two projects—also very much the reason why they failed—is obvious, because appeals to authenticity based on cultural nostalgia or atavism threaten to unravel the precarious oneness of the Singapore nation. Each movement of nostalgic imagination of cultural continuity with the past inevitably leads to a "home" country or civilization that is *not* Singapore. A regime of authenticity rooted in rural Malay identities could not have been sustained in light of Chinese's numerical dominance in Singapore as Chong himself admits (ibid., p. 887), while the Confucian

value discourse, and the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" in particular, which sought to revitalize the Chinese authenticity of the Chinese Singaporeans, left the Malays, Indians, and Other Singaporeans awkwardly unacknowledged. Regarding this problem, Benjamin has sharply pointed out several decades ago (1976/1997, p. 72):

> "Culture" as an object of public discussion in Singapore almost always means a traditional, ethnically delimited culture, a Golden Age to which each "race" can look back separately for inspiration. "Singapore culture", on the few occasions when that term is used, refers normally not to any new Singaporean synthesis or innovation but simply to an agglomerate formed of the separate Chinese, Malay, Indian and European cultural traditions. Each "culture" remains unchanged and unmerged with the others.

Neither is the third of Chong's cultural impulses, centered on contemporary cinematic representation of Singaporean "heartlander" identity, exempt from this criticism. The "heartlander" is always portrayed as an ethnic Chinese, and the cultural/linguistic medium for his authenticity is *Chinese* dialects or sometimes Mandarin. Not dissimilar to the second cultural impulse Chong analyzed, this again leaves the multicultural and multiethnic make-up of Singapore in an awkward position.

In thus critically assessing cultural projects or movements in Singapore that have aimed to manufacture authenticity, I do not seek to label illegitimate or to dismiss their claims, whether these claims were made in efforts undertaken by the Singapore state, as in the cases of "Asian value" discourses and other official cultural policies, or in literary and artistic elites' representations of mass desires or sentiments, as in the cases of the Malay literary movement of the 1950s and Jack Neo's films. Indeed, each of these authenticity projects was problematic precisely because it had legitimacy in their own way but each nevertheless contested with the others. This contestation reflects Singapore society's constitutive complexity. Instead, my aim here has been to show that making positive national identity claims for Singapore based on essentialist construction of cultural authenticity is a constitutively bedeviled endeavor. The notion of authenticity, were it to be productive in the discussion of national identity in Singapore, may have to be radically rethought. Thus, I propose to conceive of authenticity in the relative and negative, as *not something that one has, but something that the "other" has not*. As I have

deployed in various places in this chapter already, I prefer the formulation of "*senses/feelings* of *belonging/togetherness*" instead of identity/identification, because the latter requires something tangible to identify with, whereas the feelings of belonging or togetherness can be achieved simply through facing or being set against a common *other*. As Julie Skurski (1994, p. 610, emphasis added) insightfully notes, "While the concept of nation represents itself in abstract terms, representations of national *belonging* weaves together images that promise collective *unity* as well as collective *exclusions*."

Now, I turn to Singapore's Chinese "foreign talents" to show how some of the discourses of exclusions being applied to them arguably enable Singaporean belonging and unity.

"Foreign Talents"

I already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that the Singapore government's "foreign talent" policy burgeoned in the 1980s, and further intensified in the 1990s and 2000s. It would be impossible to present an exhaustive list of all the policy measures taken by the government, not only because such detailed information is often beyond access, but also because policy measures often undergo convoluted changes and intractable evolvements. Nevertheless, I briefly present below some of the most salient features and components of the "foreign talent" policy as mentioned in existing literature to illustrate the Singapore state's effort in this regard. After that, I zoom in onto the two specific types of Chinese "foreign talents."

Generally, the desire for "foreign talent" has led the Singapore state to operate a "bifurcated" foreign manpower management system (Hui & Hashmi, 2004; Low, 2002; Teng & Wu, 2007; D. Wong, 1997; Yeoh, 2006; Yeoh & Huang, 1999; Yeoh & Yap, 2008), under which both talented/skilled and semi/low-skilled migrants are welcomed in large numbers, but are treated rather differently. According to Ho and Ge (2011, p. 268), 1989 saw the first relaxation of Singapore's immigration control. Since then, the number of non-citizens (i.e. permanent residents and non-residents) has steadily increased, from 14 per cent of the total population in 1990, to 26 per cent in 2000, to

36 per cent in 2010 (Jones, 2012, p. 313). Among these, those semi/low-skilled migrant workers or "Work Permit"-holders, such as construction workers and domestic helpers, are not allowed to apply for long-term residency in Singapore and must leave after a few years of work (Yeoh, 2004, p. 2439). In contrast, skilled migrants, who hold the "Employment Pass (EP)," generally face promising prospects in applying for Permanent Residency (PR) and subsequently citizenship. Much of the population growth in the past decade or so in Singapore has been due to immigration and naturalization, rather than organic growth. The number of PRs in Singapore increased from 112,100 in 1990 to 541,000 in 2010 (Yeoh, 2013, p. 101). Of the more than 1.3 million foreigners working in Singapore, which account for over one third of the city-state's total workforce, roughly a quarter falls under the "talent" category ("Foreign Workforce Numbers," 2014).[3]

In 2007, a Personalized Employment Pass (PEP) was further introduced to allow high-earning foreigners in Singapore to switch jobs without having to applying for another EP, and to remain in Singapore for up to six months between jobs.[4] An Employment Pass Eligibility Certificate (EPEC) scheme, until its discontinuation in December 2011, allowed foreign job-seekers potentially eligible for EP-level employment not already in Singapore to enter the country and stay for up to one year to seek employment (Yeoh, 2013, p. 113). Between 2008 and 2013, an Overseas Talent Recruitment scheme operated, providing tax deductions for expenses incurred by employers in recruiting and relocating "foreign talents" (Yahya & Kaur, 2010, p. 27). In addition to these schemes aiming at facilitating the employment of skilled foreign professionals, there are also programs designed to clear the path for foreign entrepreneurs hoping to set up business ventures in Singapore, such as the EntrePass[5] and the Global Investor Program.[6] In short, for both professionals and entrepreneurs, the Singapore state has created a favorable immigration and naturalization policy environment.

At the same time, international students make up the other major category of "foreign talent" targeted by the Singapore government. Starting from the mid-1990s, top schools in Singapore began scouting for promising students from neighboring

countries (K. C. Ho & Ge, 2011, p. 269), enabled through, among other mechanisms, the ASEAN scholarship scheme[7] as well as the "SM1" scheme which recruits only Chinese students, as I shall detail later. Also during the 1990s, government-linked scholarship programs for undergraduate foreign students came into being (see also A. Koh, 2012, pp. 198-199), including two programs specifically for Chinese middle school students. It has been reported that, in recent years, the Singapore government annually gives out some 1,000 scholarships to foreign students at the undergraduate level alone (Yeoh and Lin, 2013, pp. 39-40). Most of these tertiary-level scholarships carry service "bonds" requiring the recipients to work in Singapore subsequently for between three to six years. Taken together with the usually bond-free pre-tertiary scholarships, as many as 2,000 foreign students are said to receive substantial subsidies worth a total of 36 million Singapore Dollars per year (Seah, 2012).

Granting scholarships, with or without the "bond," is a more targeted form of "foreign talent" tactic, but the education in Singapore more broadly has been mobilized to the end of talent attraction as well. Most notable among such efforts was an ambitious "Global Schoolhouse" project launched by the government in 2002, the main objectives of which were to attract up to ten world-class universities to set up branch campuses or collaborative programs in Singapore, and to secure a critical mass of up to 150,000 foreign students by 2015 (Christensen, 2012; K. C. Ho & Ge, 2011; Ng & Tan, 2010; Olds, 2007; Waring, 2013). Then Deputy Prime Minister and currently President of Singapore Tony Tan stated clearly that the Global Schoolhouse Project was meant to become "an engine for talent attraction in Singapore" (Tan, cited in W.-L. C. J. Wee, 2010, p. 142). The Project galvanized both the public and private education sectors, and though not quite hitting the target of 150,000, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, some 90,000 international students studied in Singapore, 40,000 of them as undergraduates (Waring, 2013, pp. 6-7). Undoubtedly, many of these students, upon obtaining their university degrees, seek professional employment in Singapore and acquire resident statuses.

"Foreign talent" policy, thus, is an ensemble of "concrete and carefully orchestrated strategies to attract and retain talents" (Yeoh, 2013, p. 103), implemented across a

range of policy domains by an array of state agencies. Some of the policy measures can be understood as more generic, such as the relaxation in immigration/naturalization control, whereas other measures are specific and targeted, such as some of the scholarship schemes and visa programs. Regardless, the effect of this ensemble of policy measures implemented across two decades of time since the late 1980s is that a significant presence of "foreign talent" came to exist in Singapore. Among them, it is not known exactly how many are from China because the government seems reluctant to release such sensitive figures. But there can be little doubt that this group is the largest, and constitutes the focus of the most strident social disquiet (Liu, 2014; Yeoh & Lin, 2013, pp. 35-36).

Consequently, it should be interesting to note that, with several exceptions (Gomes, 2014; A. Koh, 2003; Liu, 2014), existing research on "foreign talents" in Singapore has by and large failed to examine the local socio-discursive responses to these controversial subjects (e.g. Beaverstock, 2002, 2011; Butcher, 2006; Hing, Lee, & Sheng, 2009; K. C. Ho & Ge, 2011; Lam & Yeoh, 2004; Thang, MacLachlan, & Goda, 2002). I now seek to plug this conspicuous gap by looking at two particular types of "foreign talents" from China, bearing in mind my earlier discussions of Singapore's national identity and desire for "authenticity." I rely primarily on the local English broadsheet *The Straits Times* (English) to gather empirical data on the popular discourses. Contrary to a general impression that may result from the fact that local print media are owned by the state-linked Singapore Press Holdings, *The Straits Times* in fact provide appreciable space for the public to express opinions on social issues. Especially the "Forum" and "readers' letters" sections in these papers, from which I draw, may be regarded as a microcosm for what Kluver and Powers (1999, p. 373) have termed "civic discourses," or self-conversation within a society that "serves as the defined rubric of national identity," in the context of Singapore.

Foreign Sports Talents

The type of "foreign talent" that perhaps most controversially epitomizes the Singapore

state's desire for skilled professionals is the "Foreign Sports Talent" (FST). First launched in 1993 as "Project Rainbow" with a view of bringing high-caliber foreign sports professionals to Singapore to augment the country's national teams and to give a spur to the local sporting standards, the "Foreign Sports Talent Scheme" (FSTS) was formalized in 1997 after Cabinet approval ("Foreign sports talent scheme," 2003). Since then and through much of the 2000s, various professional sports organizations in Singapore embarked on the recruitment of FSTs. Out of a larger number of FSTs recruited and put through training regimes, those who were deemed to have potential in representing Singapore in high-profile games would be invited to take up Singapore citizenships. According to a report in 2008, since the institution of the scheme, 54 foreign-born athletes had become Singaporeans (Lim, 2008). More up-to-date information suggests that in 2011, 33 out of the 994 athletes in national squads were foreign-born (Au Yong, 2011).

Despite the apparently modest numbers, however, the contributions made by the FSTs in terms of Singapore's international performance have been significant. For instance, in the 2002 Commonwealth Games, FST helped clinch all of Singapore's 12 medals (Peh, 2003). Singapore's Table Tennis squad, whose top players are virtually all Mainland China FST, has won 22 of all the 56 Commonwealth Games medals awarded in this category since 2002.[8] Foreign talents contributed 34.9 per cent of Singapore's 43 gold medals at the 2007 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in Thailand, even though they made up only 7.6 per cent of the 423-strong Singapore contingent (Lim, 2008). But most memorably, Li Jiawei, Wang Yuegu, and Feng Tianwei—all PRC-born naturalised Singaporeans—won a silver medal for women's team table tennis in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games: the first medal that Singapore had since 1960 in the Olympics.

Given that the 2008 Olympic triumph was perhaps the most high-profile, this may serve as a case in point to illustrate a politics of in/authenticity regarding the FSTs. Just days after the victory, a Singaporean reader, Zheng Enli wrote to the *Straits Times* Forum, expressing his/her qualms with the authenticity of the win. This letter illustrates the FSTs' entanglements in the local anxiety regarding authenticity and Singapore's national identity so well that it is worth quoting here in full:

China team No. 1 v China team No. 2? Too true

> I congratulate Li Jiawei, Wang Yuegu and Feng Tianwei on their individual achievement in winning the women's table-tennis team silver medal – 'individual' because, in my opinion, the glory is theirs and not Singapore's.
>
> As a small nation, Singapore undoubtedly needs foreign talent to supplement its talent pool. This is beyond doubt for business, scientific research, academia and many parts of the economy. However, I think using foreign talent in sports is a step too far.
>
> Sports is not just about winning, moving up medal tables and statistics. In many ways, sports is the only arena where national passion, pride and achievement can be safely demonstrated. It defeats the point to make foreigners Singaporeans, just so they can represent Singapore and win medals for us.
>
> *It has been argued that Tan Howe Liang was also born overseas in China, but the difference is he moved here at the tender age of four. Our table-tennis players came much later in their lives - Wang became Singaporean in 2005, and our semi-final 'heroine" Feng was hurriedly made a Singaporean only early this year. Only Li has been in Singapore a significant amount of time.*
>
> This makes our silver medal victory ring hollow. The perception that the final was between China's first team and China's second team is not without justification. Holding pink identity cards may make these players technically Singaporean, but are they truly our own? On television, a refrain is played ad nauseam that after 48 years, 'we have done it'. But have we really done it? Sporting pride cannot be bought.
>
> Finally, the argument that many other countries also adopt foreign sports talent to compete does not hold water. Just because everyone else does something, does not make it right. I think many Singaporeans would share my opinion that we would rather wait another 48 years for a medal, than celebrate a medal that was not truly won by Singaporeans. (Zheng, 2008, emphases added)

Here, the doubts cast over the authenticity of the *technically* Singaporean players as *truly* Singaporean people is self-explanatory. It is simply worth highlighting, as found in the emphasized section, that this politics of in/authenticity appears to be a relativistic one. Because of the constitutive hybridity of the Singapore people as a nation which makes it impossible to say who is authentic and who is not, a practical compromise had to be made—so that the 1960 Olympics medalist who came to Singapore from China at the "tender age of four" could be regarded as truly Singaporean, where as the more recent Chinese player who was "hurriedly made a Singaporean" could not. The letter writer argues, echoing many others in Singapore, that Tan Howe Liang's sporting talents were developed in Singapore, and that makes his achievement authentically

Singaporean; but have not the more recent Chinese-born medalists gone through training and talent-nurturing in Singapore before they achieved honors for Singapore? I argue that a relativistic yardstick is used to draw a precarious line between "true" Singaporeanness and its opposite, not based on qualitative differences, but based on the *relative* degrees of "authenticity."

The above case emerged out of a wider social discourse that has always questioned the authenticity of the FST and the practice of recruiting FSTs *per se*. In a 1999 letter to the *Straits Times* Forum, reader James Huang (1999) compared the practice to the use of mercenaries. Just as mercenaries' loyalty is constantly suspect, so too has the foreign talents' loyalty to Singapore often faced suspicion. Jeffrey Law (2002) wrote to *The Straits Times* Forum page in 2002 and brought up this point, contending, "If these imports were to play for Singapore against their country of origin, there would be a conflict of national interests." Another reader (Lin, 2007) pointed out the "foreign talents'" lack of loyalty and their using of Singapore as a "stepping-stone" by observing:

> Zhang (a China-born Table Tennis player) obtained her Singapore citizenship in 2001, was groomed to be a top player and had beaten other international top players during the Athens Olympics in 2004, but chose to leave Singapore for China to be with her husband. All this within a short span of five years. [...] Another China-born former Singaporean table-tennis player, Xu Yan, has also left our country, for Germany.

Beside the widely shared suspicion of the players' loyalty, there is also the occasional doubts of their personal character. In one case, the president of the Singapore Athletic Association alleged that the FSTs he brought in from China had "abused [his] generosity" by being overly demanding and trouble-making.[9] Perhaps too annoyed by the disloyalty and ungrateful behaviors of some FST, one reader, Vernon Sim (2008), wrote *The Straits Times* a letter in 2008 strikingly entitled "Punish disloyal foreign sports talent."

Pursuant to ideological pragmatism, the Singapore state and those among the citizenry who align with it have defended the FSTS, insisting on the scheme's practical benefits and reiterating the place of inclusiveness as a crucial Singaporean value. One

may regard, for instance, the then Acting Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan's remark, "Talent is what counts, not where you're from" (Peh, 2004), as the cornerstone official rhetoric justifying the entire "foreign talents" project in Singapore. What we have seen in this section, however, is that contra the official ideology, there has been a potent ground-up societal discourse that engages in a politics of in/authenticity that casts suspicion and doubt over the loyalty of the "foreign talents," and their eligibility for authentic Singaporeanness. In this process of projecting and separating out the "foreign talent" as an inauthentic *other* figure, I argue, some Singaporeans derive a sense of belonging amongst themselves, that is, as "authentic" Singaporeans.

Foreign Talent Students

When it comes to "foreign talent" in the shape of students and scholarship-recipients, although understandably no official statistics are openly available, chances are that those from the PRC make up the majority group again. This group is far larger in terms of numbers compared with the sports professionals, and by being students, they study and live amongst ordinary Singaporeans. Thus, in addition to the symbolicality that is characteristic of the "foreign talent" athletes, foreign "scholars" also enter into mundane daily contact with the local society.

Below, I offer a quick overview of three main "PRC scholarships" in Singapore—the "SM1/2/3" schemes (see also Table 2.1 for a summary). A much more detailed ethnographic account on the SM2 program is provided in chapter 4.

"SM1"

SM1—with "SM" standing for "senior middle"—is a pre-tertiary level scholarship scheme first established in the mid-1990s. It targets Chinese students, usually around the age of 15, who are about to start Senior Middle (*gaozhong*) school grade one (or grade 10 in total schooling years). Approximately 30 Singaporean secondary schools participate in the SM1 program—though this number was possibly smaller in earlier

years—and each recruits between several and a few dozens students from their Chinese feeder schools every year. Each Singaporean school typically has multiple feeder schools located in different Chinese provinces/cities. These Singaporean schools established collaborative relationships with their feeder schools through the facilitation of the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) and the educational authorities in China. Feeder schools in China are usually top-ranking ones in their respective province or city, and scholars are chosen from among the most academically capable students in these schools. Students volunteer to apply, sometimes with their schools' recommendations; they then undergo written tests and interviews conducted by the Singaporean school officials and teachers who visit China each year specifically for the purpose of scholar selection. Without access to accurate figures, my modest estimate is that each year more than 200 SM1 scholars are recruited. Based on my interactions with former SM1 scholars in Singapore, it can be said with some confidence that the majority of them come from urban middle-class family backgrounds and above.

SM1 scholars have completed their junior middle school (*chuzhong*; formal schooling year 7-9) in China when recruited; once in Singapore, they join the third year of the four-year local secondary school education. Upon taking "O Level" exams at the end of secondary school, they typically proceed to local Junior Colleges to study for two years toward the "A Level" exams. During this four-year duration, the SM1 scholars are exempted all tuition fees and are provided free accommodation and catering, either at hostels that are specially arranged for them or in the dormitories of the schools they attend. According to an SM1 scholar informant who came to Singapore in 2003, during his four-year scholarship tenure, scholars also received 200 Singapore dollars (SGD) monthly in pocket allowance. Although SM1 scholars are often—though not always—accommodated separately from local students, while in school, they usually have no alternative but to mingle with local students, because usually the number of SM1 scholars in each school or junior college is too small for them to form cliques.

The most generous feature about the SM1 scholarship is perhaps the fact that it does not carry any "bond." In other words, SM1 scholars are free to leave or stay in Singapore to pursue whatever future they see fit. For SM1 scholars from wealthy families, this

means that they could use the "A Level" qualifications they obtained in Singapore to apply for places in top Western universities, such as those located in the US or UK. From anecdotal evidence, it seems that a fair share of SM1 scholars do come from families that are well-off enough to afford undergraduate education at elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. According to an SM1 scholar informant, most SM1 scholars have ambitions to attend world-top universities in either the UK or North America and many of them achieve strong enough "A Levels" to qualify for such universities. The only obstacle remains financial means, and SM1 scholars who remain in Singapore for higher education do so typically out of pragmatic consideration, since the Singapore government offers a blanket grant ("Tuition Grant") applicable to all students in local higher education which covers a large part of the tuition fees.[10] Another privilege associated with the SM1 scholarship is that scholars are eligible for Permanent Residence (PR) status in Singapore when they complete Junior College education. This offer is usually taken up by female scholars no matter they intend to stay in Singapore in the long run or not; on the contrary, virtually no male scholar takes it, because for them it would involve a two-year compulsory military service ("National Service") before they can matriculate at university.

"SM2" and "SM3"

SM2 and SM3 are both undergraduate level scholarships, and there are some notable similarities between them. Because chapter 4 is dedicated to the SM2 scheme, my introduction here shall be brief, and is focused on the SM3.

The SM3 scheme commenced in 1992 and concluded in 2011, with twenty cohorts having been put through. SM3 scholars are recruited from among first-year students in more than a dozen highly ranked Chinese universities.[11] Singapore MOE officials and university representatives travel to these feeder universities in China to conduct selection exams and interviews to pick the scholars. I have not been able to obtain reliable figures on the intake scales of SM3 throughout the years, but fragmentary evidence suggests that there were between 300 and 400 scholars in each of the last few batches. In the initial years of this program, the numbers were probably smaller, and

100-200 scholars per cohort would not be an unreasonable guess.

Upon arrival in Singapore—typically in November/December each year—the SM3 scholars undergo a six-month "bridging course" designed to intensively improve their English and prepare them for university. There have been different arrangements when it comes to the scholars' accommodation during the "bridging course" over the years. In some years, scholars were housed together in hostels specially arranged for them—usually the dormitories of local secondary schools that the MOE secured for them. For some other cohorts, scholars were allowed to live in the resident halls of the university to which they have been assigned. In the latter case, even though they were distributed more or less evenly across different campus dormitories, because they attended bridging programs specifically catered to them, their contact with other students in the campus tend to be rather limited. On the whole, the SM3 scholars spend the "bridging course" being well taken care of, but in a rather closely-knit circle of themselves before matriculating the next August. During the undergraduate period, scholars are provided with a monthly living stipend of 500 Singapore dollars, and are exempted from all tuition, examination and accommodation fees.

The SM2 scheme commenced in 1997, and is also planned to run for 20 years, with the last cohort of scholars to be recruited in 2016. It is similar to the SM3 in many respects, except that eligible candidates are second-year senior middle school students from more than a dozen Chinese provinces. The number of eligible Chinese provinces increased with time, and the annual intake scale increased from 100-200 in the early years to between 300-400 in more recent years. Upon arrival in Singapore, SM2 scholars typically undergo an 18-month "bridging course," though more recently changes have been made to the "bridging course" arrangements.

Absent authoritative statistics, it is estimated that the SM2/3 schemes, in combination, have so far brought up to 15,000 PRC students into Singapore. In contrast to the SM1 scheme which is "bond"-free, however, both SM2 and SM3 have certain conditions. Scholars are required to specialize in engineering and science majors at university. Indeed, the scholarship selection exams they undergo in China prior to coming to Singapore strongly emphasize mathematics and science. More importantly,

both scholarships carry a legal “bond” requiring the scholar to work in Singapore for a total of six years upon finishing their undergraduate degree. Three of these six years are the condition to receiving the blanket Tuition Grant, while the remaining three reflects the living allowances and additional perks that are specific to the SM2/3 schemes.

Local response

The fact that “foreign talent” students, such as the SM2 and SM3 scholars, are often “bonded” to stay and work in Singapore for a period of time signifies the government’s hope that these scholars will eventually sink their roots in Singapore. While undoubtedly many eventually do, there is a widely felt doubt in the Singapore society about the loyalty of these “scholars,” which sees them as advantage-takers who will use Singapore as a “stepping-stone” to somewhere better. The following remarks, found in a letter a member of the public wrote to *The Straits Times*, exemplify this sentiment:

> We should try to attract foreigners who have the potential to assimilate into our society and would consider making Singapore their permanent home ultimately. If we do not do this, foreigners will treat Singapore as a stepping stone. They will stay when the economy is prosperous and leave when times are bad. [...] It would be a waste of our precious resources if they do not contribute to Singapore and leave after a few years. (K. W. Koh, 1997)

On one occasion, a Singaporean youth was reported (L. Teo, 2004) to have said this regarding “foreign talent” scholars—“I can’t help feeling that we’re being used. Is there some way of making these foreign scholars stay in Singapore after receiving our education?”

Singapore government-sponsored PRC scholarship Schemes	Operating years	Sources of scholars	Phase (in China) at which scholars are recruited	Yearly intake	Full scholarship duration	Singapore participating education institutions	Bond
"SM1"	Mid-1990s - present	Top junior middle schools in various Chinese provinces	End of junior middle school	(approx.) 200	Secondary 4 to end of Junior College (JC)	Approximately 30 secondary schools;[a] JC depending on scholars' own choices/applications	NA
"SM2"[b]	1997 - 2016 (planned)	Top senior middle schools in various Chinese provinces	Senior middle school Year Two	100-400	18 months 'bridging course' and Undergraduate	NUS NTU (since 2011 also SUTD)	6 years[c]
"SM3"	1992 – 2011	Approximately 20 highly ranked Chinese universities[d]	University Year One	(approx.) 100-400	6 months 'bridging course' and Undergraduate	NUS NTU (since 2011 also SUTD)	6 years

Table 2.1 Singapore government sponsored "PRC scholarships" (based on author's fieldwork)

Notes to Table 2.1

a. A list of Singapore's SM1 participating schools, dated May 2011, is provided on the following webpage based in China: http://hi.baidu.com/zhuliang123/item/9399818ad2924857e73d1964 last accessed 1 January 2014.

b. Chapter 4 provides a detailed look at the SM2 program.

c. The six years is to be understood as three additional years plus the three-year bond attached to all recipients of the Singapore government "tuition grant."

d. See http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E6%96%B0%E5%A5%96%E5%AD%A6%E9%87%91%E9%A1%B9%E7%9B%AE last accessed 1 January 2014.

While the creation of a contractual bond represents an attempt to ensure *legally* that the "foreign talent" scholars perform their obligations, Singaporeans seem to understand loyalty also as something more, as a *moral* obligation on the part of the scholars. Indeed, the discourses of suspicion about "foreign talent" scholars often carry strong moral overtones, challenging whether they were "authentic" talents truly worth having. As I wrote about already in the Introduction, in early 2012, Sun Xu, a scholar from China studying at a local university caused an outburst of public anger by making insulting remarks on Singapore/Singaporeans on a social networking website (see also Gomes, 2014, pp. 25-26; Yeoh & Lin, 2013, p. 45). To many in Singapore, this is another incident that reaffirms a simmering uneasiness with the "PRC scholars" that has built up in the past decade or so out of several other similar cases involving scholars behaving objectionably (Zhu, 2012), but also out of more mundane experiences of contact which inevitably give rise to misunderstanding, discomfort, and conflicts. Arguably, the "PRC scholars" gradually take shape in many Singaporeans' imaginations as an ungrateful, disloyal, rude and occasionally morally suspect figure. These imaginations may be again interpreted through the lens of the politics of in/authenticity.

A reader wrote a letter entitled "Give scholarships to foreigners with care" to *The Straits Times* on August 15th 2008, telling the following story:

> At a seminar last year, I met a Chinese scholarship holder with a prestigious statutory board. In our short conversation, he lamented how he dreads having to serve his six-year bond, for after studying at a prestigious university in Britain, he found there were many other attractive job opportunities and he felt his talent was under-used in Singapore.
>
> Given that the statutory board focused on Singapore's external enterprise growth, he was assured an exciting opportunity to work in its overseas offices as part of his training programme.
>
> Not that it mattered, for he was thinking of how to break his bond, for he wanted success, not after serving his bond but immediately. He felt staying in Singapore would impede his ability to let his talent shine, for it was too small for him.
>
> *In fact, he shied away from being associated with Singaporeans. When I commented that his English was tinged with a British accent despite his years of study in Singapore, he beamed and said he was happy to get rid of his Singapore English accent: 'Do I sound British? Oh great.'*

> I left the seminar with a heavy heart. Have we made the right choice in grooming foreign talent, only to have them snub us? Indeed, we have allowed them to realise how fortunate they are to study in top universities abroad - so much so, they feel they are too good for Singapore. (He, 2008, emphases added)

In this vignette, not only are all the typical suspicions and discontents that the Singapore public felt toward the "PRC scholars" vividly captured, we also observe an intricate politics of in/authenticity played around the English language in the context of Singapore (see the emphasized section), with bearings on the issue of national identity. Singaporean English can be a source of "cultural cringe" for Singaporeans, due to the troubled nature of its authenticity. Yessar Matter (2009), for example, argues that English language pop music made in Singapore is stigmatized for being inauthentic, given that the "regime of authenticity" operant in relation to pop music privileges Western/Anglo-Saxon English(es). Underlying Singapore's "Speak Good English" campaign (Hoon, 2003; Rubdy, 2001), it may be argued, is not just an instrumental rationale—so that Singapore becomes more conducive an environment to global investors—but also Singaporeans' own ambivalence over and doubts about the social and aesthetic value of the Singaporean English. However, in this vignette, the twist is that PRC "foreign talent" is seen using the undesirability of the Singapore English to "snub" Singaporeans; in response, the Singaporean writer becomes evidently protective and assertive of her own identity as Singaporean. Confronted with an *other* in the shape of the PRC scholar who "snubbed" the Singaporean writer, this writer turns what ambivalence and "cultural cringe" she might have over Singaporean English as inauthentic into a protective, even proud, feeling towards it as an index for authentic Singaporeanness.

Beside the doubts about their loyalty and moral characters, the "foreign talent" students are also subject to suspicion over the authenticity of their status as "talent." Writing a letter to *The Straits Times* (S. C. G. Wong, 2001), a member of the public warned, "We must not be blinded into thinking that foreign talent means superior talent", for otherwise, "we may end up getting third-rate foreigners who come here because they are not doing well in their own countries." This is echoed by another

reader of the newspaper who called those inauthentic foreign talents "liabilities, not assets" to Singapore (K. M. A. Wee, 2001). In 2011, a reader's letter to *The Straits Times*, somewhat aggressively entitled "Keep out the less talented among foreign students" (Oh, 2011), suggested that "the sentiment persists that Singapore offers sponsorship to too many foreign students of average calibre." Interestingly, in their use of terms such as "third-rate foreigners," "liabilities" and "assets," the Singaporean public seems to be re-appropriating the ideological vocabularies of the Singapore state to contest the state's "foreign talent" policies and practices.

As in the case of sports talents, the Singapore state stands firmly by its pragmatism in the face of voices of doubt and protest over student talents, defending the policy of recruiting "scholars". To ease the public's doubts, the Ministry of Education has variously pointed out that it revokes only three per cent of foreign students' undergraduate scholarships (A. Tan, 2009), that 67 per cent of foreign talent scholars earn degrees with Second Class Upper Honours and higher,[12] and that two out of three foreign students stay on to work in Singapore for ten years or more (Davie, 2008). Yet, I maintain that facts such as these are not likely to dispel the local sentiments of doubt, suspicion, and occasionally hostility toward the "foreign talents," because such sentiments are precisely a way for Singaporeans to feel they belong to each other. Put it more bluntly, in evoking an "it's-unfair-for-us-Singaporeans" feeling, Singaporeans are enabled and empowered to say "We are the true Singaporeans."

The Straits Times of 20 February 2008 carried a letter from a graduate of Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Zhou Zhiqiang, apparently written after he encountered some SM2 or SM3 scholars studying at his *alma mater*:

> I was in the top 15 per cent of my cohort - and performed better than some of these scholars. While studying at NTU, I had to work as a pizza delivery boy to earn my allowance. Upon graduation, I had to start paying off a \$24,000-student [*sic*] loan. Why are *Singaporeans* like me not treated as considerately as such scholars? My study loan took five years to pay off after I started working. The China scholars receive financial support, a free education and start their working lives debt free. Their six-year bond is seen as a contribution to Singapore. Am I not contributing as much, if not more? Non-scholar *Singaporeans* are not treated in quite the same way as foreign talent,

> regardless of how well we perform. The disparity is disheartening. Don't *Singaporeans* like me who have done well deserve some relief? (Z. Zhou, 2008, emphases added)

The frequent invocation of the identity label "Singaporean" here has the quality of an emotionally charged plea, as if the writer's own authenticity as a Singaporean were at risk and needed reasserting. An even more manifestly emotional expression was found in a news feature in *The Straits Times* of 8 December 1999. Members of a locally grown chamber music quartet lamented the Singapore government's blind favoritism towards "foreign talents" and that fact that "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." Their supplication to the Singapore state was, as captured in the striking title of the feature piece—"We are yours, please make use of us" (X. Li, 1999)!

Conclusion

In examining and interpreting the more contentious aspects of Singapore society's discursive constructions of Chinese "foreign talents" via a relative and negative reformulation of the notion of "authenticity," I have offered above my take on what "foreign talents" subjects might mean for Singapore and Singaporeans, in relation to the island-nation's troubled senses of nationhood and national identity. I have shown that although the Singapore national identity is often argued in scholarly literature to be troubled, and the co-national bonding somewhat weak, yet when confronted with a *relatively* speaking much more "inauthentic" and suspect figure of *otherness* such as the PRC "foreign talents," Singaporeans seem able to evoke a powerful sense/feeling of national belonging/togetherness. My aim in this chapter has been broadly speaking twofold: on the one hand, I have developed some of the themes mentioned briefly in the Introduction chapter, and by doing so, I have also provided a fuller background picture on Singapore's "foreign talent" situation. On the other hand, this chapter makes two theoretical points: first, in the Singapore context, and arguably in other contexts involving constitutive sociocultural hybridity, the notion of cultural authenticity as a

foundation to national identity-making is constitutively problematic; in the chapter, I have attempted to deconstruct this notion, but also to re-appropriate it in the formulation of “authenticity in the relative and negative” to make it analytically more productive; secondly, instead of speaking of national identity/identification, in this chapter I preferred using terms such as “sense” or “feelings” of national “belonging” or “togetherness.” These terms, by highlighting the affective substance of national sentiments and the relational and negative ways in which it emerges, avoid the pitfalls of positivity and essentialism in the discussion of national identity.

3 Chinese middle school as infrastructure of desire: Ideological rhetoric, pragmatic desire and global horizon

Temporarily leaving Singapore behind, this chapter delves into the world of Chinese middle school education—the crucial context that shapes and constitutes the educational subjectivities and desires of contemporary Chinese students. As it shall become clearer in later chapters, three broad currents or forces that shape desiring in the Chinese middle schooling context that I identify and describe at some length in this chapter, namely, (1) an ideologized moral education that attempts to normalize students' moral sentiments and desires, (2) a pragmatic desire that leads to highly instrumentalist attitudes toward learning and education, and (3) the emergence of internationalized educational desires, all have important implications for the Chinese students' experiences in undergoing Singaporean higher education as "foreign talent" scholars. But before ethnographically analyzing these three dimensions, I first offer a theoretical framing that incorporates the notion of desire into what extant literature says about the interrelationships between schooling, state, and subject formation. This brief theoretical frame-building echoes, fleshes out and develops in the concrete context of Chinese schooling my more abstract treatment of educational desire in the Introduction.

Schooling, State, Desire, and Subject Formation

School education for the masses is one of the hallmark institutions of the modern nation-state. It is charged with the tasks of molding children and young people into proper national *subjects* that make up a *people*, a *nation* and a desired *citizenry* (Anderson, 2006; Benei, 2008, 2005; Gellner, 2006; Green, 1990, 1997; Kaplan, 2006). The school typically does so by imposing on the students (a) specific language(s), senses of history, cultural traditions, worldviews and collective identities that are officially

sanctioned and recognized as essential to national life. Michel Foucault's seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1993) illustrates how the school is also one of the principal institutions of the "disciplinary society" where individuals' behaviors and subjectivities are intimately monitored and conducted by various capillary technologies of power, of which the hierarchizing and homogenizing examination practices in schools constitute an excellent example (pp. 181-4). These broad ideas about the school as a key modern institution responsible for effecting both a universal discipline and producing particularized national/cultural/political subjectivities form a baseline for this chapter.

In late/post-modernity, the neoliberal governmentality of the "advanced liberal democracies" (N. Rose, 1999b) represents a different and arguably more sophisticated governing rationality that works by granting the subjects governed the freedoms as well as the responsibilities to make choices, to aspire, and to *desire* (Gordon, 1991; Rofel, 2007; N. Rose, 1999a; N. Rose & Miller, 2008). Although in the context of education the term *aspiration* is more often used, I prefer *desire* not only because it is broader and therefore more flexible, but, more importantly, because it carries fewer normative connotations and thus is more analytically productive. Aspiration is often spoken of as a good thing which is to be encouraged, whereas desire can be for both "good" and "bad" things. This neutrality of desire allows me to deconstruct the normalizing processes in education more effectively and to identity forms of longings the Chinese education system inculcates that are precisely at odds with the normative ideals that the system purports to aspire to. As shall be discussed at length in the main sections of this chapter, Chinese teachers/students/parents' obsession with exam rankings and a fetishistic focus on the "prestige factor" of educational institutions seem more akin to a desiring for empty signifiers of privilege and power (cf. Seshadri-Crooks, 2000) than aspirations for good education *per se*.

The power and effectiveness of neoliberal governmentality rely in no small measure on constructing the Truth and ahistoricity of *desire* as stemming from "human nature" while masking the historical contingency and educability/educatedness of desires (Foucault, 1978; Stoler, 1995). More recently, scholars of Asia (e.g. Ong, 2006) and China specifically (e.g. C. Hsu, 2007; Rofel, 2007) have also observed how

politically illiberal states nevertheless leveraged on neoliberal discourses of desires to bring about desired forms of national developments such as economic growth, market reform, and technological advancement. As the word *desire* invokes imaginaries of psychosomatic origins or expressiveness, the governing of desires warrants to be included in the same theoretical and analytic terrain with other forms of *biopolitics*—governing/regulatory actions that intervene on matters such as birth, vitality, morbidity, mortality (Rabinow & Rose, 2006). The school, as a ubiquitous institutional environment in which more and more young people around the world spend their physical and mental growing-up years, is, I argue, an essential *biopolitical* site where educations of desires and interventions in ways of desiring take place.

Building on the assumptions that desires are educable and educated, and that the specificity of desire-educating programs (e.g. what desires are educated, not educated, through what mechanisms) really reveals the operations of a technology of governing, this chapter offers an ethnographic examination of the public "middle school" education system (7th-12th grade) in China as a sprawling *infrastructure of desire*. Infrastructures are not just innocuous built structures that facilitate and enable activities, they are also "a privileged institutional channel for social regulation" (Rodgers & O'Neill, 2012, p. 403); they possess considerable "infrastructural powers" (Mann, 1984) that may be capable of inflicting injustice and violence (O'Neill & Rodgers, 2012). Schools are physical as well as social infrastructures; they provide the physical facilities and environments in which students receive education; but more importantly, the ways the schooling infrastructures are socio-culturally organized and configured have decisive powers over what kind of subjects the students develop into, and what kinds of desires they shall come to embody. By providing an ethnographic analysis of an exemplifying middle school in urban China, I offer the conceptualization of schools as infrastructures of desire as a case study on how the education and regulation of desires more broadly constitute a prominent technology of governing in postsocialist China.

On the subject of Chinese school education, Andrew Kipnis's recent work (2011a) presents a comprehensive and compelling account, integrating rich ethnographic materials with multilevel socioeconomic, cultural, and historical analyses of the

intensive "educational desires" in contemporary China. Specifically, Kipnis offers explanations for the presence of this desire in terms of "rapid, late industrialization; demographic transition; literary masculinity; nation building; and exemplarity" (p. 160), and argues that these universalizable factors have converged in particular fashions to produce the unique expressions of desire for education in China. In this chapter, while drawing on Kipnis's various useful insights to assist my analyses, I also unpack the term *desire* more so than Kipnis does, because for him, *desire* remains mostly a descriptive term denoting the intense drive for educational success. In contrast, by respectively examining three main facets of the Chinese middle school infrastructure, I offer three contextualized exegeses of educational desire in China—firstly, desires for virtues and moral ideals; secondly, pragmatic desires for exam success; and thirdly, desires for foreign (Western) education. It is worth noting that this third dimension and its corresponding desires are conspicuously missing from Kipnis's work.

Another weakness of Kipnis's work is the relative absence of the voices of the students themselves, which for a work on schooling is somewhat surprising. I surmise one reason for this is that, as he observes (Kipnis, 2001a; 2011a, p. 118), in the schools where he conducted research there is a conspicuous lack of a counterculture that rejects academic ideals and the meritocracy ideology—the kind of counterculture that Paul Willis vividly captures in his now classic work *Learning to Labour* (1977). Another reason may have been the emphasis Kipnis placed on the act of "governing," which led to a somewhat top-down analytical approach, with a focus on how political powers, historical legacies and cultural ideals enmesh the subjects in a "governing complex." While this chapter's framing of Chinese middle schooling as *infrastructure* of desire arguably also emphasizes structure, central to my approach is also the idea that desire cannot be educated without the desiring subject actively participating in the training of desire in some way, and hence, it cannot be analyzed unless we attend to the *immanent* emergence of the desiring subject. It is in the desiring subjects' ambiguous, conflicted engagement and sometimes doomed negotiations and accommodation with the infrastructure, that desiring may be better examined. In the following accounts, I foreground the voices, actions, and thoughts coming from the students, and hold them

up as a mirror against the schooling infrastructure of desire that I portray. In other words, by attending more closely to the *social lives* of desire as embedded in a specific school environment and embodied by the students—their thoughts, words and actions—I offer here a *pragmatic* definition and exploration of (educational) desire.[1]

Further notes on the school and my ethnographic work

I briefly mentioned in the Introduction chapter that this chapter is underpinned by my second line of enquiry of the China stage fieldwork, in which I focused on "School A" as a case. Here, some more detailed information on School A is in order. Located in Jiangxi's provincial seat Nanchang, School A is a public middle school affiliated to Jiangxi province's Teachers College, and has long been regarded one of the most academically selective schools in the entire province. As such, School A may be confidently viewed as typical of the more than a hundred top public middle schools across China that supply Singapore with "foreign talent" scholars. More broadly, the phenomena in and around School A can arguably be taken as representative of the "normal" and *normative* conditions in Chinese middle school education.

School A consists of a "junior middle" (*chuzhong*) section (grades 7-9) and a senior middle (*gaozhong*) section (grades 10-12). As of 2009, there were 71 homeclasses across these six grades, in which over 4,100 students were educated and supported by over 300 academic and administrative staff members. As a school reputed for its academic excellence (measured in terms of its success in sending students to high-ranking, prestigious universities), School A usually manages to draw the most academically capable students from Nanchang city, and a small number of top students from across Jiangxi Province. In the 2010 national University Entrance Exam (UEE), or *Gaokao*, 22 students from School A gained admissions to Tsinghua and Peking Universities—the two most prestigious and competitive universities in China. This number must be seen against the background fact that China's socialist planning legacies in the education system dictate that top national universities only have very limited admission quotas for the provinces. For example, in 2009, Peking and Tsinghua Universities had a combined admission quota of just 66 in Jiangxi; this number was slightly higher at 84 in year 2012.

This means the senior middle section of School A manages to produce a quarter to a third of all Peking/Tsinghua-admitted students in a province of 45 million people where 438 senior middle schools prepare 251,060 students for the UEE.[2]

I gained research access to School A thanks to the help of the school's vice master who had been my teacher when I was a 10-grader. During the three months at School A, I was made an "assistant headteacher" of a Grade 10 class, assisting the headteacher's work. In addition, I sat in to listen to as many lessons of as many subjects as I could. After becoming more familiar with the students I also had plenty of opportunities to interact with them on both formal and informal occasions, such as chatting over lunch/dinner in the canteen or occasionally playing sports together.

Alongside School A, I visited two other Nanchang schools for comparative insights: School B and School C. School B is another top school in the city and province, and has long been the arch rival to School A. School C, on the other hand, usually ranks close to the bottom among middle schools in the city based on exam benchmarking. My visits to these two schools allowed me to compare and contrast with School A on specific issues—as shall be evident in what follows—thus offering a wider perspective on secondary schooling in China. However, insofar as ethnography is concerned, School A should be considered my sole fieldwork site.

Ideological rhetorics and the normalization of desires: a speech contest

In this section, I address the first aspect of desire education/regulation in the Chinese middle school infrastructure: the highly ideologized education of moral sentiments or, as I call it, the normalization of desires. Consider the following scene from School A that took place on a Friday afternoon, May 2011, which, I argue, contains many a telling clue about the moral and ideological dimensions of the contemporary Chinese middle school education and students' conflicted (dis)engagement with it.

> In School A's large function hall, the entire cohorts of Grades 9 and 10 are gathering; students bring their stools from their classrooms, and settle into neat blocks. On the raised stage in front, mikes are prepared; the emcee, herself a

student, is about to kick off the annual school Speech Contest, with this year's theme being "I love reading" (*wo ai dushu*). In order, sixteen contestants each takes the stage and gives a five-minute speech. Several are well prepared and performing fairly well; most are evidently nervous, now speaking with a trembling voice, now repeating the previous sentence to cover up the fact that he/she has forgotten the next, and now getting stuck completely, desperately trying to recall memorized texts while holding back tears…

One contestant tells a staple parable in the Chinese school literary education repertoire: a person walks on a mountain road after sunset, hears a mysterious voice instructing him to pick up some pebbles from the ground; baffled and suspicious, he picks up just several, only to find when it dawns those pebbles were actually gold, leaving him to regret having not adhered to the voice and picked up more. The moral is, as the contestant reveals in her coda, those pebbles are just like books/reading, and one ought to do more while still young, because one tends to realize its importance only too late. In like manners, most contestants tell some parables, and use very emotionally charged tones, voices and body languages to deliver edifying messages such as—"Oh, how I love reading! Reading is the purest and noblest of pursuits!" "Reading is the fount of wisdom, the sweet dew that nurtures the soul!" "We must read, just like Premier Zhou Enlai who vowed to read for China's revitalization!"[3] … The exaggerated emotiveness of several contestants involve so much fervour that they remind me of the Red Guards that I'd seen on TV documentaries about the Cultural Revolution. Yet, at the same time, I cannot help also noticing the glaring fault lines in the performances: nearly all contestants at some point get nervous and forget a few lines; they alternate between fiery grandiloquence one moment and complete blankness, silence, and embarrassment the next, perhaps as quickly as Geertz's Balinese natives fall in and out of trance.

Off the stage, the audience—the contestants' classmates—respond variously to the whole occasion: some have brought their homework or English vocabulary memorization booklet with them, beavering away without even raising their heads for a moment (—attendance is mandatory, otherwise they would have preferred staying in their classrooms and study); some pay only interspersed attention amidst general nonchalance; while a small number seem more engaged. When one contestant got stuck and couldn't speak for nearly a minute, loud applauses of encouragement erupted from the floor. Yet, when another contestant in her interactive speech asked the audience: "Can you now all hear the most beautiful melody of the sound of reading books?" the "yes"s voiced by a small number of students were drowned in jeering "no!"s coming from the majority who sabotaged her plan. Yet another contestant ended her speech with a totally unexpected gesture—inviting (rather obligingly!) all students in the hall to stand up, with clenched fist over the shoulder, to say out loud a pledge that she had prepared—"Let reading become an inalienable part of our lives, and use the knowledge we learn to perfect ourselves and build our great nation!" The audience indeed rose up (—so did I) to make the pledge (—this I didn't), though

> I could sense the grudge and hear many murmur complaints: "what the hell is this again"… (based on fieldnotes, May 2011)

Normalizing desires

Although more than three decades has passed since China entered the reform era, the kinds of moral pedagogies that invoke legacies of high socialism as well as pre-socialist Chinese traditions still permeate the education system. Stig Thøgersen (1990) points out that moral education in Chinese schools can be seen as a combination of traditional Confucian values, patriotism and socialist principles, just as Nie (2008, p. 7) more recently also notes that "politics, ideology, and morality have remained the major elements of moral education in China." In a broad sense, moral education is universal and implicit in any form of human education, regardless of temporal or geographical specificities. Thus, a meaningful analysis of moral education must seek to pin down the specific and contingent characters of a particular regime of moral education. One key feature of moral education in contemporary Chinese schools is the high degree to which it is still ideologized, by which I mean not only that ideologies still take center stage in the moral pedagogical substance, but also the fact that ideology's better half—rhetoric (Chylińska, 2009; Mariner, 1971)—plays a notable role.

The schema of Chinese school moral education can be seen as composed of four intersecting and often mutually reinforcing layers or strands. The most general and basic layer involves what may be regarded as universal moral sentiments and principles that apply to most human societies, such as rules like thou shall not steal. However, above this universal layer, moral education in Chinese schools quickly takes on socioculturally unique bedizenments. A second major strand consists in the Confucian value system that emphasizes culture-specific virtues and moral ideals. A third strand is that of nationalism/patriotism education, which aims to mold students into national subjects who share a national pride and embody patriotic sentiments. The fourth and final major strand pertains to the official political ideologies of the Chinese state, namely, Marxist/communist/socialist principles in their adapted Chinese versions; specifically, this political ideological strand also involves educating students to develop loyalty

toward the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its policies.

The ethnographic snapshot of the Speech Contest at School A to varying degrees hints to all these four strands of moral education that attempt to normalize the students' desires—in this specific case, the desire for knowledge, as metonymized in the love for reading. The exhortation to dedicate one's youth to reading can be first interpreted at a general level as corresponding to the call for the universal moral value of conscientiousness and industry. However, this general moral call is already inextricably bound up with the Confucian ideologies and imaginaries that have taken deep roots in the Chinese society,[4] because conscientiousness and industry need not be tied to the pursuit of bookish studies or intellectual activities; in fact, it is equally if not more conceivable that such values be manifested in physical labor, trades or entrepreneurial activities. However, in the Confucian moral universe of agrarian-imperial China, literary pursuits are held in the highest symbolic esteem; therefore, the most honorable form of industriousness is also scholarly industriousness.[5] Furthermore, the mandarin examination system of agrarian-imperial China meant that scholarly pursuit has been historically linked to worldly success, because imperial officials were selected on the basis of their mastery of the Confucian canons (P.-t. Ho, 1964). Thus, the parable about pebbles turning into gold rehearses this very specifically Confucian/imperial definition and governmentality of educational desire. (It also hints to the instrumentalist attitude toward education and intellectual pursuits which I address in the second section.)

The nationalistic/patriotic strand and the Party-state ideological strand in Chinese school moral education are almost always intertwined, where the CCP state is glorified as the savior of the Chinese nation, while the love for and pride in the Chinese nation are meant to buttress the legitimacy of the CCP state. These ideologized dimensions of the moral education are explicit in the Speech Contest where contestants touted the love for study/reading as a way to serve the nation. In one particular instance, the Communist veteran leader Zhou Enlai's own act of tying study/reading to the revitalization of the nation was meant to be an edifying example for these contemporary Chinese students to aspire to.

The very format of the speech contest is worth noting as a combination of

exemplarity and *examination*, two key components of the Chinese education as a system of governing (Kipnis, 2011a). The contestants go up on the stage and deliver the performance; if they do well, they set an example for the rest of participants and the audience; at the same time, being in a *contest*, the contestants are judged by a panel of teachers who are responsible for scoring, ranking the students and giving out prizes at the end. Bakken (2000) famously calls China an "exemplary society," where the wide-spread use of exemplar and models constitutes a fundamental governing philosophy as well as technology. Thus, exemplarity is enacted not just when veteran Communist leader Zhou Enlai was invoked as an example to be emulated by the students, the very event of the Speech Contest recapitulates the principles of exemplarity and examination.

Students' (dis)engagements

Although those contestants have volunteered to participate in the contest, mostly citing the reason that they wanted to give themselves a "challenge" (*tiaozhan*) or "training" (*duanlian*), once they were in the contest, the event should be analyzed as a staged pedagogical ritual involving pre-given actors, settings and structures, in which the student is just one largely passive actor, supposed to regurgitate and enact *scripts* that are alien and imposed. The contestants have all been coached by their teachers (usually ones responsible for subjects like Chinese literacy/literature or social/political studies) prior to the contest both in writing and performing the speech, *despite* or perhaps *because of* which, they evidently falter and struggle with staging the "correct" performances. The contest expects the performers to conform to very specific *substantive* as well as *stylistic* standards, based on which they are then hierarchically judged by being given scores. In the foregoing section, I have already analyzed the substantive aspects of the students' speeches which reflected the ideologized substances of the Chinese moral educational regime.

With regard to the form of delivery, the contestants also demonstrated varying degrees of mastery and success at reproducing an emotionally charged, moving rhetorical style that is expected in such moral pedagogic rituals. Kipnis (2011, pp. 104-5)

has similarly observed how in Chinese schools moral training is believed to result from the emotional embodiment of moralizing messages. He points out that, as many of the moralizing messages "can be quite maudlin, depicting, for example, the sacrifices that parents make for their children or that soldiers and Party members make for the nation, there is plenty of room for emotive display through facial expression and tone of voice" (p. 105). This rhetorical and stylistic dimension to moral education is central to the normalization of desires, because visceral, bodily trainings are often more effective (cf. Benei, 2008) than mere abstract intellectual or ideational indoctrination in shaping and channeling students' aspirations and longings—i.e. desires—toward the lofty virtues and ideals sanctioned by the state.

However, as the contestants' contrived performances and the audience's mixed but mainly dissenting responses demonstrate, these highly ideologized normalizations of desires seem to fail largely to get a grip on the students. Woronov (2004, p. 303) documents one instance in a shabby school for migrant workers' children in Beijing whereby a teacher read to the class an ideologized textbook passage which contained many emotive "ah"s and "oh"s to glorify the grand buildings symbolic of the powerful Chinese state; the teacher, according to Woronov's account, eventually could not help but "laugh out loud" at such "silly" (p. 303) hyperbole, resulting in the students also following suit. While School A students did not quite treat the speech contest experience as a sheer joke, their reactions indeed demonstrate how the ideologized moral education in Chinese schools fail to engage them the way the state intends it to. In particular, scholars (e.g. Kipnis, 2011a; Nie, 2008) agree that those Party-state related ideological indoctrinations fail most conspicuously due to the drastic discrepancies and contradictions between the propaganda and the social realities that are apparent to most students (Nie 2008).

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990, p. 22, emphases added) famous, radical formulation of education as "the *arbitrary* imposition of the dominant cultural *arbitrary*," although dated, nevertheless offers an incisive interpretation not only of the Speech Contest event in School A, but also of the students' sensuous, embodied reaction to the educational system that they undergo. Both the substantive and stylistic requirements of

the Speech Contest exhibit a high degree of arbitrariness—a *double arbitrariness* that is evinced by the ways in which contestants struggled to conform to them. True to Bourdieu and Passeron's thesis, this double arbitrariness precisely reflects the interests of the dominant power in the system, namely, the Party-state which sets the agenda as to how students' moral sentiments and desires are to be normalized. The indifferent and often dissenting responses from the students to this doubly arbitrary game illustrate that they, as the targets on which moral education is imposed, do "see through" or—borrowing Paul Willis's (1977, p. 175) vivid phrase—*penetrate* the nature of the game. Indeed, the small event of Speech Contest may be seen as homological with a concentric but larger doubly arbitrary game, namely, school education itself. In any case, Bourdieu and Passeron's original indictment is precisely directed at the education system *per se*. While the School A students could afford to penetrate the smaller of these two concentric/homological games, i.e. the Speech Contest, in the sense that they could choose not to take part in it and to ignore it when it was staged; they have, on the other hand, much less of an option with regard to the larger of the two games, i.e. schooling itself—recall those students off the stage who did not want to waste any time on watching the contest but instead buried their heads in studying—because the stakes are real, and too high.

Lastly, although it has been rightly pointed out that this largely ineffective game of ideological moralization (especially the Party-state strand in it) tends to produce cynical subjects/students (Nie, 2008), caution must be exercised against dismissing the effectiveness of moral education in Chinese schools too hastily and entirely. As Kipnis (2011, p. 112) sharply points out: "even when official pedagogic narratives produce nothing but cynicism, it is a form of cynicism that is widely shared throughout the nation," thanks to the extraordinarily high level of political and administrative centralization in China. Invoking Herzfeld's (2005) idea of "cultural intimacy," Kipnis points to the mercurial oscillation between cynicism and disbelief on the one hand and identification and internalization on the other. In any event, it is very unlikely that years of ideologized normalization of moral sentiments and rhetorical training of desires should have not some lasting effects on the students. Especially in those dimensions of

moral education which are not seen or experienced as severely contradicted by reality, the educability of desires in face of the powers of the moral pedagogical infrastructure ought to be acknowledged. Vanessa Fong (2004) notices, for instance, how China's singleton generation youths who grew up post-1980s harbor toward their motherland China a "filial nationalism" that seems to be the "cross-valorization" (Willis, 1977) between the Confucian filial piety ideology and a nationalistic/patriotic sentiment toward the country. As I shall show in Part Two of this thesis, the ideologically educated desires of the Chinese students actually have very significant implications for the ways in which they experience education in Singapore.

Infrastructures for pragmatic desire: hierarchy and meritocracy

I now turn to the second and arguably the single most important aspect of Chinese middle schooling, namely, the ways in which the entire system is so structured as to have the effect of producing the most intensive desires for success in examination. While other agendas such as the moral education outlined in the previous section do have concrete ramifications in the schooling culture, Kipnis (2011, p. 163) notes that "none has been powerful enough to counter the force of a mass drive for examination success by students, parents, teachers, principals, and local cadres." This desire for examination success is largely pragmatic and instrumentalist; in other words, it less reflects students/parents/teachers' love of study/knowledge for the sake of study/knowledge than it reflects the fact that, for the vast majority of Chinese youths and their parents, success in middle school and consequently in entering a good university is still *imagined* as the most obvious—often the *only*—way to achieve socioeconomic mobility. Kipnis (2011, pp. 24-5) has already elaborated on how the imaginary link between educational and worldly successes remains strong due to a historical continuity between the official personnel systems in agrarian-imperial and socialist China, which was succinctly captured in the pebble-turn-gold parable in the Speech Contest. Thus, here I do not dwell on this cultural-historical dimension any more, but instead focus on describing how the system as an infrastructure of desire is

laid out. With the case of School A in Nanchang, I try to show why the Chinese schooling infrastructure is one productive of such intensive pragmatic and instrumentalist desires.

Consider the following self-explanatory list of institutions and practices that may be regarded as the very "brick and mortar" of the *sociocultural infrastructure* of Chinese middle schooling:

"High Exam" (*gaokao*): officially known as the University Entrance Exam (UEE) that each province administers for its grade 12 students. Students' scores rank them within the province, and accordingly determine whether they are admitted to the universities (across the country) that they have applied to. As a legacy of socialist command system, universities have preset quotas for each province. The High Exam is very much the ultimate purpose of attending a senior middle school (grade 10-12).

"Key vs. ordinary universities" and "first-/second-/third- tier universities": higher education institutions in China are divided into "key(point) universities" (*zhongdian gaoxiao*) and "ordinary universities" (*putong gaoxiao*), whereby the key institutions are considered strategic and hence receive more investments from the state. Another categorization is the tiering system, which dictates the order in which institutions are to process student applications after the High Exam took place: the "first-tier" (*yiben*) universities admit students who have applied to them before the second-tier (*erben*) universities can do the same, and so on. The tiering is also an important indicator of the universities' perceived/real academic quality and prestige.

"Middle Exam" (*zhongkao*): the city/county level exam that students sit for upon completing junior middle school (grade 7-9). In a same logic as the High Exam, students' scores rank them within the city/county, and determine which senior middle school they are eligible for.

"Key School" (*zhongdian*)**, "Key School under Construction"** (*jiangshezhong zhongdian*), and **"Ordinary School"** (*putong*): three categories of senior middle schools at city/county level that reflect their descending order of perceived/real quality, importance and prestige.

"Key Class" (*zhongdian ban*): in any given senior middle school, a small number of classes in a grade cohort[6]—usually no more than two—are usually designated as "key classes," which gather the "best" students in the cohort based on exam score rankings. Students in "key classes" are given more attention by the school and teachers. Variations of the concept of "key class" include, for example, the "**Zero Class"** (*ling ban*) which proclaims the class's superiority because classes are normally numbered starting from One; the "**Excellence Cultivation Class"** (*peiyou ban*); the

"**Experimental Class"** (*shiyan ban*) which experiments with more challenging contents and faster teaching paces; and, interestingly, the "**Golden-poster Class"** (*jinbang ban*) which begets its name from the fact that historically, the names of the successful examinees in the imperial mandarin exams would be displaced on a golden poster in public.

"Ordinary Class" (*putong ban*): the majority of classes in a grade which are not "key." In recent years there has been a tendency for this derogatory sounding term to be replaced by more palatable terms such as "**Parallel Class"** (*pingxing ban*).

"Monthly Exam" (*yuekao*): in most senior middle schools, students sit monthly drill exams modelled on High Exam style, testing all High Exam-relevant subjects. After the monthly exam, students are ranked throughout the cohort based on their total scores. Normally, according to their new rankings, students may be honourably invited to enter a "key class" or face the embarrassment of dropping out of the "key classes" back to an "ordinary class."

In this non-exhaustive list of terms of Chinese middle school's infrastructural elements, most are generic and used widely throughout China, while a few others such as those more micro-level ones can be part of a local "lingo." Evidently, these terminologies show a tendency to invoke imageries of physical structures and/or frameworks, wherein the metaphor "key school under construction" perhaps most succinctly captures the educational system's *self*-understanding as *infrastructure*.

Pyramidal stratification and the shaping of desire

The most salient feature of this educational infrastructural system is its steep hierarchization. Ranking, tiering and differentiation saturate the system, constituting the key principle around which both institutional relationships as well as human subjectivities are configured in the life-worlds of Chinese middle school students, teachers and parents. The hierarchization more or less takes a pyramidal shape, which means that entities on upper tiers tend to be numerically fewer than those on the lower rungs. Thus, there would almost always be fewer "key schools" than non-"key" schools, fewer first-tier universities than second-tier universities, and so forth. Also, true to the principle of *exemplarity*, there is a tendency for institutional setups and practices at higher levels to be replicated at lower levels down the hierarchy. For instance, in recent

years in Jiangxi province—as is very likely also the case elsewhere in China—the Middle Exam has become increasingly isomorphic with the High Exam, whereby the three types of senior middle schools ("key," "key under construction," and "ordinary") correspond to the three tiers of universities. The three types of exams ("monthly," "middle," and "high") resemble each other not just in format, but also in the common effect of setting in motion processes of ranking, differentiations, and hierarchization. In fact, such replication is observed even further down the hierarchy, resulting in junior middle school admission and even primary school admission in many places becoming competitive in some manners,[7] despite official regulations explicitly prohibiting such practices.

This steeply hierarchical system encourages self-reinforcing stratification circles. As students who have done well in the Middle Exam flock to key schools such as School A, these key schools easily garner academically capable students who are likely in three years to do their schools honor in the High Exam, which further strengthen these schools' reputation and ability to attract capable freshers in the future. Hence, talents become pyramidally stratified within the system, with those most academically capable in a city or across an entire province often concentrated in just a handful of schools. During my fieldwork, a School A official proudly told me two facts: among their 2009 intake there were 88 out of the top hundred students in that years' Nanchang Middle Exam; for the 2010 intake, the entirety of Nanchang's top hundred students came to School A. Yet, in spite of these successes, School A was starting to spread its nets out to the whole province to recruit the best students from the localities. According to students that I spoke to who had come up from provincial localities to attend School A, teams of School A teachers would actually travel down to their local middle schools to administer tests and interviews, selecting the best "crops." This tallied with a newspaper report I read which suggested that senior middle school teachers increasingly felt the pressure to ingratiate their junior middle school colleagues in order to secure the best sources of students.[8] Technically, for School A to recruit students from outside Nanchang city constitutes a regulatory violation. However, the school has always enjoyed a good working relationship with the provincial educational authorities; the

regulatory inconvenience was elegantly dealt with by having School A designated as a "provincial level key school (*shengji zhongdian xuexiao*)."

Such stratification and concentration of "good" students in one or two key schools leave many other less "good" schools severely under-motivated. During my first visit to School C, a manager revealed to me that in 2010 only ten students out of a graduating cohort of almost three hundred at the school made it into some form of colleges/universities, none of which was in tier 1 or 2. Further, upon learning that I was doing fieldwork at School A, the School C manager lamented metaphorically: "In the past, we used to get small fish and shrimps, while key schools like School A got the big fish; now the key schools trawl away big fish, small fish and good shrimps, so we are only left with small shrimps! However capable we are as teachers we can't help shrimps grow into fish—schools like ours are just hopeless!"

In *Discipline and Punish* (1993, pp. 181-184), Foucault has offered a penetrating analysis regarding how hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their culmination in the examination, are used as powerful disciplinary technologies on students of the French military school. I maintain that discipline's other side is always desire, and that a disciplined subject is a subject that has been trained through the infrastructure to desire in certain ways and not others, to relinquish certain desires while strengthening others. Students in the Chinese middle schools are made painfully aware of their own places in a rigid hierarchy, which is then directly linked to real, worldly rewards and punishments. For example, in Nanchang, as of the time of my fieldwork, the annual tuition fee for public senior middle school was no more than 3,000 Yuan, but if a student failed to hit the cut-off line and wished to enter the school nevertheless, ten times as much in "sponsorship fees" has to be paid to the school upfront in cash. At the same time, key schools in Nanchang and across China offer fee waivers to excellent students who are spotted as "seeds" for the High Exam in three years' time. More disturbingly, although not being practiced by any Nanchang schools to my knowledge, practices like dishing out cash prizes worth as much as 200,000 Yuan to students who make it into Tsinghua or Peking Universities are not unheard of in some parts of China. These myriad small practices constitute an educational infrastructure

that brings out from students the most intense possible pragmatic desires for educational success, often defined narrowly in terms of exam scores, cohort rankings, and the brand name and prestige of the schools or universities they gain admission to.

Meritocracy and its desire-discipline effect

Although to some the steep hierarchicality of the Chinese middle schooling infrastructure may seem to border on oppressiveness, at School A, I often sensed from among students an optimism and determination that spoke for their accommodation of, if not quite complete identification with, the system. During the many canteen lunches and dinners I shared with School A students, I often tried to suss out their attitudes toward this gigantic schooling infrastructure that closes in on them and intimately shapes their desires. It seemed many students did not want to dwell on such a serious topic, preferring to talk about more lighthearted matters with me; however, when they sensed my persistence in hearing their opinions, they opened up and offered me serious thoughts. Many genuinely believed in the meritocracy and thus fairness of the Chinese education system. "Of course the system is not flawless—far from it—but can you tell me a fairer system that is possible in China's current situation?"—one thoughtful grade-10 boy rhetorically questioned me. "The Chinese educational system is such that as long as you put in hard efforts, you can get results and succeed!"—echoed another. But the statement that left the deepest impression on me came from a grade-10 girl, who actually said: "In our system, even a genius has to bow in front of the diligent (*tiancai zai qinfen mianqian ye yao ditou*)!" It was moments like these that convinced me of not only the aptness of Kipnis's use of the word "desire," but also my own conceptualization of Chinese middle school education as the infrastructure of desire.

The fact that the hierarchy in the school and the resultant senses of superiority/inferiority, honor/shame are all based largely on students' exam performances means that there is an ethos of fairness and desert in School A. Another fierce sounding statement that came from a student informant captures this squarely—"In school, one speaks with a volume proportional to one's exam results (*zai xuexiao yong chengji shuohua*)!" Discrimination or prejudice among students based on their families' socioeconomic backgrounds were absent for as far as I could tell, and this was

notwithstanding the actual disparities between their backgrounds that I managed to gauge through interacting with them. In the school, students wear tracksuit-style uniforms at all times, follow the same routines, do the same things—everything revolves around study. Those hailing from outside the provincial capital city even received preferential treatment (negotiated with the local municipal authorities on behalf of them by School A officials) to have their household registration[9] relocated to Nanchang for the duration of their studies so that they could eventually take their High Exam here.

This perception of meritocracy and fairness again has to do with the systemic features of the Chinese middle school infrastructure. Echoing Kipnis (2001b), I contend that the ways in which contemporary Chinese school pedagogy emphasizes methodic, rote memorization and other un-"creative" forms of learning (see also Woronov, 2008)—reasons for which the education system is often severely criticized both in and outside China—actually end up building some veritable meritocracy into the system by ameliorating the disadvantages suffered by students from rural and/or lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While this is generally true for the entire curriculum, here I take the case of learning English as a foreign language, which is a compulsory examinable subject for all, to briefly illustrate.

The teaching and learning of English in China has long been recognized and critiqued as disproportionately emphatic on grammar at the cost of actual communicative skills (e.g. Campbell & Yong, 1993; Hu, 2002). Although the exams always include a small section on "listening comprehension," most marks are allocated to reading and grammar questions. Thus, in class, teachers tend to dish out detailed information and explanations on grammatical rules, followed by plenty of written exercises such as multiple choices and blank-filling. This is in addition to the sad but often true fact that most teachers themselves often do not speak English very fluently. Although the large trend is certainly to move away from this type of exam-oriented English learning toward a more communicative, application-centered approach, progress is uneven across regions and schools, and the old style holds on strongly in most places (Liming Yu, 2001). A quick rule of thumb is: the more socioeconomically

developed a place, the more likely English teaching and learning there has become communicative and "fun."

In this regard, Jiangxi province and School A both have a long way to go. However, my point is, by de-emphasizing the communicative aspects of English teaching/learning, a pedagogy centered around grammar and rote memorization actually reduces the disadvantages in exams encountered by students from less privileged backgrounds. This is because communicative and applied competencies in a language often cannot be improved except through relatively long-term immersion in the right environments and exposure to superior resources, both of which often require types of financial investments and parental cultural capital that simply evade the less privileged students. In the current system—at least in the case of School A—as long as students put in hard efforts and follow a ferocious study discipline, they are not necessarily at a clear disadvantage. An English subject teacher at School A once told me something that made this point. Noticing how students hailing from less developed localities in the province were more likely to regard learning grammar as "*proper*" English learning, she mused:

> Sometimes when I try to speak a bit more English in class and get them to speak up too, the students from the localities feel I am "playing around" (*wan'er*) and not teaching *properly* (*zhenzheng*). They feel as if they haven't learnt anything proper unless they copy some grammar rules in their notebooks. But this kind of students aren't really disadvantaged in the exams—sometimes they score even higher than those who enjoy speaking and listening to English, those who like the "fun" approach; they [the latter "fun" approach type—author] get pissed off by that. (from fieldnotes, May 2011)

Were the teaching and learning of English to be revolutionalized overnight to de-emphasize grammar and rote learning, favoring instead applied and communicative competencies, students from affluent urban settings are very likely to gain a huge advantage, as they can often take for granted accesses to the Internet and audio-visual resources such as English TV news and original soundtrack movies, while some might even have been tutored by native English-speaking teachers since primary school because their parents were wealthy enough to afford it. This is of course not to suggest that reforms in teaching and learning English in China are not desirable; however, to

those who govern China's educational infrastructure as a form of social regulation and production of specific desires, it may involve too great a risk to jeopardize this relatively speaking level playing field for those less privileged students who currently give credit and legitimacy to the system based on its perceived and real meritocracy. Hence, by having an exam system that to some extent explicitly rewards rote memorization, uncreative forms of learning, and hard efforts, a desire-discipline dialectic mechanism is at play whereby the intensification of an instrumentalist and pragmatic desire for success in exams is corresponded by the intensification of discipline on students' bodies and thoughts. Their drive to do well in the meritocratic exams makes their bodies prodigiously diligent but also docile, while their thoughts and mentalities are trained to be equally respectful of ranking, recognizant of hierarchy, and deferential to authority.

For not a small portion of Chinese middle school students, it is really not what they learn or how they learn it, but how well they do in exams—measured in scores/rankings/prestige—that matters at the end. This pragmatic desire that arises at the conjuncture between the system's hierarchicality and meritocracy, I argue, remains the definitive feature of the Chinese middle school as an infrastructure of desire. In the next and final section, through examining how this mainstream educational eco-logic has more recently come under challenge from its margins, I contemplate how the entire infrastructure of desire may in time transform and possibly unravel.

Global horizons of Chinese educational desire: "Everybody wants to go to America!"

In 2011, when I returned to School A for this fieldwork, the vice master of the school was an excited and busy man: he and his team were in the midst of juggling between negotiations with an American high school about setting up an International Program at School A (a "Sino-American Program") on one hand and dealing with the provincial educational authorities to obtain official approval for this program on the other.

This, however, would actually not be the first international program at senior middle school level in Jiangxi Province. Back in 2007, School B started the first

international collaborative program in the province—a "Sino-Canadian" program that was run jointly with the educational authorities of Nova Scotia, Canada. The program charged at that time 30,000 Yuan per year in tuition fees, when the annual fees at a public senior middle school were less than 2,000 Yuan. Enrollment in the program grew from 18 in the inaugural cohort to over 20 in the subsequent two cohorts, and to over 60 in the fourth cohort. According to information available from School B's website, the program involves Nova Scotia educational authorities sending teachers to School B to teach the Nova Scotia high school curriculum to the enrolled students, who must at the same time also complete the Chinese senior middle curriculum with School B teachers. The completion of Nova Scotia curriculum enables the students to apply directly to Canadian universities, which is the explicit *raison d'etre* of this program. Thus, although students are still required to go through the Chinese curriculum, they in fact only need to pass the Senior Middle School Exit Exam (*huikao*), not the "High Exam," or *Gaokao*. According to a student at the Sino-Canadian Program I spoke to, all those who enrolled had their minds set upon going to universities in Canada; hence, they were free from the pressure to study as intensely as their *Gaokao*-taking peers in School B's normal stream. This informant also revealed that although the entry criteria for the Sino-Canadian Program put special emphasis on the applicants' English scores in the Middle Exam, it was true that the overall cut-off line for admission was some 20 to 30 points (out of a total possible points of 610) *lower* than School B's normal admission line.[10] For some cynical, unimpressed observers, this was a program that "enabled rich but not very smart or hardworking kids to escape the High Exam;" but the particular informant I spoke to praised the high quality and enjoyable "Western" styles of learning in the program. School B's website shows that students of the first three cohorts that graduated between 2010 and 2012 went to destinations that included University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, Dalhousie University, University of Ottawa, UPEI, among others.

School A's vice master, however, was confident that his Sino-American Program would be a greater success, and this was perhaps reflected in the fees they were ready to charge: 80,000 Yuan a year. "Everybody wants to go to America!" the vice-Master told

me, summarizing the new horizons of Chinese educational desires, "because American college education is first-rate in the world." The idea of the Sino-American Program is similar, namely, to give enrolled students direct access to American undergraduate admission. The partner American school would send five teachers to Nanchang to cover the American part of the program, based on the Advanced Placement (AP) curriculums. Similarly, School A also stresses that Sino-American students need to complete their Chinese senior middle school curriculum; thus, in a school official's words, the Program "should be seen as even more challenging in a sense." Nevertheless, a glossy online brochure explaining the Program shows that students are encouraged to take TOFEL, SAT and AP exams as early as at the end of their second year (i.e. grade 11). Similar to the case with School B, since students are only expected to take the Exit Exams, the Chinese side of their curriculum is significantly reduced, enabling them to participate in the much more lively, diverse, and attractive American pedagogy. Although I left Nanchang before the first cohort enrolled in the Sino-American Program in autumn 2011, I was fortunately able to find out about the Program's recent developments from online in May 2013, by which time the first cohort of 16 Sino-American students had all received multiple offers from American universities and colleges. Indeed, the Program's website was strewn with headlines screaming "Good News," announcing the admission triumphs of this inaugural cohort which completed in just two years. Among the 16 students, one particular student received seven offers, respectively from Syracuse University, SUNY Binghamton, Centre College, DePauw University, Agnes Scott College, Lawrence University, and Augsburg College. Even the student with the fewest offers received two, respectively from Washington University and Indiana University Bloomington.

International school education is nothing new. At the pre-tertiary level, the "American International Schools" that exist in many developing country metropolises which cater to foreign expatriates and elite locals have long epitomized pockets of educational exclusivity and privilege that carry a sense of extraterritoriality vis-à-vis the local educational infrastructure. British elite school Harrow, for instance, now has international schools in several Asian cities including Beijing. The type of collaborative

programs that caters mainly to Mainland Chinese students such as the ones in Schools A and B, are, however, a more recent phenomenon. The first such program in China was a Sino-Canadian class set up in 1997 in Beijing, exactly ten years before School B's Sino-Canadian Program in Nanchang. As of early 2013, there are already seven such programs in Jiangxi Province.[11] The fact that an economically mediocre province like Jiangxi has now come to have its own share of internationalized schooling means that hundreds of such programs no doubt exist throughout the country.

In China, the *Gaokao* used to be known as the "single-log bridge (*dumuqiao*)" that millions of students squeeze through. This seems to be slowly but steadily changing. Currently, not only do over 70 per cent of all those who take the *Gaokao* end up in some form of college education, it was officially reported that in 2009, a staggering 840,000 eligible examinees across the country simply abandoned taking the exam[12]—many probably thanks to the kinds of developments I have outlined in this section. As urban Chinese residents become increasingly affluent, more and more parents entertain the option of letting their children receive less draconian and supposedly more enriching Western education by avoiding the local educational infrastructure. In this emerging Chinese middle schooling infrastructure which now includes, in addition to the "single-log bridge," "escape routes" and "flyover bridges" such as the Sino-Canadian/American programs in Nanchang, desire casts its ken over global horizons. Hallowed Western institutions together with imaginaries of lively, enriching pedagogic practices and learning experiences have come to delineate the new frontiers of educational desire that the Chinese schooling infrastructure produces. It is crucial to stress here that these "escape routes" and "flyover bridges" are not exogenous challenges but endogenous evolvement of the Chinese schooling infrastructure, because all such programs operate strictly under the approval and monitoring of the government. In other words, they reflect the Chinese state's evolving approach to governing educational desires.

Finally, however, the transformative hope and liberating potential we attach to these new schooling arrangements and new forms of desires must be tempered with the realization that they also signify the return of a mode of socioeconomic privilege

reproduction (i.e. raw economic capital to sociocultural capitals) that is at odds with the mainstream meritocratic ideal. Nanchang parents who send their children to the Sino-Canadian or Sino-American program not only have to pay three years of hefty fees in Jiangxi, they must also be wealthy enough to be able to afford their children's actual university education expenses in Canada or the US, because these students would no longer be competitive in the *Gaokao*.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified three major currents that characterize contemporary public middle school education in China as infrastructures of desire based on an ethnographic stint in School A. The first current pertains to moral education and the ideologized cultivation of students' moral sentiments and desires; although this current still exerts and is set to continue exerting notable influences on the cultural-symbolic dimensions of the Chinese middle school life-world, its effects on students is arguably on the wane as China's interactions with the world increase. The second and mainstream current is still the definitive feature of Chinese middle school education: an infrastructural setup that produces an intense pragmatic drive and often instrumentalist attitudes toward learning and education, geared toward exam success; such pragmatic and instrumentalist desires for educational success are unlikely to abate for as long as both the Chinese society and the state regard education as the golden path to personal and national socioeconomic development. The third and rapidly uprising current consists in internationalized schooling arrangements that have recently emerged to cater to financially privileged families and their children whose educational desires are now set upon global horizons; as the Chinese economy continues to expand and urban Chinese become wealthier, this current is set to strengthen, and may one day significantly alter the entire infrastructural layout of education in China.

In rendering this account of schooling as *infrastructure*, I am not advocating a deterministic or static interpretation. Far from it, I argue that it is in the dynamic interactions between these three dynamic currents—which therefore amount to an

evolving infrastructure for schooling desires—that Chinese students learn to aspire intensely to certain things and not others, to value intensely certain things and not others. Echoing James Ferguson's (2012) point about "structures of responsibility," however, I maintain that social infrastructures, such as schooling in China, do powerfully shape human experiences and subjectivities, and we ought to acknowledge as much. For my examination of the Chinese students' experiences as Singapore's "foreign talent" scholars in subsequent chapters of this thesis, understanding these experiences and subjectivities are crucial, because in selecting scholars, Singapore indeed picks from among the most successful products of this infrastructure of desire. The next chapter examines this selection process.

4 The SM2 program: An ethnographic account

In chapter 2, I introduced the "SM1/2/3" scholarship schemes in the context of illustrating the Singapore state's desire for "foreign talents." For practical reasons, in the fieldwork I had to choose to focus on one of these schemes, and I chose the SM2 program for pragmatic concerns of access and logistic feasibility. In this chapter, I offer a detailed look at the SM2 program, covering its history, facts and statistics—insofar as they were realistically obtainable or reconstructable through my research activities. Based on first-hand ethnographic work, I also furnish a close-up account of the 15th batch SM2 recruitment process in Jiangxi Province, which took place between March and May 2011. In these accounts, I interweave data stemming from online ethnography, real-world ethnography and a small scale targeted questionnaire survey to paint as full a picture as possible about how the PRC scholars are recruited by Singapore and how the would-be scholars and a variety of other stakeholders in China reacted to the "foreign talent" schemes.

An overview of the SM2 program

Facts and statistics

It has been rumored that the SM2 program was an agreement sealed between the then Chinese Premier Li Peng and Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew at some point in the 1990s. Although this is quite impossible for me to verify, I do recall on more than one occasion the SM2 program being described by officials from the Singapore Ministry of Education ("MOE") as "an outcome of the strategic visions of the very top-level leaders of the two counties." What can be reliably deduced, however, is that the program started in 1997. After the recruitment of the 15th batch in 2011, the

program was extended for another five years, making for a projected total of twenty batches, to be ended in 2016.

Technically speaking, SM2 is a program *managed* by the Singapore MOE on behalf of several prominent government-linked corporations (GLCs) in Singapore, which provide the actual funding for the scholars' study and living expenses. For example, in the case of the sixth batch recruited in 2002, these GLCs included: Development Bank of Singapore (DBS), Keppel Corporation, Neptune Orient Line (NOL), Sembcorp, Singapore Airlines (SIA), PSA International and SingTel. In legal terms, an individual scholar receives her scholarship from a specific GLC, toward which she then owes corresponding obligations ("service bonds"). In operational terms, however, apart from legal documentation, these GLCs never come into the picture in the scholars' experiences. The GLCs reserve the rights to demand the scholars they have funded to perform the service bonds under them or to pursue legal damages when contractual violations occur, but rarely are these rights exercised, if at all. It would not be unfair to suggest that these corporations are only involved nominally because of their corporate legal status and the expediency of carrying out legal formalities. In effect, the Singapore MOE manages the program and implements all the relevant procedures.

In a nutshell, the SM2 program offers full scholarships to Chinese senior middle school year two students across different provinces in the country for undergraduate studies in engineering and science disciplines in Singaporean universities, on the condition that the scholars work in Singapore for an accumulated period of six years after graduation. Throughout the years, the core terms and conditions of SM2 have remained the same, save for some minor adjustments. The scholars are entitled to the following benefits during their scholarship tenure:

- A one-way airfare from the scholar's hometown to Singapore at the commencement of the program, and a return airfare between Singapore and China upon completion of undergraduate education;
- A living allowance of 6,000 Singapore dollars (S$) per annum until the scholar's completion of the normal course of university education; (the amount of allowance, which works out to be S$500 per month, was increased to S$800 per month from the 16th batch onwards;)

- A one-off settlement allowance of S$200 upon initial arrival in Singapore;
- All tuition and examination fees paid;
- Basic medical and personal accidents insurances; and
- Accommodation fees waived throughout the study period.

The obligations of the scholars, in detail, are:

- To major in science and engineering disciplines approved by MOE in either of the two major public universities in Singapore; (for a list of the disciplines SM2 scholars are eligible for, see Figure 3.1 later. Starting from the 15th batch in 2011, a newly established Singaporean university specializing in technology and design is added onto the eligible destinations for scholars from Sichuan, Jiangsu, Hebei, and Shandong Provinces;)
- Satisfying performances, academic and otherwise, over the entire scholarship period and;
- Upon graduation, completing accumulatively six years of work experience in either the sponsoring GLCs or any Singapore-registered company/organization.

Unsatisfactory academic performance or conduct during the scholarship tenure may result in the scholars receiving warning letters from the MOE; in more serious cases, they may have their scholarship funding terminated or be disqualified altogether and repatriated to China. Similarly, non-performance of the bond service after graduation also amounts to contractual violation. Upon such occasions, the sponsoring GLCs are, by virtue of the legal agreements, entitled to demand financial damages from the scholars, though the exercise of such rights is discretionary. Deferment of the service obligation is possible, but subject to case-by-case approval from the MOE or the relevant university authorities.

Although the terms and conditions of the scholarship have remained essentially the same, the scale of the program has grown significantly over the years, despite a slight decline most recently. Table 4.1 shows the numbers of scholars and their places of origin in various years for which I could obtain reliable statistics.

Table 4.1 Numbers of the 6th and 12th-17th batches of SM2 from various Chinese regions (sources: fieldwork and "SMiraclebook": pp. 12-13 www.smiracle.com/bbs)

Name of Chinese Administrative Region	6th (2002)	…	12th (2008)	13th (2009)	14th (2010)	15th (2011)	16th (2012)	17th (2013)	18th (2014)	19th (2015)	20th (2016)	No. of high schools eligible for SM2 program in the region (12th batch onward)
Heilongjiang	19		20	19	20	18	18	17				7
Jilin	12		17	14	15	14	13	13				5
Liaoning	-		18	20	20	17	16	15				5
Tianjin	-		12	12	13	10	10	8				8
Hebei	36		37	37	35	31	31	30				10
Henan	-		15	15	15	13	13	11				6
Shandong	18		27	27	30	25	23	23				7
Shaanxi	9		16	15	21	18	12	11				5
Hunan	-		15	14	15	13	10	9				6
Chongqing	-		16	17	15	18	15	11				8
Sichuan	41		40	40	40	36	36	31				8
Hubei	17		21	25	20	18	17	16				6
Jiangsu	39		40	41	37	34	34	26				19
Anhui	-		16	15	14	13	6	7				8
Zhejiang	-		15	17	15	11	11	11				6
Jiangxi	15		15	15	15	13	14	13				5
Fujiang	-		15	15	15	12	10	10				7
Guangdong	-		15	14	15	12	10	9				6
Hainan	-		6	5	4	-	-	-				4
Total	***206***		***376***	***377***	***371***	***326***	***299***	***271***				***136***

The SM2 program consists of four stages.

The first is the pre-Singapore stage, namely, the invitation, application and selection processes in China. This stage usually lasts from March, when the selection kicks off, until November of the same year, when successful scholars embark for Singapore to start their SM2 journey.

The next is a so-called "bridging course" stage lasting normally 18 months, comprising intensive university level preparatory courses in English communication, mathematics and science subjects (all taught in English), which aims to help the scholars adapt to an English-medium academic setting and the Singapore environment in general. This 18-month period is reduced to six months for scholars who are admitted to the "Accelerated Program" (AP) based on their exceptional academic performance at the beginning of the bridging course. In the 15th batch of 2011, SM2 scholars originating from seven provinces (Jiangsu, Shandong, Hebei, Sichuan, Zhejiang, Liaoning and Hubei) were asked to make the move to Singapore in July instead of November, and to go through bridging programs lasting twelve months before university matriculation in August the following year. Starting from the 16th batch, scholars from all provinces headed to Singapore in July and go through 12-month bridging courses; the AP program was abolished.

The third stage is the four-year university undergraduate course, during which the scholars enroll as normal students and study like any other undergraduate. Since the scholars have already passed the selection exams set by MOE, their admission to the universities is automatic, provided they perform satisfactorily during the preceding bridging courses. Which specific Singaporean university they get assigned to is largely decided randomly by the MOE, though scholars are asked to indicate their preferences prior to coming to Singapore. Scholars are also asked to indicate what majors they wish to pursue, and admissions are determined by the university schools or faculties that offer those majors.

Finally, upon graduation, scholars face either looking for jobs or pursuing further studies. Since higher studies are not encouraged under the SM2 scheme, most scholars enter the job market. Nonetheless, pursuing postgraduate education is in fact a sensitive

issue central to many scholars and their families' concerns, and this generates some tensions and doubts for the candidates at the invitation and selection stage in China, to which I now turn.

Recruitment Process

While acknowledging some intractable minor variations between different year cohorts and across different provinces, a general picture of the recruitment process can be sketched based on my ethnographic observation of the 15th batch recruitment in Jiangxi and my dialogues with scholars from various cohorts and provinces.

Typically in February or March, the Singapore MOE sends out invitations for application (see Figure 4.1, which forms part of the application materials in 2011) to the local educational bureau (LEB; *jiaoyu ting*) in each of the eligible Chinese provinces, entrusting them to pass on the invitation to the eligible schools. The application quotas are relatively modest, and vary from province to province, ranging from over a hundred in some to less than fifty in others. Only second year students at the eligible senior middle schools can apply, and a set of more subjective criteria is listed (Figure 4.2). Because scholars are eventually expected to major in engineering and science subjects in Singapore, the program predominantly attracts students from the science stream, though this need not be always the case.

1. 品学兼优、身体健康、奉公守法
2. 心理素质高、适应能力强
3. 具备领导才能、交际才能
4. 能够自立、自理、自律、自强
5. 有正确的名利观、人生观、价值观

(English translation:

1. Excellent academic standing and characters, good health, law-abidingness
2. Good psychological fitness, ability to adapt to new environments
3. Leadership skills and social skills
4. Independence, ability to look after yourself, self-discipline, self-motivation
5. Correct views on fame and riches, views on life, values.)

Figure 4.2 Eligibility criteria for SM2 applicant

[The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available through ORA because of copyright. The image was obtained from an informant during the resarch fieldowrk, but the form was created by the Singapore Ministry of Education.]

Figure 4.1 SM2 Form for Choice of Course, 15th batch, 2011

The application process is managed slightly differently in different provinces by their respective LEBs. On one extreme, the invitation may be extended to as large a pool of potential applicants as possible in the province, and elimination exams may be organized to determine who are to be put forward to sit the written exams administered by Singapore MOE; on the other extreme, there may be no preliminary exam at all, and the LEB may simply assemble the candidate list based on recommendations from the eligible schools. Since the provincial LEB controls the final list of applicants in that province to be submitted to MOE, they become the key gatekeeper in the whole process, and *guanxi*, the Chinese term for social capital or personal connections, may come into the picture, as it does in many aspects of Chinese life. Parents with strong *guanxi* capital—by being important local officials, resourceful business people or simply relatives and friends—may try to persuade the LEB or the school leadership to enter their children's names directly into the schools' or the LEB's candidate lists. Internal elimination exam, thus, becomes not just a way to distribute the limited SM2 opportunities more fairly, but also a way to manage *guanxi* demands.

Take the case of Jiangxi: Singapore's yearly SM2 quota for this province has been about 15 ever since the program started there in 2001, and the number of candidates invited to take the MOE written exams has always been around just 50. In 2002, exactly 50 candidates took the exams, and there was no elimination exam prior to that. Back then, only two schools in the province were eligible for SM2, and both were located in Nanchang. The two schools simply recommended their candidates to the Jiangxi LEB, one contributing 22, the other contributing 28. By 2011, however, five schools in Jiangxi Province were SM2-eligible, but the candidate quota did not increase—it was 48 for 2011. As the SM2 scheme became more well-known over the years, increasing numbers of students and parents became interested in the opportunity. This put the Jiangxi LEB under pressure, not least because now many more parents with *guanxi* are keen to let their children have a go at the SM2 exam. Consequently, according to informants who experienced the 2011 selection rounds, a province-wide elimination exam was held in January, involving more than 270 students. But according to an official from the Jiangxi LEB, this was already much reduced compared to the previous few

years, which saw as many as 3-4,000 students across the province competing for the 50 or so places on the LEB's final list.

The eligible schools also have various considerations and concerns of their own, which explain their varied ways of managing the invitation and application processes. Upon being notified by the provincial LEB to recommend students, a school may either make the invitation entirely public or selectively notify students. In 2002, for example, one eligible school in Jiangxi did not publicize the invitation school-wide, whereas the other school opened the application to anyone who was interested. Making the invitation open necessarily attracts more applicants, and therefore is administratively more complicated and time-consuming for the school. For instance, the latter school had to conduct an internal elimination exam to decide which students to recommend. Secondly, keeping the invitation under the table may serve some vested interests. For example, in the case of the first school, several teachers managed to put forward their own children who happened to be studying in senior year two as candidates. Some parents who had solid *guanxi* were also able to get the opportunity.

However, the main concern the Chinese schools have about the SM2 program is the worry that sending students to Singapore undermines the schools' own talent pool. Although the schools will not recommend clearly under-qualified students to take the SM2 exams, so as not to waste such good opportunities, reversely, neither are they willing to put forward their topmost students, because these are the "seeded players" who have potentials to win the schools honor and glory in the *Gaokao*. For "good" high schools in China (see chapter 3), the number of students admitted to top domestic universities such as Tsinghua and Peking in *Gaokao* is arguably the most crucial indicator of their standing, which in turn directly translates into the schools' future popularity and clout. Hence, students with potentials to enter top Chinese institutions are likely to be discouraged by their teachers from applying to SM2. In some schools, there may be explicit policies prohibiting, say, the top-50 ranked students in the year cohort to apply. Alternatively, the number of top students who are allowed to apply may be restricted. In yet other cases, instead of hard and fast rules, the school may try to dissuade top students from applying by convincing them that SM2/Singapore is not the best option

for them, and that they would be better off to remain in China. Here, it is perhaps interesting to note that even if the school policy forbids, parental *guanxi* easily takes precedence in the end. This was the case for one candidate from Jiangxi in 2002. The particular student in question was often the top-ranking student in the cohort, and statistically she was almost certain to make it into the Tsinghua or Peking University. When the school came to know that her name was on that year's LEB SM2 candidate list because of her father's *guanxi*, the headteacher and the headmaster of the school were said to have paid a purposeful home visit to persuade her and her parents to give up on SM2. Eventually, however, the student went ahead, won the scholarship and left for Singapore. For students who are not among such "protected pedigree," in contrast, the school's attitude is usually very positive. Sometimes, the school actively helps the students to give their best shot by providing supportive reference letters or even organizing interview coaching sessions.

Once the candidate lists have been finalized and submitted to Singapore MOE, MOE officials would personally travel to China and go from province to province to administer the written exams. They physically carry with them the exam papers and, afterward, carry back the answer sheets to Singapore for marking. For SM2 15th batch in 2011, these written exams across various provinces took place mostly in March, and it was believed that four separate teams of MOE officials, carrying four distinct sets of exam papers, traveled to the 19 eligible provinces via different routes. As has been the standard practice throughout the years, the exams comprised four papers: mathematics, physics, English language and General Aptitude Test (GAT); all were completed within the course of a single day. In the 2011 Jiangxi case, the written exams took place in early March. Results were announced in early May, shortlisting 48 candidates to 24 for interviews at the end of May. On the evening of the interview day, 13 students were informed of their success, making for a gross success rate of about 25 per cent. Table 4.2 presents the success rates at various stages of the 14th batch (2010) SM2 selections in a number of provinces.

Province/ Region	No. of students who took written exam (= application quota)	No. of students shortlisted for interview	No. of students finally awarded scholarship	Written exam pass rate (%)	Interview pass rate (%)	Net success rate (%)
Anhui	43	16	14	37.21	87.50	32.56
Fujian	45	21	15	46.67	71.43	33.33
Zhejiang	37	29	15	78.38	51.72	40.54
Henan	52	28	15	53.85	53.57	28.85
Heilongjian	69	32	20	46.38	62.50	28.99
Hebei	127	54	35	42.52	64.81	27.56
Hunan	45	18	15	40.00	83.33	33.33
Guangdong	42	18	15	42.86	83.33	35.71
Jiangsu	102	57	37	55.88	64.91	36.27
Chongqing	64	25	15	39.06	60.00	23.44
Shaanxi	53	31	21	58.49	67.74	39.62
Shandong	97	40	30	41.24	75.00	30.93
Sichuan	110	59	40	53.64	67.80	36.36
Total	*886*	*428*	*287*	*48.31*	*67.07*	*32.88*

Table 4.2 SM2 selection rates for some provinces, 14th batch, 2010
(source: "SMiraclebook," p. 46. www.smiracle.com/bbs)

Ethnographic account: SM2 15th batch, Jiangxi

Having looked at the SM2 program in terms of general facts and the recruitment processes, I now shift the perspective to that of the scholarship candidates themselves. In what follows, I describe the concerns and doubts, but more often the imaginations and desires that the Singapore "foreign talent" scheme set off in these students (and their parents too). The first subsection focuses on the aspiring scholars' sometimes ambivalent feelings toward the SM2 scholarship and toward Singapore. The second subsection portrays two of the Jiangxi 2011 candidates, one of whom was eventually successful while the other not. Interpreting their stories through the prism of social/cultural capital, I highlight the ways in which their differing family socioeconomic backgrounds and upbringings led to divergent personalities and cultivations. I argue that these two candidates' eventually divergent SM2 application outcomes give us some hints

as to what specific kind of human subjects Singapore desires. The final subsection is a quick sketch of the scholarship award ceremony for the successful candidates in Jiangxi 2011.

Perceptions and feelings

After the results of the MOE written exams were announced in early May 2011 for the Jiangxi SM2 applicants, I set about to get in touch with the 24 shortlisted candidates. It turned out that twenty were living in Nanchang. Through their schools, I managed to meet 19 of them, and asked them to complete a simple two-page qualitative questionnaire survey (Appendix I). Twelve survey forms came back to me in the end. In addition, with eight candidates who hailed from my former school, School A, I conducted a focus group discussion, asking them to talk freely about whatever concerns or thoughts they had about SM2.

In terms of these candidates' general perceptions of Singapore, their answers were largely formulaic. That Singapore was a beautiful "garden city" (*huayuan chengshi*), that it was one of the Asian "tiger economies" (*yazhou si xiaolong*), and that it was a safe and orderly society were things mentioned by virtually all candidates. Before the candidates took the SM2 exams, they were shown fancy promotional videos brought by the MOE officials. Needless to say, being the postcard country it is, Singapore deeply impressed the students. This is not to say, however, that the candidates might not have some other thoughts. One candidate said to me, "Singapore has only shown us the shiny side of things," but she wanted to know in greater detail what it would actually be like to live there. It was also interesting that many candidates believed that the *suzhi* or "quality" of Singaporean citizens were high—higher than that of the Chinese.[1] Others pointed out that Singapore had one of the most efficient and least corrupted governments in the world, perceived to be a far cry from the situation in China. Echoing what Vanessa Fong observes in *Paradise Redefined* (2011), these young Chinese citizens indeed showed a tendency to have rosy imaginations about the "developed world."

Pertaining to the SM2 program more specifically, the candidates' opinions resembled each other's too. They understood the rationale of the program mainly in

terms of “human capital exchange,” “human resource cooperation,” or “mutually beneficial exchanges.” All informants seemed to know that Singapore launched such “foreign talent” programs in order to augment its human resource base, particularly in the scientific and technological fields. In other words, these would-be scholars seemed to understand well the instrumentality or an “appropriated”-ness (Long, 2011) to the “foreign talent” subject-position. In fact, several male candidates voiced a rather more coarse-sounding version of this understanding, namely, that the scholars were basically recruited to “improve Singapore’s human genetic pool.” While it was never quite easy to ascertain how serious such cynical statements were meant to be—especially given that the speakers often spoke in a self-consciously cynical tone—there seemed to be no shortage of subscribers to such views. In the fieldwork, I once heard a teacher at an SM2-eligible Nanchang school share with some other people, apparently in all seriousness, what she felt she had discovered about SM2 through observing a number of years’ selection outcomes. According to her, academic aptitude was no longer a concern in the final interview stage, whereas the candidates’ physical appearances played a decisive role—it seemed to her that it was simply the better looking ones that were eventually picked by the Singaporean interviewers; to her, this supported the theory that Singapore was basically fishing for “good genes” in China. Those listening nodded in agreement, with no sign of incredulity.[2] In fact, I was also asked by the father of a slightly stocky boy candidate—“Look at the way he is, do you think he’ll make it?”

In any case, given that candidates seemed to appreciate the transactional dimension to the SM2 program, the majority of informants, when asked, suggested that they could accept the terms and conditions of the scholarship and thought they were “reasonable” or “fair.” The following are some of the typical responses found in the questionnaire answers:

> Having received so much from Singapore, I think it’s reasonable to perform the service.
>
> I think it’s a reasonable obligation – in any case for the six years we are going to get paid – it’s not as if it’s an unpaid service.

> It's the same to work in China or in Singapore. I don't mind the six-year bond. It may actually turn out to be better, because I heard it's easier to find a good job in Singapore than in China.

When asked if they felt being "made use of," one candidate responded with frankness: "It's mutually making use of each other—they use us for their ends, and we use them to our ends too. It's a bit like 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (*gejing suoneng, gequ suoxu*)." Only three candidates had different opinions. Two of them simply said that a service period was "okay," but six years was "a bit too long." The third provided an interesting answer:

> (Six years is) Too long. In my opinion, if Singapore really hopes to attract talents, they should make the students love the city from their hearts, so that the students will think Singapore is a place worth spending the best years of their youths, instead of imposing legally binding conditions. So I don't think it's reasonable, but I can appreciate why they are doing this.

It should be stressed that if somebody did not approve of the six years service condition or thought Singaporean universities not worth going to, they would probably not have considered applying for SM2 in the first place. As the Chinese society became more affluent on the whole, increasingly, going abroad for undergraduate or postgraduate education is no longer a rare privilege for urban Chinese families (Fong, 2011). With various strings attached, the appeal of the SM2 scholarship correspondingly decreases in these people's eyes. The academically most capable students tend to be confident that the gates of Harvard or Yale stay wide open for them at some point in the future, while the financially very well-to-do parents can afford sending their children to Western countries and institutions without having to incur obligations anyway. Thus, by and large, it may be assumed that those who have chosen to apply to SM2 were prepared to fulfil their obligations.

Most candidates also seemed more or less to accept—or at least so they said at the time of interview—the prospect that they would not easily be able to pursue postgraduate studies. In the "SMiraclebook," a digital guidebook about the SM2 program compiled by SM2 students already in Singapore to share insights with SM2 hopefuls and

their parents in China, I found the following passage:

> If you wish to pursue Master's or PhD studies at local universities, you must apply to MOE. Since you will not be leaving Singapore, the approval is relatively easy to obtain. Financial deposit is still required, though in reality there may be some leeway. If you wish to study for a Master's at a university outside Singapore, it's more complicated: you need to apply to MOE, then open a special bank account into which you deposit a financial guarantee. The bank account is frozen throughout the duration of your overseas graduate course, and you can only withdraw the deposit when you have returned to Singapore. The amount of financial deposit varies from year to year. A previous SM2 scholar who went for a Master's at Princeton suggested in their case the amount was 640,000 yuan. The deposit is calculated in terms of the total value of the SM2 scholarship plus 10% per annum compound interest. Without a Singapore citizen or Permanent Resident guarantor the deposit will amount to over 1,000,000 yuan. (source: "SMiraclebook", p. 20. www.smiracle.com/bbs, my translation)

While the passage remains obscure on quite a few points upon closer examination, the overall tone of the message is deterrent and discouraging, which should invite sophisticated reading. This passage could easily have been the most difficult and controversial for the SM2 scholar-authors to write in this entire guidebook, because the tension between the private desire to pursue further studies in top Western (primarily American) universities on the one hand and the public moral-legal duty to Singapore to fulfil the scholarship bonds on the other had to be handled delicately. The scholar(s) who wrote this passage would be wary of expressing or passing on views that were politically and morally incorrect, let alone legally transgressive. This means self-censorship becomes the scholars' discursive *modus operandi* when it comes to negotiating between the scholarship bonds and personal desires and objectives. As such negotiations become relevant for a minority of scholars when they approach graduation years later, they also become a very private matter, to be dealt with on an individual basis, and to be kept to oneself.

Postgraduate education at Master's and PhD levels means a great deal to Chinese students, because in the Chinese social context there is still a widely shared tendency to perceive a proportionate correlation between a person's academic accomplishments and her socioeconomic success. The specific conditions for the prevalence of this view are

complex, but as Andrew Kipnis (2011) argues, these include China's Confucian educational traditions in the past and the extremely competitive labor market at present, which makes higher academic qualifications less indications of specialist competence than a necessary mechanism for distributing job positions that are far outnumbered by job-seekers. I found during the fieldwork that many parents, teachers and students still considered Masters and/or PhD qualifications an unquestionable good. Chinese parents, in particular, hold these views strongly, because most of them grew up during the Cultural Revolution or its aftermath, and they often believed their life could be better had they not been brutally disrupted in their educational pursuits by the chaotic political movements. In China, parents hold strong influences over their children's educational choices (Bodycott, 2009; Fong, 2011). Consequently, many eligible and initially interested students were put off from applying to SM2 because of the perceived difficulty of pursuing postgraduate studies under the scheme. But even among the SM2 hopefuls, some parents were apparently already contemplating the idea of paying the deposit when the time came. In my focus group discussion, five out of eight candidates mentioned that they would consider paying the deposit to enable postgraduate studies, but they also added, "It is still too early to worry about that."

In sum, most SM2 candidates felt they could appreciate and accept the terms and conditions of the scholarship, despite some minor concerns. The same applied to their views on the restriction of university and course choices under the scheme. *Most* students suggested that they were interested in the science subjects anyway, and therefore there were no strong resistant feelings. (I say "most" but not "all," because there certainly are exceptions, as I shall explore in detail in chapter 7.)

When asked what they expected to gain and lose by taking up the SM2 program, the students' answers again converged. The most frequently mentioned potential loss was the separation from families, friends, and a familiar environment. Others also pointed out they would lose the opportunity to build up social and professional networks in China, just as China was becoming the most dynamic economy in the world. I soon realized that asking the candidates about their potential loss in taking up SM2 gave them the opportunities to narrate a detachment toward the scheme, which would come

in handy in case they failed the interview in the end. A typical statement, which I am fairly certain is echoed by SM2 applicants elsewhere in China and across different batches, runs as follows:

> SM2 selection for me is a challenge, and an opportunity to prove myself (*zhengming ziji*). If I got selected, I will be happy; if I didn't get selected, I might even be happier, because who knows what's the best path for me to travel? Whether I want to go to Singapore or not, this is a good exercise, to show that I am also capable of another mode of exam. It's an eye-opener too. I won't be upset at all if I didn't get it. (quote from questionnaire answers)

The perceived gains, unsurprisingly, far outweighed the perceived losses. Candidates echoed each other in talking generally about how Singapore could provide them with a superior education, how the universities in Singapore were highly regarded in the world, how the research resources there were unparalleled by Chinese institutions, and how studying in Singapore would help them develop an "international perspective" and train them to be "bilingual elites," and so forth.

Two particular imagined gains stood out. One pertained to the perceived meritocracy and fairness of the Singapore system, and how there the "rule of law is well-developed (*fazhi jianquan*)." Several students and parents ranked this very highly among Singapore's appeals to them. "In Singapore, you stand out because you are capable; in China you stand out because you have background or *guanxi,*" as one mother told me, "My son is very simple-minded and naïve, he doesn't know how to manipulate *guanxi*, he is just a serious good student, and I believe Singapore's environment *suits him* better." Others echoed: "Singapore is governed by law; China is governed by people and *guanxi,*" "In China there is no transparency, it's all cloud and smoke (*wuyan zhangqi*); in Singapore everything follows law and procedures"…

Another major perceived merit related to the apparent superiority of Singapore's education to that of China. When asked what they believed was the main difference between the Chinese and Singaporean educational systems, virtually every informant suggested that the Chinese system was exam-driven (*yingshi jiaoyu*), in contrast to which, the Singapore system focused on developing students' "practical skills" (*dongshou/shijian*

nengli) and creative capacities. Parents and school teachers, few of whom had actually been to Singapore, let along have deep knowledge about the place, strongly held these views too, and probably influenced the students' own discourses. I found it interesting how with yet little actual insight into the Singaporean educational system and society, the candidates came to possess such strong, dichotomized views, which pitted a superior and desirable "other" against an inferior and undesirable "self"—although I also realize that years ago I might have said exactly the same things when SM2 was in front me. Whether these candidates' perceptions and imaginations about Singapore were to be confirmed or disconfirmed, and whether their desires are to be satisfied or disappointed, are questions that I follow up in later chapters; but the fact that the candidates eagerly entertained such imaginations bespoke their criticism of the current Chinese system which they knew only too well (chapter 3). For at least some SM2 aspirants, desiring Singapore was both a symbolic gesture of protest against a system that they found wanting as well as an attempt to break free from it.

Jun and Chen: sketches of two SM2 candidates

I mentioned earlier that SM2 did not attract the most socioeconomically privileged of Chinese students; so what kinds of background do the SM2 students come from? While this is not a question that can be answered satisfactorily in the absence of large datasets, what can be said is that my wide contacts with many SM2 scholars from various provinces and cohorts revealed that they were predominantly children of urban middle-class families. A great many SM2 scholars I got to know had parents who were doctors, teachers, civil servants and so on. These are rarely strictly speaking rich or powerful families, but equally rare are those who come from really humble origins.

During my Jiangxi fieldwork, I got to know several candidates and their families particularly well. Among them were two boys from School A—let me call them Jun and Chen—who came from quite different socioeconomic backgrounds, and had contrasting personalities and cultivations. Thus, their eventually divergent interview outcomes seemed to offer some interesting comments on the ways in which sociocultural capitals matter in the SM2 selection.

Let's look at the cases of Jun and Chen.

Jun is from a rather well-to-do family. His father is the vice master of a private technical college in Nanchang, and his mother is an environmental engineer working for a government bureau. The family owns two comfortably sized sedan cars—a Lexus and a Honda—and lives in a spacious two-storey penthouse in a gated residential community. Their upper-middle class affluence has made possible good investment in Jun's education or, broadly speaking, "cultivation" from an early age. Jun plays the piano, guitar and is learning saxophone. From as early as Jun was in primary school, his parents hired *waijiao* or native English-speaking teachers (which are still not so numerous in Nanchang as they are in some wealthier Chinese cities) to tutor Jun on spoken English for at least two hours a week. As a result, when I met Jun, I noticed that his spoken English was quite impressive for his age, and certainly stood out from his peers in school. But more significantly, according to Jun's parents, extended exposure to foreign teachers has also given him a somewhat liberal and non-traditional mentality and mannerism. This manifests in his Americanized spoken English—he has had mostly American *waijiao*s—and his casual and sometimes assertive demeanor. In fact, when preparing for the interview, Jun's parents became quite concerned that his casual and assertive personal style might be a liability. Nonetheless, what I met was a 17-year-old with a strong character: fluent, sociable, confident if occasionally cocky, and obviously privileged though not necessarily pampered.

On the other hand, we have Chen, who comes from an urban working class family: his father is a worker at a state-owned road construction and maintenance company, while his mother works in a bank branch as a clerk. Chen previously went to a small little-known junior middle school in the city, though for senior middle school he was able to enter School A. Chen's spoken English was not as fluent as Jun's, and he frequently mispronounced words. But his greater disadvantage is perhaps a lack of confidence in his manners. He speaks softly and smiles shyly. In contrast to Jun's self-assuredness, he tends to intersperse his speech with expressions indicating hesitation such as "*aiya,*" "hmmm," "well, I don't know" and the occasional sighs.

It was not that Chen lacked ideas or thoughts compared to Jun, but he expressed

them less articulately and less confidently. He is a relatively quiet boy, and although he counts several sports among his hobbies, such as rope skipping, he does not boast any musical skills in terms of mastery of instruments. Chen seemed to me a typical case of a "good child" (*hao haizi*) from less privileged backgrounds in the Chinese context. Academically capable students from less privileged backgrounds in China—and academically capable Chen surely was, notably more so than Jun if we were to judge based on their usual performances in school exams—are often praised for being *dongshi*, which literally means "understand things," implying that they know the importance of study as the only path leading to a better life. But children of this streak also tend to be filial and obedient in their personal ethos, which, at a social or interpersonal level, can be expressed in demure and non-competitive demeanors.

On the evening of the day of SM2 interview, I received a text message from Chen, telling me that he wasn't successful. Minutes later, at the other side of the phone was the mother of Jun, who shared with me in an ecstatic voice the news that Jun had made it! Chen would dutifully go back to school the next day and perhaps study even harder, as now he had no alternative but to face the *Gaokao* in about a year's time. Jun, on the other hand, shall not be back to school again, as he had many exciting plans: he wanted to improve his saxophone skills and also to learn to play band drums, which he hoped would be useful for the "talent show"—a yearly fixture of the SM2 bridging course.

Contemplating such outcomes, I could not help feeling how "lucky" Jun was, and how it was, in a way, "unfair" for Chen, while knowing perfectly well that the outcomes involved factors well beyond my knowledge. Jun's already well-to-do parents will now save a significant sum of money on his university education, and can perhaps invest in their son in other value-adding ways. For this family, an ascending trajectory seems about to shoot off from the circular orbit of social reproduction—with the blessing from Singapore.

The crowning moment and the first step in a thousand-mile journey

The very next day after the interviews was the scholarship award ceremony. The panel of four—two MOE officials and one professor from each of the two Singaporean

universities—who had interviewed the candidates the day before now sat on the dais in the conference hall, smiling, congratulating the winners.

Apart from administrative matters such as handing out and explaining the scholarship agreements to the scholars-elect, the main part of the ceremony was a speech given by the more senior MOE official who had been in charge of the SM2 program for some years—Madam Tan. What first struck me was how excellently Madam Tan was able to speak Mandarin. Apart from her speech speed, which was perhaps slightly on the slow side, it was virtually impossible to tell her apart from a good Mandarin speaker in China. Everybody present was extremely impressed, and a feeling of cordiality filled up the hall.

As for the contents of her speech, the single most prominent theme was to give advice to the scholars who were about to open a new chapter in their lives. Her voice was powerful yet affective, and ingeniously managed to come across motherly and teacherly at the same time. As she started, "A door is now open, leading to a colourful and challenging future. How to go on after this door is open, all is up to you."

She first praised the academic excellence of the scholars, saying that were they not excellent, they would not be sitting with her; but immediately she turned to the point: academic excellence alone was not enough for the SM2 program—a strong capacity for self-discipline and a sense of responsibility are indispensable! She suggested that in the past, some SM2 scholars failed themselves, not really because they were not academically capable enough, but because they lacked self-discipline. In the past 15 years, she said, the number of failure cases could be counted with her ten fingers; nevertheless, "each single case of failure is a painful experience, for both MOE and the scholar and their families."

"Suddenly confronted with a hitherto unexperienced degree of freedom—freedom from the pressure of *Gaokao* and from parental supervision—some scholars fell, letting themselves and their parents down," Madam Tan went on in a weighty tone. She then gave some examples: in one case, a scholar still in his bridging course, having succumbed to the temptation of the seductively abundant consumer society that Singapore is, was caught shoplifting. This was a "very serious" moral misconduct, and

leniency was out of the question; the offending scholar was immediately dismissed from the program and sent back to China. Another case involved a boy who fell into a romantic relationship that severely affected his academic performance. Madam Tan met with him for three times to talk to him, trying to help him. Despite this, the scholar's performance did not improve, but dropped further to the extent that he could not complete his bridging course; with regret, he was dismissed and repatriated too.

Accordingly, the scholars-elect in the hall were urged to learn to discipline themselves once they are in Singapore, to realize and always remember the responsibilities on their shoulders, and to keep close contact with their parents back at home as well as the MOE officials. Madam Tan's insistence on the scholars' keeping their parents updated was particularly notable. "Your parents are the source of your strength, they are always there for you, you must not let them worry; always stay in touch with them," she stressed. Indeed, later, when it was the turn for the two professors to speak, they reiterated the importance for the scholars to keep close contact with their family. One professor said:

> You must know, you are here today only because of your parents! You must be grateful to them and seek to show your gratitude! In the remaining half year before you go to Singapore, you should spend quality time with them. Once in Singapore, you should also call them frequently.

It was interesting to observe how these advice and admonitions hinted at the paternalism that some argue characterizes the Singapore state (Heng & Devan, 1995). Only in this case, paternalism was taken to the literal level. Madam Tan spoke a motherly solicitude for the well-being of the scholars, and she enlisted strength from the scholars' real parents—who were all present at the ceremony—to ensure that the scholars knew the right things to do. The repeatedly emphasized filial gratitude, we may retrospectively surmise, was an ethos that MOE would wish the scholars to imbibe in relation to Singapore as well. The unspoken other half to the professor's statement "you are here today only because of your parents" could easily have been "you are here today also because of *Singapore*"—the newly adopted parent of these scholars. Being awarded an MOE scholarship marked the Chinese scholars' impending induction into the

Singaporean regime of citizenship and subjecthood.

* * *

It is in such a tone that the pre-Singapore stage of the SM2 program resolves. Singapore secures the budding "foreign talents" that it will later nurture to become eventually part of its human capital, while the scholars themselves are equally excited in terms of their fanciful imaginations and expectations of the forthcoming adventures in the city-state. Desires are set in motion, but so is discipline. As Madam Tan never tired of stressing, when desires are given certain freedoms and privileges, temptations and indiscipline tend to follow. This is perhaps the reason why *discipline* very much sets the tone for the 18-month long (six months in case of "AP" and twelve months in case of 16th batch onward) bridging course that SM2 scholars undergo after their arrival in Singapore. In this bridging period, the scholars are subject to a highly regimented study routine set by MOE that ironically resembles their Chinese high school regimen. During term time, daily timetables are packed busy; purposefully chartered coaches fetch scholars to their bridging course venues in the morning and fetch them back again to their hostels in the evening. The hostels are specially arranged for the SM2 scholars, where curfew rules apply. In some sense, the bridging course period is deliberately made to feel contiguous with the scholars' Chinese high school environment from which they have just stepped out. We may speculate that MOE's main rationale for such a design is their concerns that the scholars, who are teenagers after all, might ill-handle the freedoms given them and that they might not adapt well to the English-medium university environment were they not subject to rigorous academic training.

The highly regulated and somewhat isolated nature of the SM2 bridging course made it difficult for me to gain access to the scholars to carry out meaningful ethnographic research. Furthermore, from my foraging on online forums for the scholars' accounts of their bridging course life, I also sensed that this stage presented relatively few opportunities for fruitful discussions in the context of this thesis. Instead, it is when the scholars fully enrol as university undergraduates, immersed in the

Singapore higher education environment proper and studying alongside *other* figures such as the local Singaporean students, that the dramas of desire unfold and intensify. I turn to these aspects of the PRC scholars' experiences in education in the next Part.

PART TWO

Experiencing Desire—Encountering the Other in Education

In the three chapters of Part One, I have endeavored to set out a backdrop—both factual and analytical—for exploring the lives and desires of the PRC "foreign talent" scholars in Singapore. There, I looked firstly in broad strokes at some background facts regarding Singapore's "foreign talent" policy and the local society's discourses around the issue of "foreign talent" in recent years (chapter 2); then, I took a drastic turn to the realm of school education in China to examine the ways in which Chinese middle school students are educated and shaped as specific subjects of desire (chapter 3), which, as I shall soon show, have significant implications for their subsequent educational sojourns in Singapore; finally, based on my China-stage ethnographic fieldwork, I offered an account on how some of China's promising senior middle school students were selected by Singapore to take part in its government-sponsored scholarship schemes, and how these students thought and talked about the schemes before they actually set foot on their "foreign talent" journeys in the Southeast Asian city-state (chapter 4).

Moving on to this middle part of the thesis, I zoom in to examine the PRC scholars' encounters and experiences in the context of university education in Singapore. No doubt, the notion "experience" is an incredibly vague and inclusive one, capable of signifying a wide range of things, from the most mundane and tedious events in everyday life to sentient subject's phenomenological relations to space and time. Here, I concretize and delimit the term "experience" by situating my research findings against extant scholarship centered on the notion of "student experience" in relation to international educational mobility.

As international student mobility at the level of higher education becomes ever more widespread a phenomenon (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Byram & Dervin, 2008), recent years has seen a growing body of research on the academic sojourning experience.

This body of research literature is informative and useful for providing frames of reference for my examination of the PRC scholars in Singapore, because after all, the latter too are internationally mobile students. Within this literature, the problem of "adjustment" stands out as a prominent theme (L. Brown, 2008, p. 76; Marginson, 2014). This is because, as Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002, p. 364) helpfully summarize: international students experience added difficulties in terms of "culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to unfamiliar social norms, eating habits, customs and values, differences in education systems, isolation and loneliness, homesickness, and a loss of established social networks." More specifically, many researchers have further looked into the various overlapping sub-categories of difficulties and "shocks" that typically confront international study-sojourners, such as the "culture shock" (e.g. Adler, 1975; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), "learning/education shock" (e.g. Gu & Maley, 2008; Yamazaki, 2005; Z. Zhang & Brunton, 2007), "language shock" (e.g. Agar, 1996; L. Brown, 2008; Ryan & Twibell, 2000), "communication shock" (e.g. Aveni, 2005; Holmes, 2004, 2007), and so on. These "shocks" are usually understood as stemming from the vast gulf separating the international students' home culture and their new host culture—a gulf which in turn results in the international educational sojourn being described as "one of the most traumatic events in a person's life" (L. Brown, 2008, p. 76) that "brings with it a considerable amount of accompanying stress" (Cushner & Karim, 2004, p. 292).

In my explorations of the PRC undergraduate scholars' experiences at UIS in the three following chapters, I enter into various dialogues with such scholarly literature. Doing so not only duly acknowledges what is common between the PRC scholars in Singapore and other internationally mobile students elsewhere, but more importantly, reversing the same token, it also allows me to highlight what is unique about my case. In a recent stock-taking account, Simon Marginson (2014) critically argues that the prevalent use of the notion "adjustment"—especially in the research pertaining to international students' experiences informed by cross-cultural psychology—assumes educational sojourn to be a largely passive process where the sojourners "adapt" or "adjust" to the host environment. This neglects the more complicated and agentic

character of the transformations sojourners often undergo. In agreement with Marginson on this point, I use the notion "adjustment"—as I do in chapter 5 in particular—cautiously, not to reduce the complexity of the educational sojourn experience, but merely to acknowledge that, at a practical level, studying in a different sociocultural environment does induce in the sojourners certain "adaptive" behaviors. Indeed, as I explore in chapter 5 the "micro cultural politics" of adjustment of the PRC scholars in UIS, I very much try to problematize the simplistic "adjustment" paradigm, and show how "adjustment" behaviors are always contingent and precarious. Furthermore, as I explore in chapter 6 the PRC scholars' transformative experiences revolving around the idiom of "very China"-ness, I echo Marginson's (ibid.) call for giving more attention to international students' "self-forming" agency, but also stress that "self-formation" is always dialectically entwined with "other-formation."

At the same time, pursuant to this thesis's central line of inquiry, namely, *desire*, in the three chapters of this Part I keep focused on the ways in which desire may be enlisted as a useful metaphor or interpretive trope to elucidate the specificities of my research subjects' experiences. Echoing Henrietta Moore's (2011, 58) observation "Otherness is a resilient and intoxicating site of power and desire," all three chapters empirically illustrate how the experience of desire seems always intimately linked with *otherness*, and arises out of self-other relations and tensions. "The self-other relation is one that takes place within the relational character of being human and thus is always shot through with social imaginaries and relations of power," as Moore (ibid., p. 76) also notes. Indeed, otherness, self-consciousness, desire for the other, fantasies and stereotypes about the other, imaginaries and power are the common threads that run through all three chapters.

These chapters also build on the materials in Part One and make various references back to them by showing how the PRC "foreign talent" scholars' experiences must be interpreted against specific contexts and genealogies. Indeed, many of the nuances, ambiguities and contradictions attendant to "foreign talent" as a controversial social issue in Singapore and attendant to the Chinese students' specific educational and cultural subjectivities, which I explored in the previous Part, underscore the equally nuanced,

ambiguous and conflicted experiences of desiring I depict in this Part. There are often contradictions in the PRC scholars' experiences and discourses, but I believe ethnography is uniquely suited to dealing with them, because "Far beyond authorizing gross dualisms or master theories, anthropology's unique analytical force lies in recording competing rationalities and vital experimentations, in conceptualizing fine articulations of worlds, differentiated, in flux and impending" (Biehl & Locke, 2010, pp. 335-336).

Social anthropologist Harri Englund (2002, p. 267, emphases added) once felicitously remarked, "migration"—educational or otherwise—is "a *transition* rather than [just] a *transportation*." Ultimately, in these three chapters, my aim is to examine some of the micro sociocultural politics, the subjective transformations, the desires, imaginations, and frustrations entailed in the PRC students' transitions to being Singapore's "foreign talent" in a local university. Much of these chapters deal with the *perceptions* and *discourses* that emerged in this fraught process of transition. In reporting them, I do not endorse these perceptions and discourses as if they were "real" or "true;" my aim, instead, is to show the micro processes, the dynamics, the minutiae of desiring.

5 Singlish and Singaporean:

The micro cultural politics of adjustment

With what I had read in existing literature about international student-sojourners' experiences elsewhere in mind, one of the questions I initially struggled hard with after moving to Singapore to begin examining the PRC scholars' life in the "University Institute Singapore (UIS)" was where their adjustment "problems" or "shocks" lay, if there were any indeed. In the extant literature, there is a conspicuous dearth of research on the experiences of internationally mobile students who study and live in cultures that are believed to be not drastically different from their own. Does Singapore's proximity—in many senses verily so—to China mean that the PRC scholars encounter no notable problems of "transition?" In the early stage of the Singapore fieldwork, I was indeed served the unsettling "So What?" question by several of my more forthright interlocutors, who casually claimed that there were "no big issues" for them to adapt to Singapore. But is this really the case upon closer examination?

Zhou and Todman (2008, p. 222) observe that the most significant problems facing international students are often study-related. In the case of PRC scholars in UIS, however, study-related problems were not found to be prominent. On the whole, the PRC scholars actually tend to do well academically, and this finds some evidence in the "Dean's Lists" published by various UIS science/engineering schools or faculties on their noticeboards—when I glanced at these lists when walking past, I noticed that student names spelt in the easily recognizable Mainland Chinese *hanyu pinyin* style often dominated them. Many of my research informants seemed to adopt an apparently dismissive attitude toward study as the purpose of their university education; they often spoke along such lines: "Well, when it comes to study, we will just study, no difference (from anybody else)…it's *not* the main point of undergraduate education." (See chapter 7 for a dedicated discussion of this issue.) They say this, however, while by and large

being able to maintain good to excellent academic performance. In one striking example, I remembered what a second year female student told me in a completely nonchalant tone:

> Well, study just has to be "dealt with" (*yingfu guoqu*)… So if I eventually failed to get "A" for one or two subjects [in the entire undergraduate course], I won't be overly disappointed.

That study should turn out largely to be a "non-issue" for the majority of the PRC scholars in UIS, of course, owes much to the fact that they were in the first place selected by Singapore precisely for their academic strengths (see chapter 4). Furthermore, the scholars' financial assistance depends on their continuous satisfying performance—their exam results are closely monitored by both the university and the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE), and if a scholar's Grade Points Average (GPA) drops below 3.5 (out of 5), their scholarship is liable to be terminated. This is not to deny, though, a very small number of PRC scholars do fail academically. From both my personal observations as a "foreign talent" scholar in Singapore for close to six years as well as hearsays during fieldwork, I have known a handful of scholars who either dropped out of the scholarship programs prematurely before returning to China or who had their financial assistance revoked such that they had to take out student loans and/or receive financial bailouts from parents to complete their courses.

Academic success, however, being only one dimension to successful educational sojourn, is not necessarily related to adjustment experiences in broader sociocultural domains (A. Li & Gasser, 2005). Problems and issues concerning language adjustment, which are also widely reported in previous research, occupy more ambiguous places in the experiences of the PRC scholars at UIS. Generally speaking, Singapore, being a multilingual society with a dominantly ethnic Chinese population, presents a much smaller obstacle for international students from China in terms of initial linguistic adjustments. Not a few of my informants recalled an interesting episode relating to language at the beginning of their Singapore sojourns. The following comment made by SM3 scholar Cheng Yi (M, 20), who was a second year engineering major, during our

interview is illustrative of this not uncommon experience:

> At first I thought people in Singapore all speak English, and I made myself a fool (*shabu laji*) by initially speaking English everywhere! (laugh) But they speak back to me in Mandarin, and everywhere I go, supermarkets, shops, even classmates in school [university]…they just speak Mandarin to me. And then I can't be bothered to speak my handicapped (*biejiao*) English any more. We all thought we were going to have language barriers (*yuyan zhangai*), but that's not the case.

During a semi-structured focus group discussion with three final year students majoring in Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE), they half-jokingly told me that for Chinese students/scholars studying EEE—the course with the highest concentration of Chinese students in UIS—they could get through four years of undergraduate education without needing to speak much English. While this was obviously a sort of cynical overstatement that I not infrequently encountered among male engineering students, it nevertheless revealed several interesting facts about their undergraduate experience. First, since EEE has the largest number of PRC scholars, if they wished, they often could avoid having to team up with local Singaporeans or other international students for group-based coursework. Secondly, many academic staff members in UIS, especially in the science/engineering faculties, are themselves originally from China, which results in off-class discussions and interactions sometimes being carried out in the obviously more comfortable language—Mandarin. Thirdly, because of their unique pedagogic background (see chapter 3), Chinese students often demonstrate a propensity for self-study (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996), which means that they tend to spend long solitary hours in the libraries or their dorm rooms; on one or two occasions, I even saw Chinese students in the UIS library poring over the classic green cover-page *Gaodeng Shuxue* (Advanced Mathematics)—a foundational textbook widely used by universities in China—presumably to supplement their studies. Given these circumstances, "language shock" did not seem to stand out as a big issue for the PRC scholars who are virtually all engineering/science-majored. Compared to Chinese educational sojourners in the Anglo-Saxon English-speaking countries who often study subjects that require stronger written and oral English communication skills such as business, the PRC scholars in

Singapore certainly have a much less troubled initial adjustment.

But although initial academic and everyday linguistic adjustments might be relatively smooth, there seems another story to be told when it came to PRC scholars' social adjustment and integration.[1] Here, language re-emerges as an issue, particularly "Singlish."

Singlish: the cultural politics of language adaptation

My informants pointed out that while the typically bilingual Chinese Singaporeans might choose to speak to them in Mandarin, thus making communication easier, Mandarin is not the language Singaporeans commonly use amongst themselves. Instead, "Singlish," a uniquely Singaporean version of grammatically flexible spoken English that liberally incorporates various Malay and Chinese dialect vocabularies (Deterding, 2007), is the *lingua franca* among young Singaporeans. Most PRC scholars reported being ill at ease with Singlish initially, and I found that most of my informants, including many who had been in Singapore for quite a number of years, typically did not distinguish between Singlish on the one hand and English spoken with Singaporean accents on the other. While the former is a form of patois or creole tongue usually spoken very fast by Singaporeans in informal social settings, and should be regarded as a far cry from English with proper grammar and vocabulary albeit spoken in the Singaporean accent, it was typical for the PRC scholars to consider the latter too as "Singlish." Having been previously trained in their middle schools in China to regard only the American or the British accent as the "proper" way to speak English, to the PRC scholars, the Singapore-accented English might easily come across as a non-standard and aesthetically inferior linguistic form. In any case, although Singapore-accented English is relatively easy to get used to, and normally by the time they finished their "bridging courses" it no longer constituted a problem, the much more socioculturally embedded and therefore cryptic Singlish remains an obstacle. Quite a number of informants mentioned they used to feel being socially excluded by Singaporeans; this is either because the Malay or Chinese dialects (mostly Hokkien) terms used in Singlish—and these terms are usually

the key words because of the succinct ways in which they deliver a variety of linguistic effects such as exaggeration or humour—prevented them from getting the gist of the communicative flow, or because, even if they understood the Singaporeans, they had no ability to partake in Singlish conversations and banters. Thus, Singlish, as a unique marker for identification (D. G. E. Ho, 2006; Leong, 2011, pp. 560-562) and arguably also a potent vehicle for cultural intimacy (Herzfeld, 2005) among Singaporeans,[2] has the marked effect of excluding and isolating "others," such as the PRC scholars. As one of my interviewees Yin Le (F, 19) recollected during an interview:

> I remembered sitting in the common room with a group of Singaporeans in an Orientation event. They just kept speaking among themselves loudly and very fast in Singlish. Sometimes I don't understand them, but even when I understand I don't know what to say back. Gradually they no longer engaged with me, and it gave me a kind of oppressive feeling (*yapo de ganjue*)...

Regarding Singlish, in her study of young Korean migrant students in Singaporean public schools, Yoonhee Kang (2012, p. 168, emphases added) notes that "many Korean students come to value Singlish as a *solidarity marker*, as the language of their local friends in the domain of friendship." As I also observed in the fieldwork, most PRC scholars seemed cognizant of the importance of Singlish in lubricating communication with their Singaporean peers; some actually claimed that they would switch to Singlish when speaking with the locals. It should be noted, however, when referring to "Singlish," what they really meant was usually little more than Singapore-accented English, which they achieve by modifying their English—which is far from "perfect" to begin with—with some of the most prominent and superficial features of the Singapore English accent in terms of intonation, stress, rhythm, in addition to unique customary local pronunciations of certain words; regarding the last, one male informant once flippantly offered me a rule-of-thumb research tool: he suggested, to see if somebody has "localized (*bian low-co le*)," the easiest test is to hear they pronounce the word "three"—whether with a non-sibilant interdental fricative as per the common English pronunciation or in the typical Singaporean way as "tree." The furthest the Chinese students would go in trying to speak Singlish normally involves dropping a few "lah,"

"lor," "meh," etc.—particles derived mostly from the Chinese dialects—in their speech and/or appropriating some of the most common short expressions or sentence structures used by Singaporeans, but whether they manage to "pull off" these features appropriately à la Singlish is often hit-or-miss. None of my informants, except for several who actually hailed from Fujian province (where the Hokkien dialect originates), professed to have much knowledge of the Chinese dialect terms used in Singlish, let alone the Malay ones. For the PRC scholars, a more readily practicable form of linguistic adjustment involves twisting their accent in speaking Chinese to imitate the way Chinese Singaporeans speak Mandarin; because doing this is much easier and arguably equally effective in creating some sense of identification and amity with the local (Chinese), this strategy of speaking the "Singapore-style Mandarin" (*xinjiapo shi zhongwen*) was a more widely observed phenomenon.

Whether in relation to Singlish, Singapore-accented English or Singaporean Mandarin, I should note, the efforts different individuals were willing to put into such adaptive behaviors and the levels of success different individuals attain in doing so seemed to vary greatly. To some Chinese students, sporting the Singaporean accent, whether pertaining to speaking English or Chinese, might be a largely unconscious and "natural" outcome of frequent daily contact with the locals; for others, this might involve more conscious efforts. In addition, a number of variables such as different individuals' varying natural flairs for languages, their personalities and temperaments, also seemed to affect their attitudes toward linguistic adaptation. It is quite impossible to draw out any neat analytical patterns, but generally speaking, it seemed that girls were more willing and capable of picking up Singaporean accents while the boys appeared less enthusiastic or successful; the more academically focused scholars tended to be less susceptible to influence, whereas the socially more active or extroverted individuals appeared to enjoy more readily switching into and out of Singaporean accents as social situations demanded. Obviously, the length of a person's stay in Singapore is also an important factor, though not one that necessarily works in a straightforwardly linear fashion: while having spent longer time in Singapore usually means more exposure to Singlish and Singaporean accents, yet as the Chinese scholar-sojourners further develop

their self-identities in relation to education and work, their dis/identification with Singaporean culture (see chapter 6 and Part Three), and consequently with Singaporean speech accents, may also change in complicated ways; the specific social contexts of the scholars' daily lives—where they study/work, who they study/work with and so on—inevitably influence their linguistic practices in their subsequent sojourn journeys in Singapore.

With regard to initial adjustment in the university context which is my concern in this chapter, I wish to note that while linguistic adaptations to the local form as mentioned above seem to underscore the PRC scholars' desires, whether conscious or not, to "fit it," adaptation is not the only response. In fact, language could also become an arena for a micro cultural politics to play out amidst processes of discrimination and jostling for social recognition of sorts. Although many Chinese Singaporeans choose to speak Mandarin to the PRC students, there are also those who are either not able or not willing to do so. Given the macro social discourses and perceptions in Singapore society pertaining to "foreign talents" and especially those from China (chapter 2), it did not surprise me when some of my informants confessed to having felt being looked down upon by Singaporeans in one way or another. Often, a convenient occasion for the expression of such discriminatory attitudes is when the PRC scholars' relatively poor command of English or their Chinese-tainted English accents irritate the Singaporean ears. One of my key informants, Han, a 19-year-old young man in his second year, mentioned in our interview that once, when a Chinese friend and classmate of his volunteered to answer a question raised by the professor during a lecture, a row of Singaporean male students seated at the back of lecture room simply broke out laughing, possibly at the silly eagerness of this "PRC scholar" to answer the professor's question, but more probably at his "funny" spoken English which, which was not very fluent and had a strong Chinese accent.

These experiences *per se* are not dissimilar to the language-based social discrimination and exclusion faced by (Chinese) international students elsewhere (e.g. Tian & Lowe, 2009); and Tananuraksakul and Hall's (2011) study in the Australian context argues that perceptions of linguistic competence could affect international

students' emotional well-being and even their senses of dignity. What is noteworthy in my case is that those PRC scholars in Singapore who experienced such discriminations or feelings of insult found themselves in a position to resist or even launch counter-insults by mobilizing certain cultural and symbolic resources available to them. For example, the PRC students' most typical counter-strategy is to devalue Singlish or Singapore-accented English, and implicitly also those who speak them, by appealing to a symbolic hierarchy of Englishes which valorizes the more authoritative or "authentic" British or American accents. Indeed, counterbalancing those who showed adaptiveness to the "local" ways, in fieldwork I also came across not a small number of PRC scholars who positively resisted adopting the Singaporean English accent, convinced that the latter lacked aesthetic quality and international prestige. A small minority, either due to their previous educational background or their current aspiration, would even make a point to imitate the American accent (manifested particularly in the ubiquitous and exaggerated rhotic) or the British accent (the "classiness" of the "received pronunciation"). To local Singaporeans, such feigned foreign accents put up by the PRC scholars come across as cringe-inducing pretentiousness not any less silly or laughable compared to Mainland Chinese-tainted English accents; but when Singaporeans express their disdain, the PRC scholars could always counter by mocking Singlish and the Singaporean accents in return. A not uncommon observation made by my interlocutors about Singaporeans' linguistic abilities is that (Chinese) Singaporeans are "half buckets of water" (*bantong shui,* meaning half-baked) in both English and Chinese,[3] and therefore they have no legitimacy in laughing at the Chinese on the point of linguistic incompetence. One of my more cynical and grumpy informants once remarked thus regarding Singaporeans—"They speak *Singlish* as if it's *English*" and that "They can't even speak a complete sentence in *proper* Mandarin!"

By thus mobilizing a resource available to him, namely, mother tongue superiority, this scholar and others who share his opinion reclaim some sense of self-worth and dignity and carve out some comfort space amidst experiences of discrimination. As research in social psychology has noted, psychological defense mechanisms arise when a person feels threatened or injured (Cramer, 2000); it is further pointed out that in such

defensive coping, culture itself may be drawn upon as a powerful symbolic source of strength (Kuo, 2011). The PRC scholars' variegated attitudes toward and engagements with Singlish—a metonymy for Singapore culture and society—should thus be seen as underpinned by both desires to adapt and desires to self-defend through a micro cultural politics.

The "high" Singaporean: stereotypes amidst failures to engage

Extant research found that among international students there is usually a strong desire to achieve contact, friendship and social engagements with the host nationals (L. Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Holmes, 2007; Lewthwaite, 1996; Marginson, 2014). Friendship in general has been noted as an important factor contributing to emotional well-being and successful adjustment in international sojourn (Collins, 2010; Conradson & Latham, 2005; Wiseman, 1997). Among three broad categories of friendly connections in the context of international educational sojourn, namely, those with the host nationals, with co-nationals, and with people from other nationalities (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Dyal & Dyal, 1981), meaningful contact or friendly engagement with the host nationals is believed to be uniquely important because of the actual or perceived benefits it brings to the international students (L. Brown, 2009a).[4] Previous research has also identified a positive relationship between international students' successful adjustment to the host environment and the amount and frequency of their interactions with host nationals (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Selltiz & Cook, 1962). However, in reality, there is a widely documented lack of interaction among different student groups in the multi-national/cultural campuses of Western higher education institutions (see L. Brown, 2009a, p. 185 for a review). In specific, researchers point out that international students typically fail to establish meaningful contact with host nationals due to a variety of reasons, including the host nationals' lack of interest in engaging with the former (L. Brown, 2009a; L. Brown & Holloway, 2008; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010, chapters 13-15). This oftentimes leads to a sense of "deep disillusionment" (L. Brown, 2009b, p. 439) in international students who expect

highly from such contacts, and cause them to fall back onto social networks which involve mostly their co-nationals (L. Brown, 2009a; L. Brown & Holloway, 2008), effectively resulting in a phenomenon of "ghettoization" (Kim, 1988) that defeats the many proclaimed advantages and benefits associated with higher education internationalization and global student mobility (Dall'Alba & Sidhu, 2013; De Vita, 2005).

In so far as the PRC scholars in Singapore are also international student-sojourners, they were not always exempted from these issues reported in the scholarly literature, but the unique features to their specific case are worth highlighting. While Singapore's relative geographical and cultural proximity to China arguably renders it less curious a place for the PRC scholars and undoubtedly makes the latter's sojourn adjustment problems less severe, as the previous section alludes, there could be other pitfalls. The significant presence of PRC "foreign talents" in the UIS campus offers them the tempting option to stay cooped up in their own comfort zones, while the cultural symbolic resources they mobilize for psychological defense against local discrimination could easily turn into forms of antisocial discourses and attitudes that threaten their integration in a multicultural university campus and jeopardize their harmonious interaction with the host nationals. Attending to these nuanced and sometimes contradictory sociocultural dynamics, in this section, I look at some contentious stereotypical images of the Singaporeans that some PRC scholars developed amidst failures to establish meaningful mutual engagement.

Although not all my informants made equally strong assertions, they generally agreed that as foreign students they should aim to establish interaction and connection with their Singaporean hosts, regardless how they currently evaluated their degree of success at doing so. In an interview, I probed my interlocutor Gao Mei (F, 18, mathematics major) by asking her: As a Chinese "foreign talent" scholar in Singapore, even without such interactions and connections you would have virtually no problem, so why is interaction important? Her answer piqued my interest: "Interaction (*jiaoliu*) perhaps is not very important (*zhongyao de*). But I think it's a *must* (*bixu de*)! Or I should say it's an

obligation (*yiwu*)." I then further pursued by asking what in her opinion constituted meaningful interaction with the locals, and there came her even more interesting reply:

> Perhaps meaningful interaction with them is being able to get "*high*" together with them (*gen tamen yiqi* high). But we can't seem to…

What is the meaning of this getting "high," which in Gao Mei's opinion seemed to stand in PRC scholars' way of achieving meaningful connection with local Singaporeans?

Previous research (Bochner et al., 1977; Kuh, 1995; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002) has noted the importance of Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) as providing valuable opportunities for international students to meet and interact with host nationals, and potentially to establish meaningful connections. When Gao Mei mentioned "getting high," it turned out she was exactly referring to her observation of the Singaporean university students in the context of ECAs and the PRC scholars' difficulties in connecting with them.

In regard to ECAs, the university campus culture in Singapore seems to bear the imprints of Anglo-American, but especially North American, university campus cultural forms (see Nathan, 2005): "orientation camps" with outrageous pranks, (Resident) Hall Junior Common Room Committees (JCRCs) and their social events, myriad kinds of university-wide sociocultural societies, and sports-related student clubs with dedicated members who train to the neglect of study… Whether these were manifestations of Singapore's colonial hangover in the realm of education or the effects of more recent institutional osmosis in the process of higher education globalization, such colorful campus ECA cultures inevitably come across as somewhat alien to the PRC scholars, whose previous schooling experiences consisted primarily of the highly disciplined life in the Chinese senior middle schools (see chapter 3) and the regimented life during the Singapore MOE-supervised "bridging courses."

In sharing living and learning spaces in the UIS campus, the PRC scholars' more studious disposition and sedentary lifestyles bring into relief the generally more physically and socially active characteristics of the Singaporean students. Some of my interlocutors self-stereotypically characterized the PRC scholars as being somewhat

zhai,[5] or antisocial in the sense of preferring to stay in dorm rooms to study or to consume Internet-based entertainments such as watching movies or playing computer games. Thus, although they live amidst Singaporeans and other international students in more than a dozen resident halls in UIS, PRC scholars are typically not at all well knit into the hall communities—the hall JCRCs and their activities tend to be the exclusive domain of the local students. The local students' greater enthusiasm for ECA activities such as orientation camps, sports competitions and so forth, thus stands out in the Chinese scholars' observation and perception.

The "orientation" activities may serve here as an example to illustrate how judgmental perceptions and stereotypical images could take shape amidst failures to understand and connect. My PRC scholar interlocutors expressed a spectrum of views regarding the orientation activities that they either went through or observed with cold eyes at the beginning of their university lives; while some suggested they had fun, most informants seemed to hold more ambivalent attitudes. What Zhou Peng (M, 23, final year engineering major) said in our interview was representative of the views at the negative end of the spectrum:

> The orientations were just silly: running around the campus, crawling in muddy grounds, blind-folding you and pressing your head into toilet bowls…all that kind of stuff. […] I wish they could do something more meaningful, more cultural, more sophisticated (*you shendu*), you know. But the locals seem to enjoy it so much, they get so *high* [sic, in English] on it! I can't fathom what get them so *high* on these activities…

Zhou Peng's judgmental tone was not shared to the same extent by most other PRC scholars I talked to, but even in the case of those informants who told me they did participate in their "Hall Orientation Camp" and so on and thought them fun, they still expressed amazement at how energetic, how "crazy" (*feng*), and how "high" the local Singaporean students could get.

As they told me, to take part in the orientation camps often involved staying awake for long hours to play physically demanding sports or prankish and embarrassing "ice-breaking" games, which are topped up by "lame" joke-telling, collective singing,

cheering and all sorts of compulsory jovial rowdiness. Although by self-selection those scholars who took part in such events tended to be extroverted and non-swot personality types, even they found keeping up with Singaporeans' "high" spirits during these activities somewhat taxing. From several informants' detailed descriptions of their experiences in these orientation camps, I figured that they tended to remain at the margins of these events, and their not being able to get as "high" might have come across as a bit of a spoiler or put-off for the Singaporeans. Viewing these orientation camps and similar events from an anthropological perspective, it may be posited that their core function is to reinforce social bonding and feelings of camaraderie through deliberately using embarrassing and "silly" activities to tear up people's masked social performance and staged personas (Goffman, 1969). Yet, because the PRC scholars are little acquainted with the rules, codes and scripts in such somewhat ritualized bond-building activities, to them, these events have the reverse effect of alienating them. As a result, even for those PRC scholars who tried to get "high" together with the Singaporeans, they mostly end up regarding getting "high" this way somewhat "silly (*sha*)" and "pointless (*meiyisi*)." Consequently, a stereotypical image of the Singaporean students as a people prone to getting "high" on pointless ECA activities begin to form in the minds of some.

The failure for jokes or humour to translate effectively across sociocultural and linguistic boundaries was another issue mentioned by a handful of my informants on separate occasions: jokes that seemed to set Singaporean students on a "high" laughing trip often seemed to them rather "lame" (*leng*) or anti-climatic, resulting in puzzlement and social awkwardness. A female informant once remarked, in what came across to me as a genuine tone of bewilderment:

> The locals like to "auto-high" (*zi-high*): they get together, in classroom, or in the hall common room…and suddenly they burst out laughing and excited among themselves. Sometimes even when I heard their jokes or whatever, I wonder: is it really that funny? How can they get so *high*?

Intrigued by this image of Singaporean students being "high" in the minds of some PRC scholars, I asked other informants to see if they held a similar impression; it turned

out not a small number echoed in one way or another, "Oh ya, locals are very *high* (*low-co hen high*)!" For the majority, this tended to be a casual remark they made with a smile as a small point of curiosity, but a small handful of interlocutors would connect Singaporeans' being "high" in various manners to more pejorative notions of being "stupid (*sha*)" or "shallow (*qianbo*)," thus revealing the hazardous potential of social stereotyping.

One informant, Yuntao (M, 21), who agreed with other PRC scholars on the impression of Singaporeans being "high" nevertheless offered what seemed to me a valuable insight that did not come out of most other informants. The semester before, Yuntao had a Chinese Singaporean as roommate, and during this time he heard many interesting tales from his "roomie" about the experiences of serving as a soldier in Singapore's armed forces—a two-year National Service (NS) compulsory to all male Singaporean citizens upon finishing secondary education. Yuntao believed that the army culture which seemed to imbue the NS men with certain kinds of masculine homosocial spirit and comradely ethos[6]—though he wasn't using any sociological jargon—travelled some lengths toward explaining the "high" behaviors of the (male) Singaporean students that apparently puzzled some PRC scholars, including himself initially. Research in social psychology (e.g. Kurman & Ronen-Eilon, 2004) has identified a positive correlation between the lack of knowledge of the host culture's social axioms and the adaptation difficulties among immigrants; in this light, the National Service which virtually all local male university students have undergone seems a good example of the axiomatic experiences in Singaporean culture that many PRC scholars lacked knowledge of.

Furthermore, in contrast to the more conventional notions of masculinity based on physical prowess and homosociality that underpin the perceived "high" behaviors of the (male) Singaporeans, researchers of Chinese society and education have found the notion "literary masculinity" (Kipnis, 2011a; K. Louie, 2002) useful in describing an alternative concept of the masculine in China which associates *literary* finesse, bookishness, learnedness, intellectual accomplishment with social worthiness of the male gender. For the small number of my informants—virtually all male—who

interpreted Singaporeans' stereotypical "high" behaviors as signs of their being "stupid," "unsophisticated," and "intellectually inferior," it seems the concept of literary masculinity, ingrained in the Chinese "foreign talents" through their Chinese educational history, offered a plausible explanation. Taking a psychoanalytic view, it could even be suggested that the male PRC scholars are driven by their unconscious sense of inadequacy in conventional masculinities in comparison to the typically muscular Singaporean young men—who have the advantage of having been toughened up by two years in the Singapore military—to emphasize literary masculinity and to devalue physical prowess. An informant, Junheng (M, 19), once mentioned in an interview that he thought Chinese boys were not as attractive as Singaporean boys to the Chinese girls because the Singaporeans boys all had "sexy" toned bodies; he believed this was the reason why more and more Chinese students in UIS were driven to take up gymming.

In any case, as "foreign talents" in receipt of Singapore government's scholarships, the PRC scholars continue to attach high importance to academic excellence, which attitude further inflects their interpretations of the Singaporean students. Thus, despite their awareness that their connection and integration with Singaporeans would require their acceptance of or even participation in the local "high" student culture, most PRC scholars still seemed instinctively resistant. Gao Mei, the girl who first brought to my attention the image of Singaporeans being "high" by defining meaningful connection as getting "high" together with them, nevertheless confessed:

> I guess I don't really like their way of getting *high*. They are like…for example, the JCRC people gather at 2am, and sing songs loud [as part of some group games or party], but I want to sleep, have to go to lectures early tomorrow morning! And the problem is their way of getting high seems so silly (*sha*): singing, jumping around… Don't get me wrong, I think they are all nice people, but I don't see how I can join them and get high in their way…I'd be thinking to myself "What am I doing?!"

I then asked Gao Mei, what kind of things the Chinese students get "high" on, and she thought for a moment before suggesting, "For example, playing *San Guo Sha* (Three Kingdom Kill)[7] can make us very *high*! It's just fun, but you also use your brain (*dong naozi*) when playing it."

Examining this discourse of the PRC scholars regarding their initial perceptions of their Singaporean hosts reveals the intercultural university campus as a potentially hazardous terrain with many hidden traps for stereotypical images of the "other" to develop. The confidence (or hubris) that some PRC scholars in UIS derive from their superior academic abilities comparative to their Singaporean peers reinforces certain stereotypical images of the latter. However, I wish to stress that the situation here is not dissimilar to the PRC scholars' reactions to Singlish as I analyzed in the previous section: derogatorily stereotyping the "other" could be seen as a strategy to cope with the senses of frustration arising from the failure to forge connections with the "other;" this failure arises in the first place out of the Chinese students' lack of local knowledge, but the failure subsequently gets re-entrenched in further processes of stereotyping.

On the other hand, just as Singlish enhances mutual identity between the Singaporeans and excludes the "others," those campus ECA activities in which Singaporeans get "high" amongst themselves are also ones that can easily marginalize or exclude other international students such as the PRC scholars. Thus, those among my interlocutors who adopted overtly judgmental discourses on Singaporean students on these matters may be seen as exercising an offensive defense against perceived marginalization and exclusion—even though they seldom consciously admitted as such.

Other than being motivated by a semi-conscious process of social psychological defense, the moral-ideological subjectivities of the Chinese students as I analyzed in chapter 3 also seemed to play a role in shaping their perceptions of the Singaporeans. Among a handful of my informants, I noticed a discourse that extended the pejorative judgments of Singaporean students in the settings of ECA or university campus culture to a wider sociocultural context. In relation to this, the most trenchant remark I came across during the fieldwork probably came from Yushu (M, 23), a final year engineering major. Although Yushu studied engineering like virtually all other PRC scholars, he had a broad range of intellectual interests in the social sciences and humanities. When I visited his dorm room, I noticed the shelves above his desk were filled up with Chinese books on topics ranging from history to literature to popular sociology. Yushu joked to

me that based on his self-motived learning, the UIS registrar should add "Minor in History" on his degree certificate. While chatting casually before we started our interview, he pulled out the Chinese version of Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs *The Singapore Story* from the shelf and told me he had finished reading that not long ago; he then added: "I don't think any of the Singaporeans in UIS has even read this!" In the subsequent interview, I was somewhat struck by Yushu's directness when he commented on Singaporeans:

> Well, most of them don't have enough "cultivation" (*xiuyang bugou*). I'm not talking about all Singaporeans, I'm talking about those I found around me in the first two years of uni. When we [PRC scholars] talk we talk about politics, international affairs and so on… But what do Singaporeans care about? They just care about which restaurant is good, which celebrity is releasing a new album, when the new iPhone is to be released or what bag looks nice, and things like that. Intellectually we are not at the same level, so, normal interaction is ok, but you can't have deep interaction with them.

Yushu accepted my request of interview with an earnest and serious attitude, and I did not detect in his tone or mannerism any trace of levity or sarcasm. This excerpt was Yushu's reply to my question asking him to self-evaluate his success in establishing meaningful connections with local Singaporeans at UIS; his implicit position was that his lack of success in this regard—which he admitted—was not due to a lack of initiative, will or ability, but because he didn't find the local students his intellectual equals. Therefore, there was perhaps still a justificatory or defensive character to his statement. But importantly, more than a dismissive caricature of the Singaporean "other" *per se*, Yushu's critique seemed to me to be targeted rather at what he saw as the vulgar consumerism and lack of cultural depth of the Singapore society in general. In other words, for PRC scholars like Yushu who otherize their Singaporean hosts in apparently uncharitable ways, it was possible to read their interpretations as infused, or perhaps *confused*, with a kind of critical commentary that is in fact sociological. But oftentimes, it seemed very difficult to disentangle the critiques at Singapore from the critiques at Singaporeans. Wen Shu's (F, 20) following comment—amidst our wide-ranging interview in which I asked her to reflect on the implications of her Chinese education

background for her experiences in Singapore—seems to illustrate this point:

> I'm very grateful to the education back in China because it laid down for me a very strong foundation in language/literature (*yuwen de jichu*). It was only after coming to Singapore I realize that if you ask a Singaporean to speak for an uninterrupted hour in one language they won't be able to do it. And I don't think that's good. Education back in China also opened my mind to the world of literature and ideas. It has positive influences on me, so that after coming to Singapore I'm at least not so totally overwhelmed by the materialism (*wuzhi de dongxi*) here. Life here is very stressful, and when I get nervous, I will recite some classic Chinese poetry or prose, that makes my mind peaceful.

Wen Shu's comment about the (average) Singaporean not being able to speak in one language for an hour captures a view that tends to occur to some Chinese students which sees Singaporeans' linguistic hybridity as evidence of the speaker's lack of articulacy and depth of knowledge. Indeed, this is often an implicit or sometimes explicit argument the Chinese scholars use to devalue the speaking of Singlish. The *rojak*[8] linguistic practice of the Singaporeans invokes the Chinese idiom *bo'er bujing,* meaning "wide but not deep," which met Wen Shu's disapproval. But she then turned to speaking about how having a deep and rich literary tradition—reciting classic Chinese poetry or prose—enabled her to cope with the overwhelmingly stressful materialism of the Singapore society.

Wen Shu's comment exemplifies the moral-ideological dimension of the Chinese schooling subjectification regime at its most successful: she drew from traditional Chinese literature as a moral-ideological resource to tame unruly desires that manifest in her anxiety and nervousness in response to Singapore's seductive and engulfing materialism; her act may verily be described in Foucauldian terms as a "technology of the self" (Foucault, 1988). As I already analyzed at length in chapter 3, the normalization of desire visited upon the students by Chinese middle schooling inculcates in them certain characteristic sets of ideological rhetoric, of which both Yushu's and Wen Shu's interview comments quoted above may be regarded as examples. The search for worth in life, the quest for intellectual profundity, the pursuit of high moral ideals, the personal assuming of national and historical responsibilities…all such highbrow

rhetoric are valued tropes and imaginaries in Chinese students' literary, moral and socio-political education, which induct them into certain ideologized and sentimentalized discursive habits, despite its apparent contradiction with the ethos of pragmatism and utilitarianism that Chinese schooling also powerfully engenders (see chapter 3). It is these moral-ideological discursive habits that seem to get activated when my PRC scholar interlocutors encountered the Singaporean "other" amidst failures to achieve meaningful communication and connection, and led them to develop a discourse that castigated their Singaporean peers as "shallow." The more deeply ingrained such moral-ideological discursive habits in the Chinese student, the more likely their perceptions of the Singaporeans and the Singapore society are to be inflected in such ways. Junheng, a somewhat sentimental young man who was already in his third year as a physics major at the mere age of 19 (having accelerated his progress because of outstanding academic abilities), also instantiates the moral-ideological subjectivity when he spoke about his perceived inability to connect with Singaporeans:

> Here [Singapore] human connection (*renyuren zhijian de jiaoliu*) is not deep. We can only talk to other PRC students. Together we can talk about life (*shengcun*), philosophy (*zhexue*), ideals (*lixiang*)… But we can't talk about these things with Singaporeans, even if we want to. They just don't seem to talk about these things. So you can only talk about very superficial stuff.

In fact, Yushu, the informant who strikingly characterized the Singaporeans he observed in the context of UIS as lacking in "cultivation," also demonstrated certain latent awareness of how his own educational subjectivities and his being a subject of the broader Chinese sociocultural and political milieu subtly conditioned his views on the Singaporeans. During my interview with Yushu, upon hearing his striking comment, I put to him the follow-up question "Why do you think Singaporeans have less 'cultivation'?"—to which he replied:

> In an advanced country (like Singapore), when the people are generally well-to-do and content, they don't need to care about too much, they just need to enjoy life. […] In China, we live in an atmosphere saturated which political economy…*that's why we Chinese think so much* (*xiang de duo*). We are always thinking about our own future, as well as our nation's. […] Perhaps also has to do with education—from

> very young, the school and teachers always told us to care about public affairs, the nation…to read poetry, to read world classics, to make ourselves thoughtful (*you sixiang*).

Arguably, there is a logical fallacy in both Junheng's and Yushu's discourses as I quoted above: having failed to engage deeply with or to be engaged by their Singaporean peers in the university context—whoever's "fault" that might be—the only subjects that they have deep thoughtful communions with are in fact themselves and other PRC scholars, which inevitably leads to the conclusion that they "think so much." The Singaporean students in UIS as an otherized figure, whose deeper thoughts the PRC scholars do not always get to know because of the failure to connect, becomes flattened into the stereotypical image based on the Chinese students' superficial observations of the locals amidst rather limited contacts.

In the final analysis, I argue nevertheless, underlying some PRC scholars' apparently dismissive or belittling characterization of their local hosts is a demonstrable desire for deep connection and the frustration of this very desire. The stereotypical imaginations held by the small number of PRC scholars in UIS ought to be interpreted not as intentional ill will but as a self-protective retrospective rationalization and justification for the failure of engagement in a multicultural university campus.

Stereotypical imaginations, both of the "self" and of the "other," are mercurial manifestations of desires; they can be unstable as much as they can be contentious. As I show in the next chapter, these imaginations can take dramatic twists and reversals in terms of the symbolic positions and meanings assigned to the imagined subject-objects.

6 The phenomenology of being "very China:"

A chapter in the PRC scholars' Bildungsroman

In relatively affluent parts of the world at least, college/university education is increasingly a critical, if not also compulsory, "rite of passage" for young people. German philosopher and educator Wilhelm von Humboldt famously upheld a vision of university education that emphasizes cultivating personal characters and installing a "culture" in the student. It is to him that we owe the notion of university as a place of *Bildung* (Sorkin, 1983), or self-development, cultivation, and maturation. In the previous chapter, I have looked at the PRC scholars' arguably "immature" first contacts with the Singaporean host environment and host people, and therein some of the contentious stereotypical images and perceptions that developed; in this chapter, I investigate how processes of stereotypification could rebound, reverse and complicate as my PRC scholar interlocutors continue in their Bildung journeys in UIS.

From the word Bildung is also derived the literary terminology *Bildungsroman*, or the genre of novel about personal development, which "portrays the Bildung of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness" (Morgenstern, 1820, quoted in Swales, 1978, p. 12). Bildung, in other words, is the transformative process a subject undergoes. Interestingly, in her treatise on Hegelianism *Subjects of Desire* (1987), Judith Butler described German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* a "Bildungsroman of the subject" (ibid., p. 17), because in the Hegelian scheme, the philosophical subject—the "*spirit*"—journeys from the most restricted and alienated form of consciousness to "Absolute Knowing," an all-encompassing universality and completeness of mind. Initially alienated and partial, the subject experiences difference as *otherness*, by encountering which it gains self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, in turn, is "desire in general" (Hegel, 1998, p. 105); in other words, by becoming self-conscious, the subject implicitly desires the "other," which is what incites the

self-consciousness of the subject in the first place. As Butler explains, desire is "the subject's relationship to that which is not itself, that which is different, strange, novel" (Butler, 1987, p. 9), and "the satisfaction of desire is the *transformation of difference into identity*" (p. 9, emphasis added). (Importantly, here this *identity* is what Paul Ricoeur (1992, p. 3) calls "*idem*-identity," or sameness, as opposed to "*ipse*-identity" which is more akin to how the term is used in common parlance.) Put otherwise, the mechanism is that the self-conscious subject desires the "other," seeks to incorporate the "other" into itself (or modify itself with reference to the "other"), thereby evolving into an expanded and superior subjectivity that overcame the otherness of the "other" as well as the alienated and partial previous self.

Hegel is an incredibly abstruse philosopher whom perhaps few can claim to understand. My purpose here of opening this chapter with this quick sketch of my reading—possibly misreading—of these Hegelian thoughts in their skeletal forms is not to claim comprehension of or declare allegiance to Hegelianism, but merely to acknowledge the fact that observing some aspects of the PRC scholars' transformative experiences in Singapore/UIS and listening to their Bildung narratives often somehow reminded me of these abstract philosophical insights. For many of my research participants, the encounter with otherness, the awakening of self-consciousness, the desire for the "other" and the dialectical negation of it seemed to be the critical moments in their subjective transformation processes; in particular, these processes revolved around the idiomatic expression of "very China"-ness, as I shall describe in the following pages.

With its title being a playful riff on Hegel's philosophical canon, this chapter is a chapter in the PRC scholars' Bildungsroman.

The phenomenology of being "very China"

"Very China" 101

As the presence of foreign students increased dramatically in the university campuses of Singapore from mid 2000s, causing disquiet to arise from among the local

students, rules have been officially announced more recently to cap the numbers of foreign undergraduates at 20 per cent of each year cohort. In spite of this, the impression that one gets on the ground is as if the percentages could be much higher. Take a random tour in the UIS libraries during exam revision period, one is likely to see the study spaces occupied by groups of PRC students "mugging" (a Singaporean colloquial term for cramming) over thick piles of lecture notes, with conversations spoken in the Mainland Chinese style Mandarin not far out of one's earshot. During the vacations, when local students have mostly left campus residence, a handful of canteens with authentic Chinese cuisines—operated by caterers from China—will be visited almost exclusively by gangs of PRC students, creating the illusion that these might as well be university canteens in China.

Although official statistics are unavailable, due presumably to the sensitiveness of the matter, at the undergraduate level, PRC students probably make up the largest group of foreign students at UIS (and in Singapore generally). At the postgraduate level, it could be surmised with some confidence that those from China account for more than 40 per cent all research students, because in 2012 a rule was internally promulgated in UIS to require all academic faculties not to award more than 40 per cent of their PhD studentships to candidates "from any single country." Some of my informants who were PhD students at UIS told me—probably with some exaggeration—that the *lingua franca* in some science/engineering labs had become Mandarin because many academic faculty members and most research students were from China.

The PRC scholars' presence is felt as much because of their pervasiveness as because of their "differences." There are perhaps two notable stereotypes associated with the PRC students in the UIS campus; and, as is often with stereotypes, there is a ring of truth to them.

The first, as already touched on in chapter 5, consists in the PRC scholars' studiousness and, relatedly, their perceived unsociability. PRC scholars easily stand out as the single largest group of swots in the university. Speaking of this subject, one of my field informants directed me to a short Youtube video clip apparently recorded by a

Singaporean UIS student. The video clip showed a big crowd waiting in front of the university's central library before it opened at 8.30 in the morning. The videographer was recorded commenting in a typical Singlish accent: "Aiya, must be those China scholar lah! No life one!" Indeed, being the successful products of their home-country education system, the PRC scholars on the whole embody highly conscientious attitudes toward bookish study and remarkable levels of self-discipline. The academic pressures they thus exert on the local students—though this is one of the declared reasons why the Singapore government desires "foreign talent" students in the first place—make the former's swot behaviors generally unwelcome to the latter.

Aside from being library desk hoggers, PRC students are also stereotypically identified in the campus by their ways of dress/fashion. At the risk of generalization and barring increasing individual variations, PRC students can be marked out by their apparent insistence on their Chinese fashion codes. Newly arrived boys, for example, are often seen wearing baggy T-shirts and tracksuits—the latter being a common style of school uniform in China. Those who have been in Singapore for longer may have abandoned the tracksuit, but a perpetual pair of sports trainers, worn on most occasions, easily betrays their identity again, especially when the trainers are of a nondescript Chinese brand. Juxtaposed with their generally speaking more fashion-conscious local peers, the PRC students' relatively untrendy (or perhaps "alternatively trendy") appearances sometimes draw the judging eyes of the local students; as some of my PRC scholar informants would self-consciously say, their styles were kind of "*tu*" (Chinese, literally means "earthy").

Embodiments are the subtle traces indexing more deeply-seated sociocultural subjectivities. Indeed, "The body [...] is a surface of social and cultural inscription; it houses subjectivity" (Longhurst, 2005, p. 52). Some—though surely not all—PRC scholars' initially *tu* appearances could be seen as the embodied markers of their lingering belonging, if not attachment, to specific sociocultural or political regimes of subjectification that moulded them into specific types of young persons. The widespread use of tracksuit-style uniforms in Mainland Chinese schools (together with the preference for boys to wear plain baggy T-shirts and sports trainers and for girls to wear

"cute" or "beautiful" but never those "sexy" clothes that their female Singaporean counterparts are more likely to wear) bespeaks an ideal construction of the student figure in China as a sporty, energetic, and above all "healthy" (*jiankang xiangshang*) youth with no frivolous vanity or craving for individualistic or morally questionable fashion statements. (It must be noted, however, as China becomes increasingly affluent and globalized in consumer culture, these stereotypes, which applied relatively readily to PRC scholars of the earlier years, e.g. late 1990s and early 2000s, became less and less sustainable in more recent time.)

In any case, when some of my PRC scholar informants—typically the ones who had been in Singapore for some time already—admitted in a tone of relaxed self-mockery that they used to wear "earthy" Chinese branded trainers and tracksuits, or to have exhibited some of the stereotypical features that had been usually attributed to them, I saw it not as a case of them legitimizing externally imposed discriminatory discourses but instead as a case of their own re-evaluation of the subjectivities they believed they used to embody. This re-evaluation is succinctly captured in the expression of "very China," or "*hen zhongguo*," as a number of my informants put it; while not everybody used exactly such an expression, many informants shared more or less a vague sentiment to this effect.

In turn, the "very China" embodied appearances metonymize a broader ranger of social or behavioural manifestations of perceived "very China" subjectivities. This metonymic connection was revealed in the following quote from a 26-year-old male ex-SM3 scholar, Da Wei, who had graduated three years before and was working for a European company at the time of our interview:

> At that time I was really *very China* (*hen zhongguo*)! Now I look back at the photos taken at that time, I dressed just like peasants (*nongmin*)! It's so *tu*. No wonder Singaporeans laughed at us [chuckles], 'cause even I would laugh at myself! I guess we also behaved a bit like peasants, you know, speak very loudly, bad social manners and all…

Indeed, anything ranging from "bad" sartorial sense to clumsy Chinese-accented English to the lack of polish in social manners could be reflected upon by the Chinese

scholars in retrospect as "very China"-ness. Here, it is important to note how this discourse of "very China"-ness arises at the ambiguous conjuncture between an arguably insulting stereotypical imposition from the "other" and a self-conscious, if not self-chastising, moment of embarrassment. The two following small vignettes told by two of my informants illustrate respectively these two aspects of the discourse.

Shuyi (F, 25), an ex-SM3 scholar who had graduated a year ago at the time of interview, vividly recalled an episode during her final year: at a career workshop on "impression management" conducted in a huge lecture hall attended by several hundred graduating students including Shuyi herself, the female Singaporean public relations guru conducting that workshop at one point commented on "my friends from *China* who suck their fingers when eating crabs," and used that as an example of disastrous impression management. Shuyi recalled how when she first heard this comment she frowned and got upset, especially at the way in which the guru stressed the word "China" with disdain. When the workshop was over, she joined her Chinese friends who were also attending the workshop in complaining among themselves about that guru's insensitive remark.

Fu Di (M, 24), an SM1 scholar at the fourth and final year of his degree, had a story with a different gist to tell. During the campus recruitment talk hosted by a major American bank that Fu Di had attended not long ago, he was amazed at how a PRC student sitting in the front row surprised the crowd by asking "So how much is the salary?" first thing in the Q&A session. This obviously caused a wave of laughter across the large lecture hall in which the talk was held, and induced quite a few giggles from the senior American bankers at the podium. Fu Di cited this little vignette with such animated disapproval as if that embarrassing moment indexing Chinese students' lack of tact in communication had been his own.

Such "very China" moments described by some of my informants may seem rather trivial at first, but I argue that this triviality belies something more significant. Namely, they are the moments of *self-consciousness*—moments in which the subject becomes aware of itself through being *reflected* by/in the "other." Such reflection may start with the unjustified stereotyping imposed by an "other" or a self-initiated comparison with

the "other," or anything in between; but regardless, the result is a heightened sense of self-awareness. It may be quipped that people from China are naturally "very China" because that's the culture and environment they have come from; however, it is when immersed in a different sociocultural setting by virtue of their educational mobility, and thereby having encountered *otherness*, for some PRC scholars, a self-consciousness emerged in the form of a realization of their being "very China."

Recalling the Hegelian idea that "self-consciousness is desire in general," the development of such a self-consciousness of being "very China" may be regarded as a *desire* shared by many of my PRC scholar informants. And as the Hegelian formulation has it, this desire, first excited by the encounter with otherness, finds its ultimate satisfaction in the negation of otherness, in the transformation of difference into identity. This is borne out in concrete terms by the ways in which, for some of my informants, the negation of their "very China"-ness and therefore the achievement of identity (or sameness) with the "other" was sometimes spoken of as a desirable aim or celebrated outcome of their personal journeys. I met a number of informants who seemed to take being mistaken as Singaporean or not being recognized as Mainland Chinese as compliments; but the informant who most explicitly instantiated this was perhaps Tong Mei, a 26-year-old female SM2 scholar who had graduated and been working for two years at the time of our interview; she remarked, intoning a sense of achievement:

> In these few years of working life, people around me gave me the evaluation (*pingjia*) that I am not like a Mainland Chinese at all (*genben buxiang zhongguoren*). My English has improved a lot, and people actually can't tell where I am from. Sometimes they mistake me for a Singaporean (*shuo wo shibushi xinjiapo ren a?*).

When I brought up this self-perception of being "very China" that was more strongly voiced by some of my informants to a wider range of interviewees, most of them echoed, although there was no consensus as to what substantive elements "very China"-ness involved. Some would vaguely say not being open-minded enough was a "very China" trait, while others were more specific—for example, one male informant once mentioned that being too nationalistic and Sino-centric was something that he retrospectively regarded as "very China." Still others referred to completely different

and mundane matters such as fashion sense, personal hygiene habits, and ways of carrying or conducting oneself in general.

Thus, being "very China" was "a kind of air" (*yizhong ganjue*), as one informant put it, that was not necessarily understood in the same way by different informants; but what seemed to be the common logic underlying this discourse is the sense of an old self being overcome by a new and more desirable one. "Very China" or *hen zhongguo* was the expression used by some of my informants but not others; however, as an *emic* idiom capturing the sense of self-(trans)formation, it resonated with a far greater number of my informants. As I show below, this idiom seemed to be a convenient device through which other informants in UIS narrated and made sense of their self-formative experiences in relation to other matters. And I, the ethnographer-analyst, appropriate the "very China" idiom *etically* to elucidate such experiences.

Critical self-consciousness through "very China"-ness

Aspects such as manner, speech, gait, and fashion sense belong to the most superficial level on which the PRC scholars re-discover themselves through being reflected by otherness. As the scholars' engagement with the locality deepens, more *educative* forms of *critical* self-consciousness emerges around the "very China" idiom. In this process, one instrumental figure of otherness is that of the local Singaporean student.

As I have discussed in chapter 5, the typical local Singaporean student at UIS, in the stereotyping eyes of not a small number of PRC scholars, is someone who is not very academically oriented, who tends to dedicate quite a portion of his university timetable to what the PRC scholars dismiss as "pointless" extra-curricular activities (ECA) or resident hall sports/games, and who tends to finish course assignments at the last minute and complain endlessly about exams. One informant, Meng Yu (M, 19), an SM2 scholar in his second year studying Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE), bluntly remarked during our interview: "The first thing about local (students) that shocked me was how bad their mathematics were! For me, it's quite unimaginably bad."

Such belittling comments on local students based on exam-oriented academic

aptitudes were often exchanged among the UIS PRC scholar-freshers, though few initially seemed to realize a simple, obvious fact—they actually enjoyed a considerable advantage over the engineering-majored local peer students at UIS because they were selected by Singapore MOE through "foreign talent" tests that specifically emphasized mathematics and science. Despite that such comments might have been casual remarks with no hurtful intentions, when slipped into the wrong ears, they could become a source of considerable tension between the PRC scholars and the locals. In fieldwork, I once overheard a Singaporean male student making very unkind remarks about a PRC scholar apparently because the latter had walked out of an exam declaring an apparently tough paper to be a piece of cake.

However, this kind of naïve hubris on the part of some PRC scholars is typically short-lived. In fact, quite a number of my informants told me about what they thought they had learnt from the Singaporean students based on their observation of and interaction with them. Many PRC scholars in UIS came to acknowledge that although academically they might be way ahead of the average local students, contrasting themselves with the locals also brought into relief what was lacking in themselves. There was a sense in which some PRC scholars saw the "other" figure as a mirror that reflected their own "lack." In this move, the PRC scholar who looks into the "mirror" becomes a subject of lack/desire—desiring the "other"—and simultaneously the object of his/her own criticism.

Mainstream Chinese schooling is widely criticized for being exam-driven and for thus inculcating a system of value and a concept of self-worth based largely on exam performances and paper qualifications (Kipnis, 2011a; Lan Yu & Suen, 2005). Yoked with immense pressures to do well in exams and the parental "wishing for dragon children" (Jianguo Wu & Singh, 2004), often students in China are given little time and few opportunities to explore freely their non-academic passions and interests in life. Many become pragmatists or utilitarianists who care not so much what they do as how well they do what they are given to do. What emerged from my field observations was that such insights were often the ones that PRC scholars become critically "awakened" to sooner or later, by virtue of their encounter with the Singaporean "other." This

self-critique, in turn, implies a desire to transcend their "very China" subjectivities.

Using the example of a Singaporean acquaintance who was a member in a Chinese music-related ECA club (*huayue tuan*) in UIS, one second-year SM2 scholar, Han (M, 19, bioengineering major), articulated this movement of simultaneous self-critique and "other"-desiring in perhaps its strongest form:

> In China, we practice a musical instrument, and take exams to pass grades, don't we? We want to get Grade Ten ("*shiji*" – the highest grade), and get a certificate, and feel good about it. The local Singaporean music lovers don't care about qualifications at all, but their skills are much better than ours. They will get you Grade 15 or 20 in China, but they don't care!
>
> I know one Singaporean guy, he loves playing *guzheng*, but I mean he loves it *genuinely*! I've never met anyone who loves an instrument so much, so *genuinely*! I really respect him. His GPA (grade point average) is rubbish, only one point something…not even two! He suspended his studies last year, but he doesn't really care! He spent his time playing *guzheng*, and has performed a lot in public concerts. This is called true passion! Many local students know what they enjoy, and they do it for that enjoyment.
>
> Do we PRC students really know what we *genuinely* love? I don't think so… We are just there for the scores, or titles: First Class honours, GPA 5.0, etc… Our education has taught us to be very utilitarian (*gongli*)! Sometimes I actually wish I could be truly passionate about something like that local guy, but that's not in our blood (*guzili meiyou*), I don't think I can break free from our mode of thinking…

Here, whether the Singaporean students indeed embody a non-utilitarian attitude to education or whether the exaggerating tones employed by Han might be fully justified is less important than the striking way in which he passionately criticised himself, and by implication other PRC scholars, via the device of the "other" figure. The Singaporean acquaintance Han spoke of might well be an exceptional case even among Singaporean students, but it was interesting to see how Han interpreted his observation of this local "other" through the categories of nationality and nationally conditioned sociocultural and educational subjectivities.

In fact, discourses of self-criticism as they emerged among some of my informants extended beyond the academic realm into the extra-curricular aspects of campus life. I mentioned in the previous chapter that the ECA "scene" in UIS could sometimes prove

to be a problematic terrain for the PRC scholars to navigate due to sociocultural differences. It must be pointed out that, compared with their "seniors" in earlier cohorts, PRC scholars of more recent years have become notably more socially ambitious and active; yet, while this gradual change goes some way toward dispelling the stereotypical image of Chinese students as swots and anti-social, which is part of the "very China" image, some of my informants critically reflected on certain incipient patterns or practices pertaining to PRC scholars' increasing participation in ECA activities that they still saw in some other ways as "very China."

Because PRC students typically find it hard, or at least it requires considerably more effort, to "break" into those ECA organizations and activities dominated by Singaporean students, they tend to join those organizations where there were already significant numbers of other PRC students or simply to establish their own clubs. This was not just the case with the "PRC Student Union (PRCSU)" in UIS, which naturally had an exclusive PRC student membership, but it also applied to some other pan-university-level ECA clubs and societies. For example, the "UIS Chinese Society," a cultural activities club which promotes Chinese culture and arts like calligraphy, traditional Chinese music and so on, used to be mainly run by Malaysian Chinese students several years ago; by the time of my 2011-12 fieldwork, this club had been "taken over" (*zhanling*—as one of my informant put it) by the Mainland Chinese students. Even a recently founded "UIS French Society" was essentially run by PRC students, with few members of other nationalities.

Because PRC students naturally find it more comfortable to work with other PRC students, in the recruitment of new cadres and members, ECA leaders (known in Singapore university lingo as Main Committee Members, or "main comms") who are from China tend to favour other PRC students for cadre positions (known as "sub comms"). According to some of my more cynical informants, *guanxi*—the term for the often essentialistically portrayed Chinese practice of favouritism based on personal connections and instrumental exchanges—allegedly becomes a feature of the ECA organizations dominated by PRC students. Because up to the time of my fieldwork the points a student earned through ECA participation still affected their chances of getting

a campus accommodation of choice, there was indeed a "favour" to be spoken of.[1]

This "arrival" of the PRC students on UIS's ECA "scene" in an incipiently segregated way was reflected upon by some of my informants through the lens of "very China"-ness. Chinese student ECA cadres who got their positions because of their friendship with the leaders of the ECA organization call themselves "*hunfen de*," meaning half-hearted ECA cadre whose main motive is to bag a few ECA points instead of doing serious work. Although it had not been feasible for me to study any PRC students' ECA organizations during the fieldwork, some informants commented that "China-style" (*zhongguoshi de*) student organizational politics—whatever that might mean—often take place in such organizations.

In any case, due also to language barrier and cultural discomfort, Singaporean and other international students in UIS tend to avoid joining these PRC-dominated ECA clubs and societies, furthering the awkward ethnic/cultural self-sorting. Even those PRC scholars who were themselves in such ECA organizations claimed that they regretted such a fact because they believed that ECAs should be about bridging cultures and forging communication. Ironically, in reality they could not deny that it was simply more comfortable to "play with one's own kind (*he zijiren wan'r*)."

Regarding these, one informant, a second year SM2 scholar, Yin Le (F, 19), who used to be very active in the ECAs during her previous academic year, made the following remarks:

> You see, every ECA club now in UIS is full of PRC students. But PRC students join ECA clubs for the wrong reasons. They join for two reasons: to earn the ECA points so that you get to live in halls, and to have some shining titles to put on your CV. Like, 'I'm the President of blah blah Club, or the VP [vice president—author] of whatever Society…' Sounds good right? But I think the local students are really doing the activities for the sake of fun and the benefit of the members. That's why they can get very 'high' in doing these activities. They *enjoy* the ECAs. For PRC students, we can get the positions and get the jobs done, but we are not really enjoying, 'cause we have ulterior motives (*mudi buchun*).

To Yin Le, Chinese scholars' utilitarian attitude toward ECA activities and their "passion"-less excellence in doing them is another "very China" trait—indeed, an

extension of the utilitarian or instrumentalist attitudes Chinese students take to academic study, as reflected in the earlier quote from informant Han. Maybe the PRC scholar could no longer be simplistically reduced to the antisocial swot figure, but the self-criticism that emerged from my informants' such self-examining reflections was that the PRC scholars applied their typically Chinese mentality to see ECA as the opportunity to create "well-rounded" personal biographies—as reflected in a CV with not just a high GPA score but also various ECA achievements—instead of as something simply to be enjoyed for its own sake, like their Singaporean counterparts are perceived to do. By contrasting the Chinese students' typical mentalities toward ECA with the local Singaporean students' (perceived) genuineness, passion, and proper motives, the self-critical discourses of the PRC scholars suggest a latent desire to transcend their "very China"-ness and to incorporate into themselves the strengths they saw in the "other."

As these instances from both the academic and extra-curricular aspects of UIS campus life illustrate, the role played by the local Singaporean student figure in PRC scholars' development of critical self-consciousness is often key. Their perceptions of the local "other" seem to shift from a narrow focus on the latter's relative academic weakness to a broader vision inclusive of those other characteristics, whether justifiably attributed to the "other" or not, that the PRC scholars found commendable and useful in highlighting their own shortcomings. This shift, arguably, can be interpreted as a process of subjective expansion whereby the PRC scholars' former value system which places a premium on academic competence is replaced or, at least, complemented or complicated by a wider range of parameters for judging the other's as well as the self's social worth and desirability.

"Very China"-ness among the PRC scholars themselves

Another point that I found interesting during the fieldwork was that the "very China"-themed psychosocial process of critiquing and othering was not just played out between the PRC scholars and their local/Singaporean "other;" in the ways of what Nancy Abelmann (2009) has aptly called "intra-ethnic othering" or what Gu (2011) has

similarly termed "in-group otherisation," the "very China" drama was sometimes also enacted among the three types of PRC scholars—the SM1/2/3—themselves.

As a rule, the SM3 scholars were generally considered to be "more China" than the SM2, and both groups were to some extent aware of a subtle identity differentiation between them. Two major differences between the SM2 and SM3 help explain this divide. Firstly, because SM2 scholars are recruited to Singapore at senior middle school grade two, they have managed to avoid taking the notoriously competitive *Gaokao*; in contrast, virtually all SM3 scholars are *Gaokao* survivors, except for the very few who had been granted direct university admission in China (known as *baosong*). Secondly, when it comes to socioeconomic background, the SM2 scholars, by virtue of being recruited mostly from China's provincial capital cities, tend to originate from a relatively homogenous urban middle-class social stratum (see chapter 4); the SM3 scholars, on the other hand, hail from a wider spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds because they are selected from the Chinese universities where they enrolled, which were not necessarily in their places of origin. Although it was not possible to obtain any meaningful statistics, fieldwork convinced me that the great majority of SM2 scholars' parents were urban middle-class professionals such as college teachers, doctors and government officials; whereas this is notably less the case for the SM3 scholars.

Hence, when it came to "very China"-ness, SM3 scholars were typically believed to exhibit more such traits than their SM2 peers did—a fact some of my SM2 informants did not easily let go of in order to subject their SM3 peers to tongue-in-cheek mockery. Among a small group of second year SM2 scholars with whom I chatted casually, everyone assured me: "We can tell that someone is an SM3 by just one glance!" When I asked as to how, one young man among them pointed to what he called—in jest I was quite sure—the SM3 scholars' "time-beaten-ness" (*cangsang gan*) due to having gone through the *Gaokao* ordeal. One of this group of SM2 informants told me that he had not so far even exchanged a single word with the SM3 scholars in his course, because "These SM3 give you the impression that when you talk to them you're wasting a few precious seconds that they could otherwise spend on reading lecture notes." Later on, in a one-to-one interview, this SM2 interviewee talked somewhat proudly about his

friendship with local Singaporeans, evidenced by his having been invited to join them in a leisure trip to Malaysia. "Many SM3 students get through four years of university without making a single local friend; that's not my way of life," he added.

Despite these SM2 informants' conscious or subconscious effort to set themselves apart from the "more China" SM3 scholars, in the eyes of the handful of SM1 scholars I talked to, however, SM2 and SM3 were largely of the same hue, again defined in terms of "very China"-ness in some sense. SM1 scholars normally come to Singapore around the age of 15, and study in local secondary schools through to Junior Colleges before university matriculation (see chapter 2). By the time they reached university, many already sport a "Singlish" accent with minimal distinctions from the Singaporeans in addition to being more in line with the local cultural sensibilities and life styles. When asked, my key SM1 informant, Fu Di, told me that he thought the difference between SM1 and SM2/3 was an "ideological" (*yishi xingtai*) one. He explained to me in the following terms:

> It's about worldviews and philosophies of life, I guess. The SM2 and 3 are relatively rigid (*bijiao siban*) in their mind, and are too fixated on exam results. They don't seem to socialize very much – some of them get through undergrad without making friends outside their small PRC circles. [...] They study very hard, but I don't think they ever asked themselves *why* they study. [...] They don't seem to have very clear visions of their own—that's why they flock to apply to the banks when graduate; quite a lot also stay on to study for PhD, not because they have passion for research, but because they don't know what else to do. They just apply to the most prestigious universities to study for PhD, because that's what they've been told to do all their lives. They are still caught in a "very China" mode of thinking (*hen zhongguo de siwei moshi*).

These impressions about SM2/3 scholars held by SM1 scholar Fu Di perhaps also contained some stereotypical truths. But the crucial point I wish to make here is something else: SM1 scholars like informant Fu Di might have assumed the SM2/3 scholars to be un-self-consciously "very China," whereas in fact, as I have shown previously, this "very China"-ness is exactly that which SM2/3 scholars themselves sooner or later become aware of and struggle with in one way or another. In this specific case, the "very China"-ness signified particular sets of education-oriented

attitudes or mentalities of the Chinese students which were believed to be utilitarian or instrumentalist; but, as an *abstract idiom* what "very China"-ness essentially signifies is the undesirability of certain self-perceived subjectivities or identity characteristics. Self-formation in the process of international study-sojourn commonly involves the subjects replacing what were thought to be undesirable or less desirable selves with what are believed to be more "mature" and more "well-rounded" ones; this is perhaps the reason why even though "very China"-ness was never a very concrete or precise discourse, it managed to emerge in exactly those words from the narratives of some of my informants, and found resonances in a great many more, precisely because the abstract personal transformative experience is in one way or another common to all the PRC scholars.

The closure of the "very China" Bildungsroman

What the "very China" discourse captures is an experience in which the PRC scholars first become aware of their limitations (as in being "very China") and then, by desiring the "other" and learning from the "other," transcend those limitations. In other words, "very China"-ness is an idiom useful only to the extent that it is eventually negated. Indeed, this is why in my informants' narratives, being "very China" was usually spoken of in the past tense or attributed to others; when it was used in the present tense and directed at the self as a self-criticism, the latent desire was obviously to overcome whatever the speaker used this idiom to signify.

The occasionally essentialising and self-orientalising tones in which some of my PRC scholar informants narrated their "very China" dramas betrays the fact that underlying this discourse is the intense desire that could be involved in the process of self-formation amidst international educational mobility and intercultural contact. Desire is perhaps seldom marked by calmness or precision; and it seemed that my informants themselves realized that "very China"-ness became a crude identity label and unhelpful category when allowed to outlast its "best-before date." It was typically the scholars in the lower undergraduate years who were more vocal and enthusiastic in their use of this idiom amidst angst-ridden narratives, but when interviewing and interacting

with scholars who had graduated and entered professional life in Singapore for two or three years, the majority of them responded lukewarmly to my interests in their politics of identity. As one such relatively "seasoned" informant once politely hinted to me during an interview, my "fixation"—he put it to such an effect—on identities was somewhat misplaced. As "foreign talents" who have had a relatively successful journey studying and now working in Singapore, they have now left behind the type of "immature" identity politics that the "very China"-ness served as an example of. For them, those once prominently felt differentiations and particularities among the SM1/2/3 PRC scholars gradually fade away or lose significance; even the instrumental importance they once attached to the figure of otherness that was the local/Singaporean while they were undergraduate students now becomes by and large obsolete. Regarding identity politics, the more seasoned of my informants were typically rather apathetic; they were heard making statements such as: "It's all case-by-case;" "It all depends on the individual;" or even "There's no Singaporeans and PRCs as such!"

This, I hasten to add, is not to suggest that identity/identification no longer matters for the PRC "foreign talents" once they have settled in Singapore for some time. Arguably, senses of self-identity and belonging are always important to human beings' social existence. But as the *desire* underpinning identity politics changes, so do the foci and coordinates of identification. The arguably *naïve* desire underpinning the "very China" identity discourse arose out of the younger PRC scholars' fresh contact with otherness in the context of the Singaporean university campus; but when this desire has been satisfied and negated through their self-(trans)formation, as I have depicted in this chapter, the "very China" discourse as a psychosocial process meets its closure. As the PRC scholars emerged from the "rite of passage" of undergraduate education into a more fully adult professional personhood, their identity discourses/practices and the underlying desires also move beyond relatively superficial or crude categories such as nationality, and into categories more specifically relevant to their new life roles, in relation to, for instance, employment, personal relationship, family, and so forth. (These shall be my focus in Part Three of the thesis.)

Conclusion

International educational mobility no doubt confronts the student-sojourners with experiences of disjuncture, difference, and difficulty (Holmes, 2004; Z. Zhang & Brunton, 2007); but it also offers them prized opportunities for self-transformation and self-development, which is one reason why studying abroad is such a sought-after endeavor by youths from developing countries (Baas, 2010; Fong, 2011), including my PRC scholar interlocutors in relation to Singapore. In extant research literature, the educational sojourn experience is described by some as a process of "(inter-)cultural learning" (e.g. Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003; Ward et al., 2001), where the "acquisition [...] of appropriate behaviour and skills" (L. Brown & Holloway, 2008, p. 235) takes place over time, resulting in the students "becoming different, evolving a new self" (ibid., p. 245). Milstein (2005) suggests that studying abroad helps the students achieve revised self-understandings/concepts, and Murphy-Lejeune (2003, p. 113) characterizes the experience as a "maturing process" which "takes the shape of a personal expansion, an opening of one's potential universe."

Despite such general acknowledgement of the trans-/formative effects of the international study-sojourn experience, there is still a dearth of concrete studies examining in empirical detail *how* trans-/formation takes place in international students. Scherto Gill's (2007) observation made a few years ago in relation to Chinese international students in the UK that "there has been very little research investigating the *nature* of changes occurring in Chinese students" (p. 169; emphasis added) seems to remain largely true. By offering a microscopic view into the nitty-gritty of self-transformation amidst self-other tensions and relations in the case of the PRC "foreign talent" scholars, this chapter hopefully contributes to the growing literature on the subjective experiences of mobile students.

As with chapter 5, this chapter is about self-other perception, judgment, and stereotype, and the ways in which these psychosocial dynamics and affects are entangled with desire or arise out of desire. In contrast to the more contentious and hazardous

aspects of desiring that are highlighted in chapter 5, however, this chapter shows also the generative aspect of desiring. Desire propels the subject to move beyond the *status quo*, to transform, to become "better." As philosopher Yirmiyahu Yovel (2005, p. 98) says of the Hegelian philosophical subject: "to be a subject is to transcend every partial, immediate identity, and to go beyond any given state."

7 The right undergraduate education?

Scholarly idealism and anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism

The previous two chapters examined the PRC scholars' desire-infused encounters with the local/Singaporean "other" in the context of UIS campus culture/life; in this chapter, I focus on how the PRC scholars perceived the pedagogical culture at UIS. In this context, UIS's academic system and pedagogical milieu again constituted an "other" with which the PRC scholars engaged or disengaged in particular ways, involving various attitudes and affects.

The ambitious global university of today's world—such as Singapore's UIS—typically aspires to develop in students in a wide range of capacities, skills, and ethos which are not always seamlessly compatible with one another: academic excellence is always valued, but extra-curricular activities are equally emphasized as a way to develop students' social intelligence and skills such as leadership and interpersonal communication; excellence in pure research is highly prized, but so is entrepreneurialism, which encourages the students to become "doers" in the real world. Ask any PRC scholar about their views on the meaning or purpose of the undergraduate education and how they felt UIS succeeded or failed to deliver in accordance, their answers are bound to be a heteroglossia of discourses, imaginaries and reflexive narratives, which not infrequently self-contradict. In this chapter, I examine some of these discourses, imaginaries and narratives, and the ways in which they are fraught with tension and ambivalence.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset, however, that this chapter is not an in-depth study of higher education pedagogy from the typical educationalist's perspective, which would entail a radically different set of research foci, designs and methods that lie well beyond the scope of my "foreign talent"/desire-focused ethnographic project. My PRC scholar informants at UIS studied in a variety of

science/engineering disciplines, ranging from the "purest" of sciences such Mathematics and Physics to the most application-/profession-oriented ones such as Maritime Studies; the ethnographic interviews that I held with them elicited their *general* reflections on the undergraduate education they underwent or were undergoing. Although there naturally were variations in the views and voices offered by different informants, these variations did not seem to me to bear strong correlations with their specific subject disciplines, but instead suggested a polarity in the PRC scholars' pedagogical dis-/engagements with UIS, which I capture in the notions of *scholarly idealism* and *anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism*. As I shall elaborate, far from indicating a neat empirical pattern, this polarity is an analytical construction I use to denote the two ends of a long spectrum of views and experiences.

Discontent and desire: scholarly idealism

First of all, it should be noted that my PRC scholar interlocutors' evaluations of undergraduate education at UIS were by no means entirely negative. In fact, most were quick to acknowledge the positive and beneficial aspects of their experiences. As I already discussed at length in the chapters 5 and 6, campus culture and life present the PRC scholars with multifarious challenges and opportunities for self-development and personal transformation. Participating in myriad kinds of extra-curricular activities (ECA), notwithstanding certain issues and troubles, nevertheless afforded them opportunities to "train" (*duanlian*—as my informants would often say in Chinese) in a variety of useful skills and capacities such as leadership, organization, task co-ordination, interpersonal and public communication, self-presentation and so forth. Nearly every informant I interviewed appreciated to some degree what they thought they had learned from participating in the campus ECAs.

Within the university curricula proper, informants also showed appreciation for the "practical" (*shiyong de*; sometimes they simply used the English word "practical") skills that they have been trained in. These "practical" skills generally referred to those non-discipline-specific "generic skills" (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2007)

that university students are supposed to obtain through their studies. The following comment from SM2 scholar Zhou Peng (M, 23), a final year engineer, illustrates this:

> UIS has taught us a lot of practical stuff, useful stuff. It's like equipping us with advanced weapons. These weapons help us smoothly blend into the business culture (*shangye wenhua*) of the local society and labor market. For example, how to make presentations in front of people, how to carry out a project, how to teamwork with other people, how to write an impressive résumé, how to do professional networking, how to do job-hunting…and so on. These are very practical stuff, *decorative* (*baozhuang xingde*) stuff. They transform us from naïve kids into professionals.

In a group interview with three final-year SM3 scholars majoring in Electrical and Electronic Engineering, they similarly mentioned that the compulsory Professional Communication ("prof com") course they were taking that semester was—despite being somewhat "boring"—useful in helping them prepare for their impending job hunting endeavors.

As much as the PRC scholars acknowledged with approval the practical abilities that a UIS education was good at helping them hone, however, it was also exactly this perceived pragmatism of the university pedagogical culture that constituted a focal point of discontent and criticism for some. Informant Zhou Peng's use of the term "decorative" to describe his educational experience alluded to what he thought was a lack of intellectual depth or substance beneath and beyond the superficial level, which he subsequently spoke about more explicitly. Through talking to a wide range of informants, I realized that such a critical view, far from being idiosyncratic, in fact turned out to be a shared perception among a significant number of PRC scholars.

Too "practical"

When asked to reflect on what he was not satisfied with about his undergraduate experience, the engineering finalist Zhou Peng simply turned to the negative side of the pragmatism of the UIS education, and remarked:

> A business culture dominates the UIS campus. I'm not sure whether this is just UIS or it's Singapore at large, but the air is saturated with a business culture

> (*chongchi zhe shangye wenhua*). It makes students worry about their future career and job-seeking from the very start. So, instead of learning things, we are always worrying about things.

In my interview with Shan Shan (F, 20), a second-year SM2 scholar majoring in Material Science and Engineering, I asked her whether she felt the UIS environment shaped or guided (*daoxiang*) her development of character or worldviews; her reply made a similar point about the pragmatism of the UIS education:

> I don't think there is much of a "guidance"—certainly not like the universities back in China where they still pretend to study Marxism and Mao Tse-tung thoughts; if there is any guidance, then I guess the message is: graduate and get a good job. That's it.

While Shan Shan wasn't at all approving of the fact that Marxism and Mao Tse-tung thoughts were still anachronistically taught in universities in China in the name of "moral and ideological education," nor was she entirely happy with the downright pragmatic culture in which UIS immersed its students. There was a sense in which she felt that attending university should be about something more elevated than just getting a job and earning a salary.

Zhou Peng and Shan Shan, by showing a dissenting attitude against what they perceived to be an overly pragmatist university education, were perhaps implicitly challenging the "hegemonic skills and employability discourses" (Henderson, 2014, p. 2) that saturate the contemporary world of higher education—UIS being no exception—with latently *idealistic* imaginaries of university education. This vague idealism or at least a *discourse* of idealism, as I discovered, was not at all uncommon among the PRC scholars. The following are some of the discourses that further illustrate this idealistic desire for education.

Not "intellectual" enough

One such discourse involved a desire, explicit or implicit, for an intellectual or "humanistic" (*renwen*) quality to undergraduate education, which the PRC scholars believed to be currently lacking in the UIS milieu.

For instance, second-year SM3 engineering scholar Huang Fei (M, 21) who requested me not to disclose his specific major told me that he had a general and "vague" (*menglong de*) interest in the humanities and social science disciplines, yet he felt that the university system did not encourage his dabbling in those disciplines:

> The way the academic system is designed does not encourage you to study beyond your chosen discipline. We are scholars, we have to keep high GPAs, and we want to get a good Honours degree, so we dare not to choose those elective modules outside our specialization. To ensure good GPA, students tend to choose those subjects which they are already good at; this way you don't get enough exposure to a broader perspective. [...] I took this module on the history of Chinese Cinema recently, and only got C for it; but the course was fascinating, and has opened for me a new way of seeing things. I wish we could have more freedom in choosing subjects like this. Courses in the humanities are often more interesting than specialist subjects (*zhuanye ke*).

Fu Di, a final year Maritime Studies major and SM1 scholar, echoed Huang Fei on this point when he mentioned, "I would like to be able to take a course in the history of Chinese literature, but this kind of course is not there." I asked him why he would be interested in the history of Chinese literature given that he majored in Maritime Studies, one of the most profession-oriented and potentially lucrative specializations at UIS, and he replied by saying that he thought university should not be about specialist training, but should be a broad "humanistic cultivation" (*renwen de xiuyang*). He continued to say that there was not enough of a "humanistic atmosphere" (*renwen qixi*) at UIS. His imaginations of the university culture in the "West" (*xifang*) as he described to me came across as a rather romanticized vision—the students smoke cigarettes, drink, and explore dreams and ambitions together, which he saw as the diametrically opposite picture to UIS, where students were just narrow-mindedly fixated on getting good exam results, good internships and, afterward, good jobs. He added, in his observation, UIS students in general did not show much interest in social issues and current affairs, which he saw as further evidence to the lack of a culture of intellectual engagement in the university.

This desire for intellectual breadth and humanistic ethos exemplified in Huang Fei's and Fu Di's comments seems to be informed by a classic vision in which the

purpose of university education is idealistically understood to be the cultivation of a "general intellect" as opposed to the training in specialized knowledge.[1]

On the other hand, influences from a related but intricately differentiated idealist vision about university education as the pure pursuit of knowledge[2] were also detectable in some of my informants' voices, particularly through the ways in which their imaginations converged upon the notion of *passion,* or the lack thereof. According to some of my informants, UIS education or being educated at UIS involved not enough passion.

Not "passionate" enough

> Most of the time we are just memorizing. Our mode of study is: in the classroom, the teacher tells you what is correct, you remember it, and then in the exam hall, you tell the teacher what is correct [on the exam paper]. You don't really get to *think* (*sikao*) very much studying this way. Sometimes I discuss with my course-mates and friends: "Is university education supposed to be like this? Isn't university supposed to be a place where there are heated debates, which ignite *sparks of thoughts* (*sixiang de huohua*)?" [...] Instead of passively receiving information, I wish there was a kind of interaction, a sense of intellectual discovery (*zhishi shang de tansuo*).

This was how Wen Shu (F, 20), an SM2 scholar at the second year of her degree course in Maritime Studies, described her views on the education she was receiving. Her criticism of the rote learning style she encountered illustrated a desire to move beyond a surface learning approach to a deep learning approach that should ideally involve genuine thoughtful engagement and intellectual discovery (Gow & Kember, 1990). Deep learning implies a certain sense of devotion and passion, which is reflected in Wen Shu's use of the expression "sparks of thoughts (*sixiang de huohua*)." Indeed, the lack of passion was a theme echoed by quite a few others when I asked them about their educational experience.

Gao Mei (F, 18) was a first year Mathematical Sciences major and an SM2 scholar who at the time of interview had just begun her first semester in university for a few months. Her views could thus be taken as to some extent representative of the fresh and

impressionist take that PRC scholar-freshers might develop when they first started their undergraduate studies. She spoke in a tone middling between mild puzzlement and vague dissatisfaction:

> Universities in Singapore seem kind of "watery" (*haoxiang man shui de*). People [students] only study just before the final exams. They aren't very serious about study here; they just want to "get by" (*hun*). Few people pursue PhD after undergraduate also, so the academic atmosphere is not thick (*xuexi qifen bu nong*). [...] When it comes to reading textbooks, nobody seems to read it seriously, page by page, like we used to do back in high school. It's just not very serious (*butai renzhen*), not very academic (*bushi hen xueshu*).

Ou Ping was a 26-year-old ex-SM2 scholar who studied Biological Sciences at UIS between 2004 and 2008. She commented on her undergraduate experience as follows:

> By right, there should be a kind of *esprit de corps* (*zhitong daohe de ganjue*) among students of the same major: we would be constantly talking about our visions: vision for the society, for our discipline, for our field... We should develop a perspective of our own, about how our discipline is situated in the society... By right we should be making a lot of "comrades." But no, I didn't have many friends; just a few fellow Chinese scholars. Only with these few Chinese friends could I talk a bit about study, there was not much interaction with other students in the course at all. [...] Have you ever heard in UIS that some students have come together to form a reading group or study group?—a group where a few people who share the same passion study together and climb the summit of knowledge (*pandeng zhishi gaofeng*)...that kind of feeling, you know...No! I think in universities back in China you have these kinds of things.

While most informants who voiced a discontent about the lack of "passion" in studying at UIS stopped at making this comment in a general way together with a vague sense of resignation, a few others, like Wen Shu, Zhou Peng and Shan Shan whom I quoted earlier, went slightly further in trying to figure out why this felt to be the case. The pragmatic ethos of the university certainly was believed to have played a role, but some also pointed their fingers at the academic faulty members at UIS—at their failure to incite in students the passion for knowledge through good teaching. Typical comments in this vein included that the lectures were "boring," superficial, and packed with too

many "dead" (*si de*) facts and too little to trigger deep thinking from the students; or that the lecturers were not interactive enough or not themselves "passionate" about the things they were teaching. One SM3 scholar once cynically remarked: "Even these professors don't look passionate about their stuff, how can they get us passionate?"

Interestingly, in the fieldwork I encountered no less than a dozen undergraduate PRC scholars who claimed to be fans of various manners of massive open online courses (MOOCs) offered by prestigious American universities. As long as they had a computer and Internet connection, which they all had, they could in the comfort of their own dorm rooms watch recordings of lectures delivered by world-renowned academics on topics that interested them, at zero cost. Indeed, three undergraduate informants, who I later established did not know each other, mentioned to me on separate occasions that they had enjoyed Paul Bloom's Introduction to Psychology lecture series on the Open Yale Courses online! These informants who had tried out such MOOCs typically spoke of the American "profs" with adulation—their "levels" (of knowledge) and delivery were simply "different;" they were engaging, humorous, passionate about their own fields, and could make the students passionate too.

When these PRC scholars criticised the UIS education for being not "passionate" enough, I noticed, their criticism was typically not very passionate either. It was almost always expressed in a tone of grousing, accompanied by a faint sigh that was or was not actually let out. While it was certainly true that as students they were quite powerless to change what they found dissatisfying in their university education, this very powerlessness perhaps also conveniently made it seem legitimate for them to put the blame on the "system." It seemed to me that the PRC scholars' discontent about their passion-less educational experiences must be read more sophisticatedly: it was not just their complaint about the university's pedagogical culture and milieu; underneath it was also a criticism of themselves for failing to be "passionate" enough students, which is a normative scholarly ideal of theirs. Locating the cause of their passion-less education in impersonal structures beyond their control absolves their own possible agentic responsibility. As I already discussed in chapter 6, some PRC scholars indeed accused themselves of being utilitarians and pragmatists who study without passion; thus, their

complaint now about the university for being too pragmatist and passion-less was both an echo of their self-criticism and a way to "shift the blame," so to speak. In other words, the picture was subtler than simply a bunch of idealistic and passionate scholars being failed by the university they attended.

Second-year Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE) major Meng Yu, a 19-year-old SM2 scholar, told me in interview that it was "okay" for him to study EEE, but he did not feel the passion. He then remarked:

> My father once told me something: "You have to passionately devote to something, before you can actually achieve anything in it (*ren bi you chi, ranhou you cheng*)." I think it's absolutely true. Right now I don't feel that kind of passion in what I study.

Although Meng Yu sounded completely matter-of-fact when he said this, from a psychoanalytic perspective, one might say that the Word of the Father—the Law—shaped Meng Yu's desire—in this case a desire to achieve something great by first being passionately devoted to (studying) something. As I have also argued in various places in chapters 3, 5 and 6, Mainland Chinese students' education normalizes their desires through the compulsory recitation of an idealistic and ideologized rhetorical repertoire, which time and again crops up in their subsequent sociocultural and educational experiences, and inflects and frames their interpretations of such experiences. In regard to their discontent about the "too practical," "not intellectual enough," and "not passionate enough" education they perceived at UIS, a similar argument could be made. Wen Shu's desire for "sparks of thoughts" and sense of "intellectual discovery," and Ou Ping's desire for the "comradely spirit" shared by scholars who climb the "summit of knowledge" are perhaps the most explicit instantiations of such ideologized, idealistic, even *stylized* scholarly desires, but the PRC scholars' discourses about UIS pedagogy in general as I examined so far might be understood in this way. The impossibility to satisfy the command and the desire of the Other—the Chinese educational system or, in Meng Yu's case, that of his father's—makes it necessary to displace the responsibility onto an abstract, impersonal "system." Conjuring up the image of the passionate American professors in world-top

universities or the imaginary of university students in China who still "climb the summit of knowledge," the PRC scholars, to the extent they did feel and express discontent about being educated in UIS Singapore, were implicitly resorting to the facile explanation or excuse that they were simply in the "wrong place"—the wrong country and/or the wrong university.

Jumbled mismatches of desires

As I started to wrap my head around this set of discourse of discontent in fieldwork, a revealing moment came during an interview with Shan Shan, the second-year Material Sciences and Engineering major and SM2 scholar from Sichuan Province. Unlike the majority of my informants whom I sought out, Shan Shan actually contacted me on her own initiative to volunteer to be interviewed, after having heard about me and my research from a friend of hers whom I interviewed earlier. When we met at a campus café and sat down, she first said that she thought she *must* meet "this educational researcher from Oxford," because to study in the Harvard Graduate School of Education (GSE) had been an idea in her mind for quite some time. During a summer vacation camp she took part in at the end of senior middle school grade one, Shan Shan visited some ethnic minority rural areas in China's southwestern region, and was appalled at the state of education in some of the poorest places she saw. Since then, the idea of doing something about education in China germinated, and she felt attending Harvard GSE might give her the right qualifications and knowledge to do just that. Although she was only at undergrad Year Two when we met, she was already thinking that after graduation and serving the six-year bond in Singapore, she would apply to Harvard GSE. I asked her, how she ended up studying Material Science and Engineering at UIS on Singapore's "foreign talent" program, given her interests in education; she conceded that getting a full scholarship to study in Singapore was simply too great an opportunity to pass, but she was not at all happy with what she's doing now. She felt no passion. Particularly, concerning her choice of major, she said:

> I'm not at all interested in Material Science! I should be studying the humanities and social sciences! I was never passionate about maths, physics and chemistry (*"shu-li-hua"*—as these subjects were known in combined abbreviation in Chinese) when I was in high school. So I wanted to choose a university major which is broad but not too specialized, otherwise I would find it difficult to cope. Material science has relatively less mathematics and calculation in it, so I chose it.

Shan Shan's "confession" revealed something very important underlying the sentiments of discontent that I encountered among the PRC scholars, namely: fundamentally accounting for their niggling dissatisfactions and disaffections were various mismatches or compromises of desires that are jumbled together.

In Shan Shan's case, the mismatch was mainly between her "true" academic passion as she gradually discovered or developed it over time and the Singapore government's desire to recruit and train PRC "foreign talents" in the engineering and science fields. In the official version of things, Singapore authorities desire scientists and engineers in order to power up the island-nation's knowledge-based economy. But as many PRC scholars believed, correctly if also cynically, they were recruited also because many engineering and science faculties in Singapore's higher education institutions simply could no longer fill their places with enough qualified local students, because the most academically capable local students tend either to go to university abroad—if they could afford it or get scholarships—or to choose professions such as law and medicine that promise much better future economic returns. By recruiting scholars from the science stream (*li'ke*) in Chinese senior middle schools, it might have appeared to Singaporean authorities that a perfect match of desires is forged: Singapore gets the science/engineering talents it wants, and budding Chinese scientists and engineers get free education in disciplines they are enthusiastic about. In reality, however, there are many school students in China like Shan Shan who chose the science stream not out of interest but out of pragmatic considerations, because of a hegemonic perception that there is "no future" in studying the humanities and social sciences (*wenke*). This belief is perhaps even vindicated when the Chinese students encountered Singapore's SM2/3 schemes which were only eligible for science stream students. The often irresistible privilege of studying on full funding in globally recognized Singaporean universities

certainly induced some PRC scholars to compromise their passion for practicality. Although in absolute numerical terms such "reluctant" or "compromise" scholars might be in the minority, in the fieldwork I encountered no shortage of PRC scholars who said if they were given free choice they would be studying something else: I met Civil Engineering students who would rather study architecture and design, Biological Sciences students who would prefer studying traditional Chinese medicine, Maritime students who chose it in order to avoid too much engineering and maths works, and Electrical and Electronic Engineering students who settled for this most versatile major simply because they were unsure as to what they were really interested in. In view of these partially fulfilled or unfulfilled desires, some of the discourses I presented earlier made better sense.

Indeed, over the years, there have been a number of scholars who decided to drop out of the scholarship schemes after they realized that they were not suited to study the subjects they were expected to. Heng (M, 19), a first-year fresher, who asked me not to disclose any of his personal information, said he was contemplating dropping out. A young man of artistic bent, Heng loved drawing and wanted to become professional in it, even though under parents' pressure he studied in the science stream in school and ended up getting an SM2 scholarship. He told me that he heard the "legendary" tale that an SM2 "senior" (*xuezhang*) a year before him quit and returned to China during the "bridging course" because he realized his passion was really in music, and he decided that he could not handle all the science and maths drilling required of the scholars. Heng spoke of this SM2 "senior" with approval and admiration, although he was agonizing over whether he should take such a drastic step. (Eventually, Heng did not take this step.)

In 2011, a newly founded Singaporean university with an explicit focus on technology and design became the third designated destination for the SM2 scholars. Among the dozens of scholars assigned to this new institution to join its inaugurating cohort, several decided to withdraw from the SM2 program altogether and return to China to resume preparation for *Gaokao*. To them and their parents, this newborn university, despite all its potentials and strengths, simply seemed too risky an option.

They worried that they would be the pedagogical white rats for an institution that was still experimenting its ways, and, worse still, that they would graduate in four years with a degree from a little recognized university. Another mismatch between the scholars' own educational desires and aspirations on the one hand, and the desires and designs of the Singapore authorities on the other…

The university of the era of late capitalism and globalization is a "multiversity" (Shore, 2010) onto which a diverse range of stakeholders and interested parties—the nation-states, the market economy, the individual members of society, etc.—project their own plans, designs, desires, and fantasies. Animated by a multiplicity of ideologies (such as the "foreign talent" policies in Singapore) and idea(lism)s (such as the PRC scholars' purist imaginations of university education), these plans, designs, desires and fantasies fly in different directions, with their trajectories cross-cutting one another; if the intersection points of these lines represent the moments in which these desires are matched, then the much more conspicuous interstitial spaces trapped in between the lines perhaps indicate the more frequent occurrences of mismatch and disjuncture of desires. The ambivalence and discontent some PRC scholars at UIS voiced regarding whether they were experiencing the "right" undergraduate education perhaps should be understood in terms of such jumbled mismatches of desires.

Anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism

However, it would be quite wrong to characterize all the PRC scholars at UIS as scholarly subjects harboring idealistic educational desires and imaginations. In fact, in field observations and interviews, I frequently encountered a countervailing discourse among my interlocutors that could perhaps be called an *anti-scholarly* entrepreneurialism. Here, I use the word *entrepreneurialism* in two not unrelated senses.

In a first, more literal and limited sense, entrepreneurialism refers to the spirit of entrepreneurship—the act of identifying business opportunities and setting up one's own business ventures. Reflecting the government's enthusiastic embracement of this

global magic word for economic development and competitiveness (see Christensen, 2012), higher education institutions in Singapore invariably place a great deal of emphasis on inculcating the entrepreneurial spirit in students. Indeed, this was no doubt the reason why some of my PRC scholar informants, like Zhou Peng whom I quoted previously, suggested that UIS was saturated with a "business culture."

Since 2001, a Center for Technopreneurship existed in UIS, with responsibilities for fostering entrepreneurial activities based on technological innovations and for coordinating the entrepreneurial educational programs in the university. The Center offers a Minor in Entrepreneurship eligible to all undergraduate students and a Master's Degree in Technopreneurship and Innovation. Among the informants I interviewed, five had taken the undergraduate Minor, and one had completed the Master's Degree after her undergraduate studies. Although the number is relatively modest, I realized that the influences of such entrepreneurial education on the individuals were often strong in terms of reshaping their educational identities and desires as "scholars." In any event, even for those PRC scholars who did not formally enroll in such courses, the idea of entrepreneurship seemed to seep into their discourses and minds by osmosis. And this relates to a second and broader sense in which I use the notion of entrepreneurialism.

To be an entrepreneur is to be a "doer," who charges into the real world "out there" to meet people, network with people and to do things that have real impacts. There is a sense in which such an entrepreneurial ethos is antithetical to the bookish scholarly subjectivity. Admittedly, scholarship and academic pursuits at a certain level and beyond are precisely about innovation and entrepreneurialism; but for undergraduate students whose academic activities still mostly consist of absorbing and understanding relatively basic knowledge, the ethos of the entrepreneur "doer"—a figure who cannot bear to sit still but must be busy like a bee "doing" things—is very much at odds with the focus and dedication required of an "academic" student—a figure who ideally spends long hours in the libraries and labs. At least, this was how many of my PRC scholar informants seemed to understand the relationship between the scholarly attitude and the entrepreneurial attitude: as antithetical, as either-or. "To study is not the main purpose of going to university, it's all about the social experiences and networking;" "Don't take

grades that seriously, just deal with it (*yingfu yixia*); it's really about meeting different people and broadening your horizon;" "Doing ECAs teaches you how to handle people and interpersonal communication, that's really the point of university education; nobody will care about whether you got a first class degree or a second lower after two years of your graduation;"...in my interviews, I became as tired of such kind of statements as I was frustrated by the ways in which they apparently contradicted those discourses of scholarly idealism that came from my informants—sometimes from the same persons!

These views on the purpose of the undergraduate education which decenter and devalue academic learning are entrepreneurial in the sense that they prioritize the self-conscious accumulation of social and cultural capitals in terms of "interpersonal communication skills" (*renji jiaowang nengli*), "social networks" *(renmai*), "experiences" (*jingli*), "horizons" (*yanjie*), with a view that these assets will one day somehow magically come together to pave a road to success in career and life. "Exposure" was another buzzword frequently mentioned by my informants: get exposed to "real life" outside the textbooks, libraries and labs; get exposed to cosmopolitan values and other people's cultures and lifestyles through going on exchange programs, "Global Immersion Programs," foreign internships; talk to people, play hard, go to night clubs and parties...indeed, do anything but spend your invaluable "youth" (*qingchun*) on reading textbooks and studying things that are more likely than not going to be quite irrelevant in your future career.

For some of my informants, disillusionment and revelation served as the bridge between their scholarly idealism and such entrepreneurial outlooks. They took hints from the fact or the impression that, like Gao Mei said, most people aren't very serious about academic study, and realized with a sense of disenchantment that perhaps going to university was never about studying. Such disenchantment and revelation get further confirmed when the scholars saw that the university itself kept on emphasizing the non-academic achievements as strongly as they emphasized academic achievements. While to the university and its policy makers, being scholarly and being entrepreneurial was perhaps never meant to be mutually exclusive, but meant as complementary facets

to a well rounded, the most desirable, indeed the *ideal* undergraduate student subjectivity, to the PRC scholars, however, because of the extent to which bookish study was singularly valorized by them, there could not but appear to be a tension or contradiction. Perhaps this was why those scholars who have been most strongly influenced by the entrepreneurial understanding of university education tended to develop a set of almost militantly anti-scholarly discourses and attitudes. Below, I provide quick partial sketches of two such scholars to illustrate this point.

SM1 scholar: Zhang Ran

Zhang Ran was an SM1 scholar from Shaanxi Province. He came to Singapore in 2003, and after having completed secondary three, four and then junior college he enrolled at UIS in the Maritime Studies major in 2008. I met Zhang Ran—then in his fourth and final year—for the first time very soon after I started the Singapore-stage fieldwork in August 2011, but did not manage to get hold of him for an interview until quite a few months later because he was rather busy with doing internship. When we finally had our interview at a campus café after the Chinese New Year early 2012, I began by asking him about his internship. To my surprise, he told me that this was the *fifth* internship job that he had had since he became an undergraduate student. Knowing that undergraduate students typically have just one or two internships during their entire undergraduate course, I half jokingly asked Zhang Ran how he even managed to find time to study. He said, totally nonchalant, "Study…just give it the slightest attention that'll be fine (*yisi yixia jiuxingle*). Just follow along until you get that piece of paper [degree certificate] (*hun zhang zhi bei*)."

It turned out that academic studies had never been more than a sideline concern for Zhang Ran since he became a university student. Actually, the four internships that he already had under his belt so far were all done during the relatively short span of one year since he returned from an exchange semester in Norway a year ago. He not only spent all the vacation time interning at maritime/shipping related companies, even during term time, he would skip more than half of all the class hours to make sure there were three completely free weekdays on his weekly timetable so that he could work.

"The exams are easy to deal with. Some classmates [of mine] spend a lot more time on studying, and I spent very little time on it, but the final exam results are really not all that different. What's the point? It's all about accumulating real world experience and doing things," he remarked. He further intimated that even during the first two foundational years of his degree course, which involved more intensive academic workloads, he was working more than 20 hours a week tutoring Singaporean secondary school students. "It made good money," he said, smilingly, "at that time I was earning more than 2,000 (Singapore dollars) a month from doing tuition. Actually, during Year One and Year Two, the time I spent on teaching (tuition) was more than the time I spent on being taught (at UIS)."

So what was the purpose of undergraduate education? "It's about getting experience and accumulating social networks (*jizan renmai*). Do a bit of this, do a bit of that… Have fun with classmates (*gen tongxue wan'r yixia*). Don't care too much about exams; rather spend time on bettering interpersonal relationships (*ba renji guanxi gaohao*). […] Undergraduate education is pretty general (*fan*), so general that it's equal to having learnt nothing. I never expected to learn much [academically] anyway. When I got into high school, I forgot all that I learnt during secondary school; when I got into university, I forgot all that I'd learnt at high school; after you graduate, you forget all that you've learnt in university… It's just a process, the point is the experience (*jingli*)."

SM2 scholar: Peng Shuai

Peng Shuai was an SM2 scholar who came to Singapore in 2002 at the age of 17. Based on his exceptional strengths in mathematics and physics, he was accepted into the "Accelerated Programme (AP)" which would allow him to shorten the 18-month "bridging course" to six months. However, he declined to join the AP, wishing to take his time to improve his comparatively weak command of English. He had the reputation for being a bit of a computer geek among his cohort of scholars, and unsurprisingly chose the Computer Engineering major when he matriculated at UIS in 2004.

According to Peng Shuai, the first two undergrad years were relatively uneventful and "standard," as in he did what the majority of students did. But in the third and fourth

years, things changed. In Year Three, he spent the first semester in the UK on exchange, and the second semester completing the compulsory six-month Industrial Attachment (IA) at a local telecomm company. In the summer vacation that followed, he spent two months on a "Work and Travel" program in the USA, working at the Yellowstone Park first before he visited several major cities on both the East and West Coasts. In Year Four, because he had cleared most of his required credits, he took up the Minor in Entrepreneurship and started to find more intern opportunities on his own initiative. When he graduated in the summer of 2008, with a First Class Honours degree, he shocked everyone around him, including myself, by not joining a big company, which was the standard path for good Honours degree holders in Singapore, but became an insurance agent instead. He subsequently had dabblings in various business ventures such as managing a Sichuanese restaurant in Singapore's Chinatown, representing beer brands from China in Singapore and doing commercial website designing etc., but has remained essentially self-employed.

When I asked Peng Shuai to reflect on his experiences studying at UIS, he replied: "The only good thing about UIS was that it had been a very easy (*kuansong*) environment." He explained:

> It's flexible. It's easy. You don't really have to attend the lectures or tutorials. No need. Just study for a bit before the exam, and you'll be fine. In my first and second year, I was a so-called "good student" (*hao xuesheng*), but even then I wasn't going to all the lectures and tutorials. My exam results were very good during the first two years. From the third year on, I basically stopped studying: went to UK on exchange for half a year, had internship for half a year, "work-and-travel"-ed to the USA. In the final year, I only had the Final Year Project to clear and that was a piece of cake. I spent most of my time working with my boss [-a senior insurance consultant], and learned the *ways of the world* (*shijie yunzuo de fangshi*). I was damn surprised when I knew I got a First Class at the end! I basically stopped studying from Year Three, and I still got a First! This is a miracle that probably only happens in Singapore, or UIS. Had it been anywhere else I'd have been in trouble.

Peng Shuai's narrative very much echoed Zhang Ran's; both felt that studying wasn't worth their time, that it was marginal and could be and should be dealt with using minimal effort. In fact, Peng Shuai told me that he regretted not starting to learn

"the ways of the world" even earlier in his university life, for *that* seemed to him to be the *really* important thing. During our interview, there was no mentioning at all of what he felt he achieved academically, even though he did well enough to get a First; instead, he claimed that he started counting his real learning from the IA period in Year Three, during which time he began to learn in the workplace about how to interact with people, how to understand people, how to be successful in the battlefield of career-building (*zhichang*). Furthermore, he started foraging in the public library among popular books with titles along the lines of "how to be a successful entrepreneur" and "the seven secrets to success," which further convinced him of the idea that academic studies in the university was far less relevant than the people skills and the "true ways of the world."

Peng Shuai's anti-scholarly entrepreneurialism came across strongly when he made the following remarks about the university professors that he had encountered at UIS:

> The professors have all got wrong worldviews (*shijieguan bu zhengque*). Many of them haven't even experienced much of the real world before they came to teach us. Their experience of the society (*shehui jingli*) is too limited, and therefore their worldviews are eschewed. For example, the professors think, in this world, as long as you have studied well, you should be able to do well. Study hard, get a good degree, then you will be needed in the world, and will be put in positions of responsibility and importance. But the world never happens that way! Not at all! Their worldviews are far too outdated; it's completely a different story now.

Peng Shuai's entrepreneurialism led him to reject the normal path taken by most fresh graduates, i.e. attend numerous career events, submit many CVs, go through a couple of interviews and get settled on a "normal" job; rather, he sought to expand his social networks, and tried to mobilize and exploit these networks in his various entrepreneurial endeavors after graduation. At the time of my 2011-12 fieldwork, it still remained to be seen whether Peng Shuai's entrepreneurial convictions would pay off. Nevertheless, the transformation he underwent, from being an academically strong scholar to being a street-smart entrepreneur who spoke dismissively about academic studies and about his university professors, was illuminating.

In the cases of Zhang Ran and Peng Shuai, we saw experiences, discourses, attitudes and

affects that are positioned diametrically opposite to the scholarly idealism I examined earlier on in this chapter. But just as PRC scholars who harbored very strong idealistic educational desires were rare, I also found Zhang Ran and Peng Shuai to be "extreme" cases when it came to the extent to which they seemed to embrace the anti-scholarly entrepreneurial understandings of the meaning of undergraduate education. Nonetheless, weaker versions of these two opposing views could be simultaneously found in the words of virtually every PRC scholar that I spoke to during the fieldwork. In other words, these two polar views were perhaps the two ends of a long spectrum along which most people are placed somewhere middling, feeling neither too strongly one way nor the other, yet experiencing mixed influences from both. Their discourses and narratives were thus mixed and sometimes self-contradictory. The PRC scholars brought with them their own desires and imaginations about the university education as they became students of a Singaporean university, and these desires and imaginations sometimes met with mismatch and disillusionment; on the other hand, they also took hints from what they heard, observed, and experienced to develop and revise their understandings. Nothing is ever too clear-cut; for the majority of undergraduate students, including the PRC scholars, attending university is a four-year long rite of passage that consists mostly in dealing with the incessant mundane academic and social demands—a task that only a minority undertakes with stronger senses of purpose and agency while the majority perhaps simply tag along passively.

* * *

As fully-funded "foreign talents," perhaps few PRC scholars would deny that they were privileged to be receiving an English-medium undergraduate education at globally recognized institutions set in the desirably cosmopolitan context of Singapore. Having come to Singapore certainly fulfilled many a dream and desire harbored by these young Chinese subjects; but as I have tried to show in this chapter, there were also desires that were mismatched, unfulfilled, but more importantly, renegotiated and transformed. In the three chapters of this Part, I traced the various transitional problems faced by the

PRC scholars in undergoing university education in Singapore to their deep-seated sociocultural and educational subjectivities in order to explain their experiences, but my purpose was not to essentialize these young people culturally. As it should be clear from the accounts I have presented, PRC scholars were specific "subjects of desire," but also highly reflexive ones at that. Desire's encounters feed back into the further shaping of desire, effecting the education of desire. Through desiring, the PRC scholars transform, but there is no teleological trajectory to such transformation. The protean character of desire means that its social manifestations in the realm of education are equally protean and intractable, of which I cannot claim to have offered more than partial accounts in these chapters.

PART THREE

Desiring beyond Education

The three chapters in the previous Part dealt with the PRC scholars in the context of Singapore's higher education environment, examining several noteworthy aspects of their experiences of desire in relation to, for instance, the encounter with otherness, the transformation of subjectivity, the clash of cultures and the discontent with regard to pedagogy. These scholars, however, are eventually meant to be the working adult "foreign talents" who contribute to Singapore's economy and society through actively participating in professional, academic, or other kinds of value-adding activities. In the two chapters of this final Part, I look at the scholars who have passed out from their incubation stage—so to speak—into the professional world.

When the PRC scholars are no longer undergraduate students but professionals working in various industries and fields, they lose some of their uniqueness because they are no longer the privileged scholarship recipients under the scrutiny of public discourse and their peer local students. Instead, they now become very much like any other young, well-educated professionals in Singapore, sailing into the post-school stage of life. Their experiences at this stage, to not an insignificant extent, may resemble that of other young professionals navigating lives in large cities in the globalizing Asia. As my focus in this thesis is the intersection between "foreign talent" and *desire* with reference to China and Singapore, I aim to present those aspects of these sojourning Chinese professionals' practices and discourses relevant to these themes.

8 Desiring home, nation, and citizenship:

PRC "foreign talents" and "regime shopping"

The pasture is always greener on the other side. (proverb)

The moon is brighter back home. (Chinese proverb)

Migration is a one way trip. There is no 'home' to go back to. There never was. (Hall, 1987, p. 44)

[H]omes are always provisional. (Said, 1984, p. 54)

In this chapter, I situate Singapore's PRC "foreign talent" scholars in the context of the Chinese desires for transnational mobility and flexible citizenship. A diverse array of contemporary Chinese subjects' practices of transnational mobility and experiences in transnational migrancy have been the foci of a growing body of literature, the conceptual concerns of which revolve around themes such as social reproduction, identity, belonging, cosmopolitanism and citizenship. Referencing the conceptual coordinates provided by some of this literature, this chapter seeks to address the following questions in relation to my PRC "foreign talent" interlocutors: As subjects who have now already achieved some degrees of transnational mobility and cosmopolitanism, how do they understand and reflect on their mobilities? What do they ultimately desire in mobility? How are their current condition of im/mobility and desires for further mobility reconciled with social identity, cultural belonging, and nationalistic and patriotic attachments? What are the various imaginations and constructions of home, nation-state, and citizenship in their minds? What are the cultural logics underpinning this particular group of Chinese migrants' discourses and behaviors? And, importantly, what implications might the answers to these

questions—no matter how provisional—have for the libidinal politics about "foreign talents" in Singapore?

Context: the emerging Chinese desire for "flexible citizenship"

In 2008, an interesting phrase was invented in China and added into people's ever colorful and ever evolving colloquial vocabulary:[1] *luoguan*, which literally translates as "naked official," is defined as a government official who works alone (thus "naked") in China, with his wife and children all residing abroad.[2] When a corrupt Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official fell from grace, it was revealed that the wife and child(ren) of this official had used his illicitly amassed wealth to emigrate to Canada in as early as 2002; inspired by this fact, a member of a minority Chinese political party, who served in the Political Consultative Conference committee of a southern Chinese city, coined the term "naked official," and lamented in a blog article about how many more "naked officials" must still be hiding in the CCP cadre system. Since then, the phrase *luoguan* quickly gained currency and became a familiar figure in Chinese people's social discourse and imagination, both online and offline, so much so that in early 2012, the Chinese Academy of Social Science published "a research report on the surveillance of 'naked officials.'"[3]

While there can be no doubt that the phrase *luoguan* became popular in China because it resonated with the public's increasing concern over the rampant corruption in the party-state officialdom, what gets neglected, I argue, is another important dimension to this neologism which captures an emerging collective imagination of the Chinese public: the desire for and the practice of transnationality that have in recent years gradually become relevant to a significant portion of Chinese citizens.

Ethnically Chinese peoples, including those in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and some Southeast Asian countries with significant Chinese communities, have been noticed for their projects of acquiring transnational mobility and citizenship in the recent decades, since the economies of these countries and areas took off in the 1970s and 80s. Johanna Waters (2005, p. 370) observes interestingly, for instance,

> During the early 1990s, the Chinese-language media in Vancouver began to observe that many immigrant males ('astronauts') had returned to Asia to work, leaving their wives and children behind in Canada for an indefinite period of time. In a smaller (although far more disquieting) number of cases, I encountered children that had been left alone in Vancouver following the return of both parents to Asia ('satellite kids'). In these situations, the family was separated by the Pacific Ocean for most of the year, often with significant social and emotional consequences for the women and children left behind.

Commenting on the significance of such phenomena, Waters (ibid., p. 370) notes that, "'Astronaut' families and lone 'satellite' children have been observed within large metropolitan areas in North America, Australia and New Zealand and have come to epitomize the transnational strategizing of Chinese immigrant households." While these observations made by Waters pertained to Chinese migrants originating from Hong Kong and Taiwan instead of Mainland China (Waters, 2005, 2008, 2009), it is nonetheless interesting yet obvious to realize that the more recent Mainland Chinese expression *luoguan* constitutes very much the other side of the same coin to images such as "astronaut family" and "satellite kid." Having quickly caught up with their co-ethnics elsewhere, Mainland Chinese, not only the "naked officials" but also wealthy businesspeople many of whom also relocate their families abroad (thus *luoshang*, or "naked traders"), may be regarded as the newest practitioners of what Aihwa Ong (1999) has famously termed "flexible citizenship."

Based on her study of a phenomenon which involved very wealthy or well-to-do Chinese migrants from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia crossing the Pacific to North America in their thousands throughout the 1990s, Ong (1999) noticed how these well-heeled migrants treated citizenship as a strategic asset in their flexible accumulation and conversion of economic, social, and cultural capitals across national borders. Such a practice was in part a response to the political circumstances at that time (specifically, for example, the return of Hong Kong sovereignty to the PRC in 1997, which created much uncertainty among the capitalist class in Hong Kong), but also reflected a more general pattern of increasingly footloose human and capital flows that other scholars have also observed (e.g. Mitchell, 1995; Skeldon, 1995). More recently, scholarship on

Chinese migration in transnational contexts continues to document the ways in which migrant families straddle across Asia and their newly adopted home of the West, strategically arranging work, life, children's education and other aspects of social reproduction across multiple borders, benefiting from their flexible citizenship (e.g. Ley, 2004; Olds, 1998; Olds & Yeung, 1999; Waters, 2002; Yu Zhou & Tseng, 2001).

Although Ong's thesis stemmed from the experiences of a rather select group of privileged subjects, and was subsequently challenged for overemphasizing flight and mobility and not paying sufficient empirical attention to the processes of localization and forms of fixity in the transnational projects (e.g. Kalir, 2012; Waters, 2003, 2009), it is nevertheless the case that flexible citizenship has become a landmark conceptual idiom in research on contemporary human experience of transnational migration. In this chapter, I show that flexible citizenship is not the monopoly of the capitalist and upper-middle classes of Hong Kong/Taiwan or the wealthy "naked" officials/businesspeople in Mainland China of late, but it is also a powerful imaginary and discourse actively desired and appropriated by those Chinese who are by no means from such moneyed social strata. Indeed, the exposure of the "naked officials'" pursuit of flexible citizenship did not put transnationality in a negative light, but only further highlights it as a coveted sign of privilege. In contrast to the *luoguan*s who desire flexible citizenship to protect their illicit gains, however, the less moneyed, less privileged Chinese subjects desire flexible citizenship, among other reasons, to protect themselves from a Chinese society that they see as unjust and full of problems, of which the *luoguan* is in fact a manifestation.

The Mainland Chinese "foreign talents" in Singapore belong to such a category of less moneyed Chinese migrants, despite their middle class family origins and the privilege of having been awarded scholarships by Singapore. For them, flexible citizenship remains an as yet unreached object of desire; at the same time, being flexible is also seen as the very strategy through which a better life may be realized. However, because flexible citizenship is far from taken for granted for these subjects, I found their discourses pertaining to it more nuanced, shot through with tensions between aspirations for a boundless flexibility and attachments to sociocultural specificity,

oscillations between denunciations of the familiar which motivate the project of flexibility on the one hand and conflicted re-/evaluations of the imagined that constantly problematizes the desirability of normative flexibility on the other. I see these ambiguities and contradictions as the seamy side to a sweeping "flexible citizenship" metanarrative, and argue that they are particularly pertinent to relatively young Chinese subjects who face the multifarious opportunities and choices that the present historical juncture presents them. The fact that my interlocutors are in Singapore, a sort of middle point between the East and the West, further complicates their perspectives.

Building on the notion of flexible citizenship, Vanessa Fong (2011) more recently examined China's singleton-child generation's desires for transnational experience and subjectivity and their quests of the same through studying overseas. Fong notices that these Chinese youths' desire of the West is backed powerfully by imaginations of the developed world as superior to their current home environment, China; yet, at the same time, they also retain a strong nationalistic attachment to it—an attachment Fong (also 2004) calls "filial nationalism"—that is not experienced as a contradiction to their desire for the West. This finding of Fong's gestures toward a refinement of the notion of flexible citizenship in the context of Chinese transnational educational mobilities, but my research with the PRC scholars in Singapore seems to suggest we take a pinch of salt about the discourses of nationalism or patriotism. My interlocutors also often spoke such discourses, but I propose that they should perhaps be more accurately characterized as "patriotism at a safe distance," as I elaborate later.

I echo Fong with regard to the salient role *imagination* plays in the desire for transnational mobility. Pursuing transnational life projects necessarily involves a great deal of personal pains and losses, whether the subjects in question are well-heeled transmigrants (e.g. S. Y. Teo, 2007), sojourning students (e.g. Fong, 2008), or underprivileged or forced migrant subjects (e.g. Chu, 2010; Ong, 2003); however, the fascination with imagined better worlds beyond seems to keep the Chinese enthralled, compelling more and more of them to embark on the adventure of "leaving China" (W. Sun, 2002). But transnational imaginations are also rooted in local realities. As Xiang's (2013) and Chu's (2010) works on aspirant migrant subjects who inhabit marginalized

positions in contemporary China illustrate, these subjects' apparently irrational willingness to invest huge sums of money or to even risk lives for the opportunities to work in poorly paid menial jobs in developed countries as illegal migrants must be understood as motivated by their desperate desire to escape the harsh local conditions that seem to foreclose any hope of a better life. Similarly, Ong's, Wasters's and Fong's works also in their own ways highlight how transnational imagination's other side is always a local background with specific realities. In examining the imaginations of the PRC "foreign talents" in Singapore, however, I encountered a slightly different situation: because these subjects are in various ways constitutively "in-betweeners," what truly constituted the "local" or the "background" for them was often ambiguous and unstable. Often, it seemed, what was assumed to be the "local" or the "background" for them had to be imagined into discursive existence, while the transnational imaginaries might appear tantalizingly real. Arguably, there is a sense in which these subjects are not ones caught in between imagination and reality, but are inhabitants of the interstices between imaginations and yet other imaginations. In turn, I suggest, this peculiar sociocultural positionality at least partially accounts for their awkward entanglement in the "foreign talent" libidinal politics in Singapore.

I now turn to the empirical examinations of the PRC "foreign talents'" discourses and imaginations.

A tripartite comparative methodology

> Backwardness, poverty, corruption, jealousy, and dependence on instrumental social networks (guanxi) topped the list of ''Chinese characteristics'' these teenagers found most deplorable in comparison with what they perceived as the wealthier, more meritocratic, more modern, less treacherous, more independent, and less socially exhausting life available in wealthier societies. (Fong, 2004, p. 638)

As Vanessa Fong's above observation shows, imagination and comparison often go hand-in-hand. An us-and-them "comparative methodology" is characteristic of transnational imaginations. For Fong's research subjects, the "us" and "them" are respectively a dissatisfying China and an idealized developed world; for the PRC

"foreign talent" scholars in Singapore, imagination involves what may be called a "tripartite comparative methodology" between not two but three "regimes."

As these "foreign talents" have already lived in Singapore for a number of years, this highly developed city-state—which in Fong's scheme belongs to the "imagined community" of the "developed world"—has become for them less a site of imagination, but more a place of concrete experience; in interesting contrast, their homeland China, now seen and experienced only from some distance, increasingly takes up the place of a site of fascination and imagination; on top of these two places that are alternately them/us and home/abroad, there remains a third place—the "real" (read White) developed West that constitutes the boundary-marking, ultimate "Other" in their imaginations.

In general, I found that my interlocutors tended to demonstrate more sophistication in articulating comparative insights and imaginations about countries and cultures, as compared with Vanessa Fong's participants. This is perhaps partly because in this chapter I focus on those interlocutors who had already graduated from university and started professional life, who therefore are simply older in age than Fong's research participants. In their tripartite comparative methodology, I found my interlocutors often qualify stereotypical or sweeping comparisons by adding acknowledgements and concession clauses; they also tended to separate different aspects of the different regimes when exercising comparison.

For instance, one prominent parameter in the tripartite comparative methodology is social infrastructure broadly conceptualized, which includes social welfare facilities such as health care and education systems. A 26-year-old female informant, Aijia, who has been pursuing a doctoral degree in engineering at UIS after completing her undergraduate studies, made the following comments regarding education:

> For foundational education (*jichu jiaoyu*) China is definitely better than Singapore. I mean from primary school up to high school, I think the Chinese education system is very rigorous. The schools in Singapore can't compare with the standards in China, expect for the very few schools here, such as [xxx], [yyy]… So when I have a child I would most likely let her be educated in China before university level. But at university level, I think education in Singapore is

> definitely better than China, even better than Tsinghua and Peking Universities. But American or British top universities are even better. So for undergraduate studies, I would send my child to either Singapore or top unis in the West. For postgraduate education and research, definitely the American universities, no doubt about that!

Aijia was an SM2 scholar, and had been to the United States several times for leisure travels and academic conferences, without living there for extended periods. Her comment above is thus a mixture of relatively insightful comparison based on concrete experiences (in the case of China vs. Singapore) and a dose of idealized imagination (in the case of America).

Similar discourses were also uttered by not a few of my informants with regard to social welfare, especially health care. The general perception is that the European countries operate "cradle to grave" care systems and are therefore the most desirable. The US, on the other hand, does not provide universal health care, but relies heavily on private insurance, which is seen as much less desirable. Interestingly, many informants cited in support of their statements what they had been reading about President Obama's efforts at reforming the US health care system, which happened to be going on during the time of my fieldwork. Singapore, for many informants, was not very desirable when it comes to social welfare either, as provisions are not considered extensive, although many did acknowledge that the quality of medical care is very high, and the system is transparent and reliable. China, in this regard, is the least desirable, with its health care system regarded as extortionately expensive and often corrupt, although not necessarily inferior in terms of technical standards. Comparative imaginations regarding retirement welfare showed a similar pattern to that of the medical care, and link into a second prominent parameter in the comparative methodology of the "foreign talents:" lifestyle.

A very common way of saying among my informants goes something like this: China is for getting rich fast; Singapore is for steady professional development; and Europe is for retirement. Again, such a tripartite imagination is formed as a result of both personal experiences and consumption of impersonal images and information that freely float in the mediasphere. Da Wei, a 26-year-old ex-SM3 scholar, had been posted

by his Singapore-based employer to its Danish headquarter to work soon after he found the job. I secured an interview with him when he took a holiday *back* in Singapore; during the interview, he mused on his relatively easy and comfortable lifestyle while working in Copenhagen:

> Europeans really know how to enjoy life. Work won't stop them from taking the holidays and leisure trips that they think they deserve. Working amongst them involves very low stress level, quite comfortable, and I have a lot of leisure time. But sometimes I think of my friends and colleagues here in Singapore, I feel I am getting *too* relaxed. After spending too much time in that life style, you lose your ambition to achieve big-time success. I think maybe Europe is not a good place for young people like us. When you are young maybe it's better to work in high-pressure environment like Asia, like Singapore, so you achieve things. When you reach a certain age, maybe going to retire in Europe sounds a great idea. Not now.

Da Wei's such appraisal of the Western lifestyle is echoed by many informants, some in passing, others in greater elaboration. For instance, Tong Mei, an ex-SM2 scholar now working in a shipping brokerage company, enjoys watching American TV drama in her spare time. She said that the lifestyle in suburban America is truly enviable, and would be her ultimate goal in the future; meanwhile, she realized that to achieve that she probably had to "struggle" (*dapin*) a bit more in Asia first.[4]

The imagination of China, as Da Wei's following comment suggests, is quite something else:

> If you want to get rich really quickly, I think nowadays you have to go back to China! The market is big, the population is massive, and opportunities are plenty! That's where people go if they want to be really rich, but I'm afraid I don't have that ability… (laughs)

Interestingly, he then recited a popular Internet catchphrase that had been hotly circulating in China several years before, which I also recalled when he made his above comments about China. The popular phrase, "People stupid (gullible), money plenty, come pronto" (*rensha, qianduo, sulai*), was reportedly a text message sent by a businessman who had newly traveled to a part of China awash with easy money-making opportunities to his business partner. The true origin of the phrase, as is typical of

Internet linguistic phenomena, is now hard to trace; but the witty impression it leaves on people's minds, caricaturizing the rising China as a bizarre place paved in gold, is indelible. Singapore, on the other hand, with its highly regulated and relatively mature economy, is considered a good place to develop one's career steadily; and this is believed to involve a lifestyle, though also stressful, not as chaotic as would be in the case of China.

A third parameter that featured often in my informants' discourse was with regard to discrimination, or social exclusion in general. Most informants mentioned that one important concern about living in the West is that there might be explicit or implicit discriminations that might affect their life quality or career. Da Wei, who had spent more than a year in Copenhagen at the time of our interview, suggested that ultimately there would be a glass ceiling in European societies for Asian people like himself. "Maybe it's much better in the US, I don't know… But the glass ceiling is definitely there in European societies; whereas in Singapore there is no issue at all," he summarized. In a similar tone, Zhi Cong, an ex-SM2 scholar who spent half a year in Canada during his undergraduate studies as an exchange student, said the following:

> When I was in Canada, I really missed life in Singapore. It was ok there, and I got along well with people; but after all, you know we [referring to Asians and Caucasian Canadians—author] are different peoples. After all, it's not entirely comfortable. In Canada or US or the Europe, we are the *real* minority, right? But in Singapore we are not *really* minority, if you know what I mean—we [Singaporeans and Chinese—author] look similar, and have relatively similar backgrounds. Eventually I think I'd like to be in a place where I don't always feel like a stranger.

My informants were aware that even in Singapore, they might not always be accepted and included by the local society, but they expressed little concern over this, suggesting firstly that the exclusionary practices in Singapore were few and mild, and secondly, that if they sank their roots in Singapore, their next generation could easily integrate and blend into the mainstream. The latter possibility is absent, in their views, in the white Western countries due to the irreducible marker of race. Most of my informants at the postgraduate stage have had some experiences of either visiting or

living in the white West, and it was an interesting fact that while none of them reported any personal experience of discrimination or abuse, they all pointed to the existence of discrimination at an abstract level, and highlighted this as an important parameter in their comparative methodology of determining the desirability of regimes. One possible explanation is that sojourners tend to be reluctant to report the more painful side of overseas experiences in order to "save face" (Fong, 2011, p. 31; W. Sun, 2002, p. 69); alternatively, their abstract awareness of issues of racial discrimination and/or social exclusion in the West may be attributed to their consumption of information on mass media such as the Internet. For instance, Kexin, an ex-SM2 scholar who had not at the time of interview been to any Western country personally, nevertheless had a negative impression of Australia as a potential destination for migration, as she had heard from her Chinese friends in Australia about cases of racially motivated violence (see Baas, 2010).

The above imaginations and their discursive manifestations apparently run into collision course with another set of imaginations and discourses surrounding a fourth parameter that my informants called "social environment" (*shehui huanjing*), denoting the moral milieu of the society, with an emphasis on social equity, justice and the rule of law. Despite seeing racially based discrimination and exclusion as characteristic of Western societies, the informants nevertheless considered the Western and Westernized societies (thus including Singapore) to have relatively good "social environments," whereas the "social environment" in China was often described as poisonous and "miasmatic" (*wuyan zhangqi*). Similar to Vanessa Fong's research subjects who see China as "corrupt" and dependent on "instrumental social networks (guanxi)" (Fong, 2004, p. 638), many of my informants criticized China for being a society where social justice and the rule of law are flouted in the face of power, privilege, nepotism, and the supremacy of money. When responding to my questions asking them to assess the cost-and-benefit of having left China for Singapore as "foreign talents," on the "benefits" account, nearly every informant noted that Singapore is a more meritocratic society, governed by law, thus giving them, having come from not-*so*-privileged backgrounds in China, a fairer opportunity to achieve what they can in life.

Zhi Cong was from rural Hubei in China, and admitted that he was among the least privileged in his cohort of over two hundred SM2 scholars. "If I had not gotten the scholarship to Singapore, I definitely wouldn't have been able to get such an education, and even to go for exchange in Canada," he reckoned. Had he stayed in China, even as a graduate from a good university there, his future would have been hard, because he could not rely on his peasant parents for providing networks in securing work in the city. Having a poor rural background in China, he suggested, meant life is simply stacked against oneself. There can be little social justice for the weak in China, he ruminated.

Even for informants who did not consider themselves as disadvantaged as Zhi Cong did, they nevertheless rehearsed similar opinions about the China's "social environment." The politicization of various aspects of life in China means that power politics is a tenacious feature of many forms of institutional life ranging from the workplace, to school, to university and beyond. In such an "overly complicated" (*fenfan fuza*)—as one informant put it—environment, the perception goes, one is not rewarded for their talents or efforts, but their birth privilege, and ability to manipulate *guanxi* and to practice dirty tricks. In addition, various food safety scandals and pollution reports that have sent shockwaves in recent times further convinced people of China's undesirability as an environment to live in. Informants cited various scandalous social events that have been made widely known through the Internet to support their such imaginations about China. Singapore and the West, on the other hand, represent the rule of law, the general absence of such social malaises.

Just as these "foreign talents" residing outside China denounce China for its "social environment," a further twist is in the tail when it comes to a fifth parameter concerning, broadly speaking, cultural compatibility. In musing over the question as to where they ultimately see as the most suitable, desirable place to settle down in the long term, the answers from my informants were typically and indeed predictably vague, because of the early life-stage to which they presently belonged. Nevertheless, something about the elusive notion of "culture" frequently flagged up. The West, in most of my informants' discourse and imagination, is culturally too distinct and incompatible, and thus did not become an object of much rumination. This is partly also due to the fact that most of my

informants, although having had certain amount of exposure to the West, do not see any immediate possibility of migrating there to set up a life. It is Singapore, the regime middling between the West and China, that became the focus of their contemplation with regard to "culture."

It is not an uncommon remark made by my informants that in Singapore, human connections are "thin" (*renqing danbo*) compared to in China, and this is considered an undesirable feature when it comes to the quality of life. Some say that the human connections in Singapore are mainly business and transactional relations, invested with interests, but not enough emotion and solicitude. Zi Guang (M, 25), an ex-SM2 scholar who worked in a local Singaporean civil engineering company, observed as follows:

> In Singapore I think the human connections are thin (*renqing danbo*). Everybody *dabao* (takeaway) food,[5] even the core family *dabao* food and eat on their own. There is not enough connection. [...] Everybody is like an isolated entity standing alone (*meigeren xiang dandu de yigen ci*).

The implication of what my informants considered to be "thin" human connections in Singapore is that there lacks "warmth" in daily life, resulting in relatively monotonous, numb, and isolated social and emotional life. When I challenged my informants upon hearing such comments by asking whether their perception of "thin" human connections might not be due to the fact that they were not yet an integral party to the local people's social life, many readily conceded this possibility. The majority of informants agreed that whereas they had many local colleagues and friends, their best friends often remained other Mainland Chinese in Singapore.

Another facet of the cultural compatibility parameter concerns the level of social "agility" or "comfort,"—*ziru du* or *shufu du*, as my informants would say in Chinese. A number of my informants, when reflecting on their experiences of working in Singapore, suggested that here rules are a bit "rigid" (*siban*), without room for flexibility (*huixuan de yudi*), unlike in China. Working in this "rigid" environment means that there is less agility and comfort. Nevertheless, this opinion, while widely observed amongst my informants, remained vaguely articulated. Even upon my elicitation, informants tended not to remember specific incidences that caused them to regard things as "rigid" in the

Singapore workplace culture or society at large. Perhaps the following case, proudly told to me by Peng Shuai (M, 27), the entrepreneurial spirited ex-SM2 scholar that I mentioned in chapter 7, can help shed some light:

> I know one of the secretaries working in the Chinese Embassy here. The other day, a friend of mine was in urgency to go abroad on a Sunday; however, her passport was being renewed at the Embassy, and the Embassy is closed on Sunday. So she phoned me up to see if I could help. I phoned up the secretary friend in the Embassy, explained the matter to him, and he helped to retrieve the new passport immediately, and asked my friend to go and collect it. You see, this is the flexibility you have with Chinese people. In a Singaporean context, this would never have happened.

In other words, while the Chinese sojourners grumble about China's "social environment" which includes exactly the lack of rule of law and the abuse of power and privileges, at the same time, they also seem to desire the convenience and flexibility that their "Chinese way" could sometimes afford. Singapore, being a "Westernized" society, is "rigid" and allows little room for such flexibility; thus, for my informants, many of whom keep open the question regarding whether to return to China in several years, Singapore is an environment where they feel less agile (*ziru*), less "as-duck-takes-it-to-water" when compared with China.

Although the discourse about cultural compatibility took the concrete form of a comparison between Singapore and China for the PRC "foreign talents," the essence of their comparative evaluation is perhaps something more abstract and universal. The weakening of traditional forms of human relationality, the individualization of members of a society (as the "thin human connection" discourse encapsulates) and the rationalization and bureaucratization (as the "rigidity" discourse alludes to) are some of the prominent features of *modernity*, as the founding fathers of sociology have pointed out more than a century ago.[6] This "cultural" parameter in my informants' comparative methodology, therefore, can be regarded as their folk experience and response to modernity when they crossed from China—a modernizing society—to Singapore—a very much already modernized society. In relation to this, Andrew Kipnis's (1997) penetrating study of *guanxi* in the Chinese society provides a powerful interpretation of

my informants' such discourses. Though literally meaning "relationships," according to Kipnis, *guanxi* unifies material exchanges and obligations with *ganqing*—the Chinese term for emotion or affection. Through a nuanced examination of the ways in which the affective and the instrumental cannot be compartmentalized in Chinese sociality, Kipnis highlights the specificity of the tendency in Western modernity to separate the instrumental/transactional relations from the affective/emotional domain. The apparent "rigidity" of the Singapore society and Singaporeans in managing social intercourses is interpreted by those who subscribe to some versions of a *guanxi* social philosophy as a lack of *ganqing* or, as my informants also said, *renqing*. Reversely, as Peng Shuai's story about the "irregularly" obtained passport shows, for subjects such as my informants who consciously or unconsciously embody certain forms of Chinese sociality, to be friends—and therefore to have *renqing/ganqing*—also means being able to request the occasional rule-bending favors, which the "thin human connection" Singapore society does not allow. In the village where he carried out fieldwork, Kipnis (ibid., p. 175) further observes that the peasants also spoke of city-dwellers as having little *ganqing*, which he interprets as a commentary on the erosion of traditional forms of sociality in the face of modernity. Most of my informants did not pride themselves for being "very China" (see chapter 6) and many saw the characteristically "very China" *guanxi* practices as something to denounce; yet, in their casual commentaries on the lack of "human connection" and the "rigidity" of living in Singapore, they seemed to display a more ambivalent attitude toward and perhaps even a desire for a *guanxi*-lubricated sociality in which they would feel more at ease.

Eric Ma (2012) conceptualizes Hong Kong as a "satellite modernity" that relays Western modernity to China through trans-border cultural and economic interactions, although he focuses more on the ways in which Hong Kong, as a stand-in for modernity, is desired by China and the Chinese. In a way, Singapore is not dissimilar in its role of relaying the experiences of modernity to the Chinese "foreign talents," except that, due to the more privileged status of the Chinese "foreign talents" compared to the rural Mainland migrants to Hong Kong that Ma depicts, my interlocutors' relation to Singapore is not only one of desirousness, but include more sophisticated appraisals and

mixed considerations.

The above-mentioned five parameters, while not able to capture fully what is a very nuanced if also messy set of discourses, can be nevertheless taken as some of the major considerations in the PRC scholars' tripartite comparative methodology in discoursing on the desirability of various "regimes." As has been noted, far from overlapping each other, the desirability of a certain regime can fluctuate or even be at opposite poles when different parameters are considered. It is according to these crisscrossing, sometimes conflicting, logics of desirability that the "foreign talents" put their "regime shopping" into discourse and practice.

The rationale for regime shopping: mobility/flexibility for stability

Essentially, as different "regimes" can be alternately more or less desirable under different parameters, my informants' discourse about choosing regimes involves a strategy of maximizing the advantages through practicing mobility and flexibility in citizenship.

One noteworthy character of the discourses of these "foreign talents" is the confidence and optimism they exuded. Having by now accumulated a certain amount of useful capitals (among others: a globally recognized education; bilingualism in arguably the two most important languages in today's world; cross-cultural experiences and awareness; work experiences in Singapore-based international corporations), my informants seemed to speak of transnational mobility in a taken-for-granted manner. They were born and raised in China, educated in Singapore, and have seen the developed West; the world is not such a strange place for them anymore. Although not immediately in a position to move freely and choose a most desirable regime to live and work in, it is not beyond imagination for certain opportunities in the near future to allow them to carry out such adventures. Kexin, the female ex-SM2 informant who at the time of interview had not yet traveled to the West, nevertheless spoke as follows during an interview in response to my question probing where she'd like to live in the future:

> Well, I don't know yet. Let's see. Now I am already a Singaporean citizen, so it's relatively easy for me to travel. Hopefully in the coming year I will have an opportunity to travel on business to Australia. If not I will just go there for holiday. And I can take a look (*kan yi kan*). Maybe further down the road I will also get to travel to Europe and the US, and then with some first-hand experiences, I can compare for myself, to see which is the most suitable environment for development (*fazhan*) and living (*shenghuo*).

In fact, personal/career development (*geren/shiye fazhan*) and quality of living (*shenghuo zhiliang*) are the two key pursuits that all of my informants emphasized. The flexible shopping of regimes is largely geared toward the fulfillment of these two criteria. It is typical to hear these Chinese transmigrants say something along the line of "*As long as* it's good for career development and family life, anywhere in the world is okay."

Take the example of Aijia, the female informant who was at the time of interview about to complete her PhD in Civil Engineering. Aijia had been in a relationship with her Chinese banker boyfriend for over two years. Her boyfriend was then based in Shanghai, and the two of them had met when he was previously expatriated to Singapore for a half-a-year period. Now the two of them were separated in Singapore and Shanghai, and traveled back and forth to visit each other several times a year. When I asked Aijia what their plans were regarding the future, her reply was illustrative of the "flexible citizenship" mentality that many others among my research subjects also adopted or did not mind adopting. Aijia suggested that as long as the arrangement is pursuant to the interest of their careers and their quality of life, they were happy to straddle across Singapore and China. After her PhD graduation, she might seek work in Singapore, and eventually obtain Singaporean citizenship; in the future, when Aijia and her boyfriend got married and had children, their children would have the option of receiving education in China or Singapore, depending on which would seem the best choice. Her boyfriend and future husband, on the other hand, would probably retain his Chinese citizenship, so that she could easily go back to China for visits, and vice versa. With each of them holding a different passport, they would be able to enjoy flexibly the best of the two regimes.

In her study of young Chinese professionals in a globalized northern Chinese city,

Dalian, Lisa Hoffman (2010) observes an interesting practice among these young people: one member of a couple would stay employed in the state/public sector for the benefit of stability and security, while the other would join the more lucrative though riskier private/entrepreneurial sector. Playing a riff on the catchphrase characterizing China's policy toward Hong Kong—"one country, two systems" (*yiguo liangzhi*)—Hoffman calls this practice "one family, two systems." The strategy articulated by Aijia, which represents the imagination of many of my informants, whether they are coupled or not, married or not, can be similarly summarized as "one family/couple, two citizenships," which allows for flexible exploitation of different regimes.

The logic ultimately underlying my informants' confidence, their taken-for-granted attitudes toward mobility, and their highly flexible imaginations, however, is arguably the desire for the dialectical opposite of mobility, namely, *stability*. In order words, I maintain that it is not mobility/flexibility for the sake of it, but for the ultimate sake of stability. The "as long as" in their collective sentiment "as long as it's good for career development and family life, anywhere in the world is okay" indicates a flexibility that is ultimately in pursuit of a stable life underpinned by good career development (*fazhan*) which provides financial security, and by the settled goodness of family life which provides social and emotional stability. One passing remark made by informant Bei Bei (F, 26) perhaps provides the most succinct illustration of this logic of mobility/flexibility for stability.

At the time of our interview, Bei Bei had been studying for a PhD in Bioengineering at UIS for three years, and was near completion. In our conversation, she revealed, not without a sense of worry, that she was still single at the time, which meant a lack of stability in life. She wouldn't mind pursuing postdoctoral research in the United States or elsewhere once she completed her PhD, but she qualified that this all depended on her "other half." "Once you're married to a husband, you follow the husband (*jiafu suifu*)," she said. Immediately, she became aware of the irony in the statement, because she didn't even at that time have an "other half" to follow.

Bei Bei's phrase "*jiafu suifu*" is a variation of the Chinese folk idiom "*jiaji suiji, jiagou, suigou,*" which literally translates as "Once married to a chicken, follow the

chicken; once married to a dog, follow the dog" (see also Farrer, 2012, p. 25). With "chicken" and "dog" carrying the connotations of randomness (similar to when one says "any Tom, Dick and Harry") and fatefulness, the phrase signifies the feminine virtue of submission to and contentment with one's husband in the context of feudal patriarchy. In the context of imagined mobility, life trajectory, and belonging, in contrast, the phrase "*jiafu suifu*" signifies a desire for the stability provided by couplehood and marriage. "*Jiafu suifu*" dialectically encompasses stability and the mobility/flexibility that might be necessitated by the pursuit of that stability. Bei Bei has her own career potential as a bioengineering researcher, but she told me that she didn't mind not pursuing it if she found a reliable spouse. Once guaranteed that stability, she wouldn't mind being a "trailing spouse" (K. B. Chan & Seet, 2003; Yeoh, Huang, & Willis, 2000; Yeoh & Khoo, 1998) to her husband, which might actually entail more geographical mobility and other flexibilities.

As the cases of the three informants I cited above seem to show, for the Chinese "foreign talents" in Singapore, although mobility is more or less a normative condition, and "flexible citizenship" has become a habit of thinking and talking, such mobility and flexibility eventually are strategies and means toward stability in life.

Instrumental citizenship and national loyalty: patriotism at a safe distance

One corollary to the adoption of "flexible citizenship" by my "foreign talent" interlocutors is that citizenship seems to a great extent "instrumentalized" (Aguilar Jr, 1999; Ip, Inglis, & Wu, 1997). Citizenship as a legal/technical matter and national loyalty and/or patriotism as a personal and emotional matter are clearly distinguished and compartmentalized.

As Sin Yih Teo (2011) observes amongst the PRC immigrants in Canada, when it came to the question of applying for Canadian citizenship, there was a spectrum of views, which were ultimately dependent on pragmatic considerations. The diverse replies given by her respondents, according to Teo,

> have to be understood in light of a variety of factors, including their—possibly evolving—goals with regard to immigration, settlement experiences in Canada, attitude towards return migration, and their particular professional circumstances. (ibid., p. 814)

Similarly, for my informants in Singapore, applying for Singaporean citizenship or not is largely a pragmatic matter. Although virtually all of my informants have taken up the Permanent Residence (PR) status offered by the state upon their university graduation, few had made the move yet to acquire full citizenship at the time of my research fieldwork. Partly this was because many informants still considered it early times to make such a decision, and would rather "take one step at a time" (ibid., p. 811) or "keep watching" (*guanwang*). For those who clearly saw themselves settling down in Singapore in the future, the application is made sooner rather than later. For example, Kexin, who works in the shipping industry, believed that because of her professional field, it was likely to be advantageous in the long run for her to be based in Singapore. Thus, she applied for and was granted citizenship just over three years after she graduated with a first degree from the UIS. Although Zhi Cong hadn't made the application yet, he hinted to me that he would probably make that move soon as well. "It would only be good for me, you see, in China, I have a rural *hukou* (household registration);[7] by becoming a Singaporean, next time I'd be an 'overseas Chinese' (*huaqiao*) when I visit China. I don't have much to lose by taking up the Singapore citizenship," he said.

The instrumental and calculative way in which my informants looked at citizenship status was clearly demonstrated in their often-made comment or, *complaint* rather, about China's non-acceptance of dual-citizenship. In fact, it would hardly be a speculation to say that, were China to accept dual-citizenship, my informants, as well as most other Chinese migrants, would not think another second about acquiring an additional passport. In other words, a great many Chinese "foreign talents" and Chinese transmigrants in general currently hesitate to take up foreign citizenships primarily due to the exclusive citizenship regime of China, the desirability of which is arguably on a rising trajectory (Fong, 2011, p. 215). Were there to be no such exclusivity, citizenship

would verily be an asset to be "accumulated" by these flexible subjects to maximize their advantage. Thus, when it comes to the formal/legal membership in a specific regime, cool-headed calculation is the dominant logic.

In any case, neither my informants nor the general Chinese immigrants in Singapore that I met really linked technical citizenship to loyalty or patriotism at an emotional level. "(Legal) citizenship has nothing to do with your sense of belonging," I was told many times by different informants. One's emotional attachment to China—to the extent such an attachment exists—will not change with the change of passport. Being "foreign talents," my informants were aware of the discourses of suspicion in Singapore about immigrants and new citizens' loyalty; nevertheless, in my interviews and informal conversations, they were candid in suggesting that they would always be more attached to China than to Singapore. As one informant Min Jian (M, 25, PhD student at UIS) put it, "my heart will always be on the side of China (*wode xin yongyuan hui xiangzhe zhongguo*)."

That the Chinese "foreign talents" in Singapore claimed they retained an emotional attachment to their homeland China was, in itself, not a refreshing finding. However, if we were to subject the concrete expressions of their "patriotic" sentimentality to ethnographic examination, it seems a pinch of salt is in order. Their patriotic expressions would not normally exceed some abstract proclamations and the daily browsing of China-related news and China-based "infotainment" on the Internet or TV. "How do you mean when you say you are more emotionally attached to China?"—I often probed my informants along such a line; and their replies would run something like "Well, you just care about it; reading the news about China; browsing some blogs to see the big social events and scandals…" In other words, for transmigrants such as these "foreign talents" living outside China, China is largely experienced as a *symbolic domain* containing information and signs. Their patriotism toward China, consequently, tends also to be expressed through symbolic acts such as leaving a comment on a China related news article or "liking" a commentary post on Facebook that says China will soon take over the US in GDP.

One of my informants, Sima (M, 27, ex-SM2, civil engineering consultant),

remarked revealingly in an interview, "Close your door, and turn on the computer, it's just the same as China." Among all my interlocutors, Sima was one of the most "attached" to China, in the sense that he kept highly up-to-date about China-related current affairs and demonstrated notable pride and defensiveness when our topics turned to Chinese culture and the Chinese society. Compared with others, Sima also stood out in how much he remained loyal to Mainland China-based media and the infotainment it offers. He would be fairly close to the type of person one has in mind when words such as "nationalism" and "patriotism" are invoked. But even for him, China is a symbolically constituted domain that one switches on when one switches on the computer. One's emotional attachment and patriotic sentiments can be kindled and rehearsed in this domain; but as we can imagine for Sima, when he switches off his computer and opens his door to go to his Singapore-based workplace, he is immediately presented with the mundanity of white-collar professional life in a highly cosmopolitan global city which has little use for his attachments to China. In the mundane spheres of working and living, pragmatism and flexibility are still the principles that govern my interlocutors' thinking and behavior, while high sentiments such as patriotism and national loyalty are relegated to a symbolic compartment suffused with signs, imagination, fantasization, but little more. Precisely because information technology has now allowed people to participate in symbolic self-expressions of identity and belonging independent of their physical locations, pragmatism and flexibility can be adopted even more fully in their mundane and extra-symbolic life domains.

The early Chinese emigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries left a poor and war-torn nation out of desperation, yet their experience of racial discrimination and the hardship of survival abroad made them even more emotionally attached to their motherland (Chen, 2000; M. Hsu, 2000; K. E. Kuah, 2000; A. Louie, 2004). Compared with these diasporic forerunners, many of today's Chinese transmigrants, such as my research interlocutors, were able to leave China and treat the world as their oyster precisely *because* their motherland was becoming an economically and otherwise powerful country. Thus, in contrast to the early diasporic Chinese communities whose deep attachment and patriotism stemmed from embodied

experiences of foreign oppression and exclusion in host societies, today's talented Chinese transmigrant subjects have relatively little "bitter" personal experience to support a strong patriotic attachment. Their integration into a world of border-crossing knowledge economy and borderless circulation of images and discourse makes them much more flexible, strategic, and agile with regard to personal identities.

Desire is often sustained by distance and unattainability. Many sojourning Chinese claim to be strongly attached to China and to be "patriotic," even as they prefer not to live there physically. Having a secure "base" abroad means they can "dip in and out" at ease; this flexibility allows the sojourners the privilege to criticize and bemoan what is amiss with China while singing the sentimental songs of patriotism. The middle class backgrounds of my "foreign talent" research participants further means that their families and friends in China are usually not the immediate victims of China's myriad social problems; this makes their solicitous attachment to China acquire a certain character of "watching the fire from the opposite side of the river" as the Chinese idiom goes (*ge'an guanhuo*). These somewhat hollowed-out solicitude, symbolically sustained yet suspended attachment, and "patriotism at a safe distance," seem to be useful conceptual notions with which to think about the desires for home, nation, and citizenship as found in the discourses and practices of the PRC "foreign talents" in Singapore.

Sources of transnational imaginations

More than two decades ago, Appadurai (1991) presciently remarked on the increasingly crucial role of imagination—enabled through the deterritorializing reaches of the mass media and mass migration—in people's social lives: "More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before" (ibid., p. 198). The advent of the World Wide Web and, more recently, the emergence of user content generating "Web 2.0" (Han, 2011), facilitated by the prevalence of portable Internet-connected devices, all but made imaginations based on free-flowing images and information more fundamental to the constitution of human experience and social

practice. The discourses of my informants in Singapore clearly reflected such macro social conditions.

Echoing existing research demonstrating the influence of new media on the ways diasporic/overseas communities imagine their homelands (e.g. Kaldor-Robinson, 2002), I have also shown that when my interlocutors invoked China in our conversations, they were more likely to cite what they had read and heard about China on the Internet than speak from personal experiences. This is partly because most of my informants had left China for Singapore when they were teenagers, returning to China only for interspersed short visits. Having by now also acquired the option of not returning for good, China becomes for them an object of, alternately, desirous fascination and rejective stereotyping. Many of the popular discourses in China's mediasphere in recent years have focused on issues such as social mobility and social justice,[8] and it is these discourses that my informants often appropriated and then regurgitated as means of contemplating the meanings of having been made "foreign talents" by Singapore.

Scholars elsewhere (e.g. D. Liu, 1999; Mitra, 1997; W. Wu, 1999) have investigated the imagination of ethnic and national identities on the Internet, and argued that the Internet enables both the centralization and fragmentation of identities. More specifically, for instance, Liu's (1999) and Wu's (1999) works in the North American context show "how virtual communities formed by Chinese immigrants carry out online lobbying to fight for the protection of the Chinese community in the host country" (B. Chan, 2006, p. 4). In my case of Singapore's PRC "foreign talent," in contrast, the influence of the Internet seems to remain largely fragmented and passive. For them, participating in Internet-mediated collective identity projects or activism is simply not necessary, as these PRC "foreign talents" in Singapore regard themselves mostly as individualistic, flexible, cosmopolitan-minded professionals on the road to career success and personal happiness, but seldom as victims of discrimination who needed to protectively assert identities. Given such, identity for them is replaced by free-floating processes of imagination that seldom goes beyond discursivity.

Implications for the "foreign talent" libidinal politics

For SM1/2/3 "foreign talent" scholars, both China and Singapore are "homes," as many of them would claim. Having spent significant portions of their lives in both these two places, Singapore and China no doubt are equally crucial in constituting their sociocultural identities. Yet, it may be argued in reverse that, precisely because both places are "homes," in fact, neither really is. Instead of developing deep attachment to both places, the scholars' experiences of mobility and subjective hybridity arguably enabled some senses of detachment to both place. In neither place do they feel completely "at home:" in Singapore, they cannot be insulated from the them-and-us discourse that always seeks to define and defend a core local Singaporean identity that excludes them (see chapter 2); in China, the fact that they have been educated abroad and that they are currently working abroad—and in relatively privileged conditions—prevents them from identifying with China in ways they perhaps otherwise would had they remained there. They have become "third culture kids" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009) of sorts.[9]

In addition, the larger socio-historical contexts surrounding these PRC "foreign talents" must be taken into consideration. Being mostly children of the "post-1980s generation" (*baling-hou*),[10] they have grown up in socially peaceful and increasingly affluent environments, in both China and Singapore. In fact, they have ridden two rising tides that crossed frontiers—the opening-up of China since 1980s and Singapore's transition to the knowledge economy model from the 1990s—to get to where they are now. In other words, they have benefited from the best of both sides, and now seem also in a position to avoid the worst of either. China, after thirty years of breakneck development, may have become a land of contradictions, teeming with opportunities but riven by social problems; through the physical and social mobilities that they have acquired by coming to Singapore as "foreign talent," these Chinese are able to avoid China's problems yet take advantage of the opportunities it presents. On the other hand, not being regarded "truly" Singaporean by either the native Singaporeans or themselves, the PRC "foreign talents" are under little obligation to treat Singapore as more than a

workplace or a rented residence. Consequently, at the level of civic identity and political consciousness, the PRC "foreign talents" are exempted the burdens of concern for either site. China was home, but perhaps will not be in the future, while Singapore will always remain an "adopted" home. The condition of Singapore as a transnational hub economy means that the "foreign talents" can have a comfortable living without having to develop meaningful civic engagement, let alone nationalistic or patriotic sentiments.

A final note of qualification

Finally, I wish to end my discussions in this chapter with two important qualifications. Firstly, as my research interlocutors mostly consisted of SM1/2/3 scholars, caution must be exercised when extrapolating their experiences to other groups of Mainland Chinese immigrants in Singapore, which can include peoples of vastly varying experiences and backgrounds (Yeoh & Lin, 2013). Secondly, the age range (26-30) of my interlocutors who informed this chapter is a critical factor. At this life stage, many of them are still focused on career development, while gradually starting to contemplate issues such as marriage, family, and child-rearing. At the time of fieldwork, none of my informants had given birth to children, and only a small handful had got married or bought properties in Singapore. I predict that as time moves on, some aspects of their discourses and thoughts that I reported here may change notably, once certain life milestones are passed. In her research on young Korean educational migrants who study at public schools in Singapore, Yoonhee Kang argues that while these "global citizens in the making" were meant to cultivate cosmopolitanism and cultural flexibility, their transnational identities nevertheless have "a firm local grounding" (Kang, 2013, p. 341). She shows that these Korean school "children's experience of migration to 'go global' consists of multiple steps across actual 'places' rather than an abstract 'space', with special attention to locality and the particularities of a specific transnational setting" (p. 341). Kang's these insights usefully remind me of the specificity and limitations of my research, namely that my interlocutors are a group of university-educated subjects in

their late 20s, who mostly worked in large international companies. That the higher education and the corporate spheres in Singapore both are already, or at least striving to be, global "spaces" instead of just local "places," is perhaps one reason why the thrust of my interlocutors' discourses and imaginations is one that transcends the local.

9 Desiring a different self:

Mini ethnographic portraits of five "foreign talents"

For once, I want to push myself to the limit. I want to know where my limit is!
(informant)

In this final empirical chapter, I examine the ways in which Chinese "foreign talents" in their mid-/late-twenties seem to demonstrate a shared "desire for a different self" despite their varying circumstances in regard to career choice and development. Through sketching mini ethnographic portraits of five individuals respectively, I weave my research participants' discourses and narratives about work and life into their biographical accounts and show how an ambivalently subversive, existentialist mode of discourse seems to characterize their ongoing reflections on their "foreign talent" trajectories and current circumstances.

"Technologies of the self" in work and life

In the age of late modernity, as Giddens (1991, p. 5) insightfully wrote more than two decades ago, "The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choices as filtered through abstract systems." This reflexive self, characterized by continuous revision, choice and external referentiality, is often also discussed in subsequent scholarly discourses in terms of the Foucauldian "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1997b, 2005), which is in turn regarded as central to the governmentality regime of advanced liberal societies (N. Rose, 1999b). Explaining liberalism not as a theory or ideology but as a *practice*, Foucault suggests that these "technologies of the self"

constitute “a ‘way of doing things’ oriented toward objectives and regulating itself by means of a sustained reflection” (Foucault, 1997a, pp. 73-74). In such a governmentality regime, the subject becomes its own object of examination and continuous reflection. The relationship between the subject and itself becomes *ethical* in tone, because the freedom given to the subject to make choices compels the subject to imagine and reflect on what is “good” for itself. In other words, central to the “technology of the self” is “the idea of one’s life as the enterprise of oneself” (Gordon, 1991, p. 44). The self becomes one’s work of art that one takes great care in shaping and *re*shaping, under one’s (supposedly) autonomous desires and designs.

Scholars observing the implications of post-Mao reforms for employment and self-identity in China (e.g. Hanser, 2002; Hoffman, 2010; C. Hsu, 2007; F. Liu, 2008) have noticed how work has became a “newly available realm for autonomy and self-development” (Hanser, 2002, p. 190). For my “foreign talents” subjects born in China but educated in twenty-first century Singapore—a city that has for decades been tightly integrated into what Fong (2011) calls the “global neoliberal system”—such a reflexive relationship between individual self-identity and their professional work can be taken as already normative and hegemonic. Professional career constitutes the major domain in which these subjects apply the technologies of reflexivity, constant reflection and redefinition. Their relation to their selves is principally narrated through the choices of and reflections over the kinds of professional work they are pursuing or would like to pursue. Work/career has become nothing short of an index of one’s social worth and the principal arena for competitively demonstrating self-value. Put otherwise, for these highly-educated, highly-skilled mobile subjects, the *professional career* has very much become a stand-in for what Erving Goffman (1962, pp. 127-128) termed people’s “moral career,” namely, the changes and transitions in people’s life trajectories that make up their “image of self and felt identity” and their “framework for judging [the self] and others.”

In the specific context of work, Hanser (2002, p. 203) regards the “technologies of the self” as involving practices of “knowing” and “altering” one’s self. This is an insightful observation, and is borne out in the prevalence of the practice of career-guiding

psychological/personality testing (i.e. knowing oneself) and self-improvement courses and manuals (i.e. altering oneself) in contemporary capitalist societies (Illouz, 2008). However, I argue that there is a gap between *knowing* oneself and *altering* oneself, and this gap is bridged by an affective state of *wanting* or *desiring.* Between self-knowledge and self-transformation, between consciousness and agency, is a mediating state of "desiring for a different self." This chapter focuses on this mediating state that I found in many of my research interlocutors' technologies of the self. Such affective moments of "desiring" are manifested in their discourses and narratives, often about work, career and professional development, but also about life more generally.

In order to convey more fully the holistic presence of desiring as something present in but also overflowing the domain of professional career, I choose to employ the technique of drawing ethnographic portraits (albeit relatively short ones—hence "mini") of five informants whom I find interesting but also, in a way, representative. Among the thousands of SM1, 2, 3 scholars from China who have trodden the path of being "foreign talent" over two decades' time, there were ones who returned to China prematurely due to academic or other failures; there are ones who have now left Singapore and moved on to "pastures greener;" and there are also those relatively speaking extraordinary ones who made careers in, for instance, the entertainment industry or the arts scene; but the five individuals that I portray in this chapter are not such statistical "outliers;" instead, they are the typical PRC scholars whose experiences more or less exemplify the trajectories of the majority.

As this is the last empirical chapter of the thesis, a further objective that I wish to achieve through these five mini portraits is to offer them as summative accounts of the life-experiences of the sojourning Chinese "foreign talents" in Singapore. Portraits of single lives "reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the wider society or social segments of which they are also part" (Arnold & Blackburn, 2005, p. 43). These mini ethnographic portraits attend to the "ordinary affects" (Stewart, 2007)—the "very fabric of our being" (Hemmings, 2005, p. 548)—in relation to my informants' desiring for different selves; but then, "Ordinary affects are *public* feelings that begin and end in broad circulation" (ibid., p. 2,

emphasis added). Thus, while these portraits provide "a close ethnographic attention to pressure points and forms of attention and attachments" (ibid., p. 5), they are also a kind of para-analysis that tactilely convey "structures of feeling" (R. Williams, 1977).[1]

The ethics of using ethnographic portraits

Creating and using ethnographic portraits in social research, however, entails ethical concerns in at least two different senses.

According to Jeffrey and Dyson (2008, p. 2, emphases added), "To a greater extent than many other styles of scholarly writing, individual vignettes can illustrate how processes cohere to produce human outcomes, convey the textured experience of youth, and instill in readers *empathy*, *respect*, and *understanding*." As I have stressed at various points throughout the thesis, such empathy, respect, and understanding are precisely the missing elements and blockage points in the vigorous libidinal politics revolving around "foreign talent" in Singapore. And as I shall argue in the Coda in a more theoretical language, both the words "foreign" and "talent" are carriers of alienness and otherness, and they tend to block the flow of understanding, respect and empathy between social agents. Through creating these mini ethnographic portraits of five ordinary Chinese "foreign talents" leading ordinary lives in Singapore, I hope to render five narratives of ordinary human desirings, imaginaries, and affects that hopefully others who are not themselves "foreign talent" can nevertheless understand and empathize with. To that extent, the generous and evocative sharing of their lives my interlocutors gifted me may be regarded as acts of ethical intervention, just as my now portraying them for the world to read and understand can also be regarded as an act of ethical intervention.

But creating and using ethnographic portraits can be an ethically tricky act, because the relatively comprehensive and in-depth description of an individual makes difficult the concealment of that individual's identity. This is particularly the case since many of my informants know each other. Thus, whereas the power of ethnographic portraits resides in its convincingness and evocativeness by virtue of their being "real," yet being

too "real" jeopardizes my research participants' right to anonymity and privacy. With regard to this dilemma, Mills and Morton's (2013, p. 96, emphasis added) following comment is very helpful: "The very term 'portrait' is a helpful one, for it emphasises the deliberately *crafted* nature of the accounts." It reminds us that although ethnographic portraits derive their powers from the "realness" and evocativeness that are typical of them, ultimately they are nevertheless part of the anthropological craft of "writing culture" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

In accordance, balancing the needs to protect my informants and to preserve the evocative qualities of my portraits, I have resorted to substituting a number of inessential facts about these five individuals with equivalent but fictitious ones in order to make it difficult for people to recognize their true identities. For instance, if a scholar hailing from Jiangxi Province who first came to Singapore in 2002 had been an exchange student to Australia during his/her undergraduate studies and had become a mechanical engineer after graduation, I may describe him/her as native of Hunan Province who came to Singapore in 2003, with exchange experience in the UK, currently employed in Singapore as a chemical engineer. Similar operations are carried out for all five portrait subjects, but great care is exercised to ensure that the "realness" of these stories does not suffer. To conceal these five individuals' identities more effectively, their quotes or information do not appear elsewhere in this thesis, nor do they appear in the pseudonymized research participants list in Appendix II.

Portrait One: Jay

Jay was born in the same year as myself—1985—and was raised in Suzhou, a city very near to Shanghai that is noted for its economic prosperity and cultural richness, both in the history and in the present. Jay came to Singapore in 2000 through the SM1 scholarship program, which meant he had just finished junior middle school in China when he became one of Singapore's thousands of "foreign talent" students. He was allocated to a prestigious local secondary school, where he finished secondary grades 3 and 4, before gaining admission to a leading though not top-ranking local Junior College

(JC). After his "A" Levels, he stayed on in Singapore, despite there being no bond attached to the SM1 program. Subsequently he enrolled in the University Institute of Singapore (UIS), which is where I first got to know him.

At UIS, Jay and I were in the same School, but not studying toward the same major—he majored in logistics and transport technologies, and was a year below me. Thus, I didn't have much contact with Jay throughout my undergraduate days, except knowing that he was a street-style dance enthusiast, and had now and then performed in School-based cultural and social events. Compared to the majority of Chinese scholars in the campus, my impression of Jay was that he was more fashion-conscious and certainly not the type to swot in order to score straight "A"s in exams. He also seemed not to socialize much with the "mainstream" Chinese students in the campus, preferring his own company.

Thus, I was a bit surprised when I received an email from Jay while I was studying for my Masters degree in the UK, in which he expressed curiosity as to how I managed to make the "jump" from an engineering background to studying social sciences. By that time, Jay had graduated for a few months, and was working for a Japanese company. We chatted over the phone, and it seemed he wasn't satisfied with his current career, and wanted to explore ways to do things that interested him more. After that conversation we didn't really keep in touch, and the next time I met him was during my fieldwork in Singapore (2011-12) at a Moon Festival dinner party at a Sichuan restaurant in Singapore's Chinatown, where he was among the friends who attended.

After the dinner, the two of us went for some snacks and a few pints of beer in one of Singapore's characteristic food centers located on the ground floor void decks of the HDB blocks. It is in between sips of beer and bites of chicken satay that I got to know him a little bit better.

Jay had never liked his engineering major, although he did not blame the SM1 scholarship for it, because SM1 scholars are not even required to remain in Singapore after completing their "A" Levels. "My 'A' Levels weren't great, so there wasn't much of a choice for me. Besides, my family is not really rich, so sending me to study in the US or UK was out of the question," he revealed to me; "but studying in Singapore, they

[the Singapore government] would even give you scholarship! So I thought: 'much easier to just stay,' and I ended up studying engineering at UIS."

Having had to study through four years something that he didn't enjoy, he felt unfulfilled, although he didn't seem to have a clear idea where his true passion was either. "So, did you perhaps want to study arts or performance or something like that?" I asked, referring to his enthusiasm for dance. "But that's just a hobby isn't it? Can't become a serious career, can it?" he replied, not commenting on this further. Instead, he turned to talk about other SM1 scholars he knew.

"SM1 people are all quite *niu* [Chinese slang, meaning "capable/impressive"], you know! They are all quite individualistic (*you gexing*) too!" he exclaimed, "Among the SM1 students, I'm really not doing that well (*hun de cha*)." Jay's tone became more cynical as he carried on to reveal: No SM1 student really wants to stay in Singapore. Since there is no bond and "A" Level results are widely accepted around the world, they could go to UK, US or Canada—he knew a handful of high-flying SM1 students who managed to go to study at places like Cambridge or Harvard. All those who remained in Singapore like him remained only because they *couldn't* go, either because their "A" Levels weren't good enough or their families couldn't afford self-financing a degree in the UK or North America.

But for Jay, it was not only about prestige and ambition and the relative stigmatization of having to settle for a local university among SM1 students; it was also about a prized sense of individuality and autonomy. He characterized the SM1 scholars as an ambitious and independent-thinking bunch who were not afraid to break conventions to chase their dreams. He gave me the following example: "A very close friend of mine, he was studying in the JC, like I was. But he decided to drop out to pursue what he really liked. So he went to the MOE to tell them that he didn't want to finish JC. Eventually, he *really* dropped out, and went to study animation production in a poly![2] Giving up JC and university for a poly diploma!—*That* takes a lot of guts! Not everybody can do that, you know! Now, he works for a British animation workshop based in Singapore. It's not that he's making a fortune there, but at least he's doing something he really likes!"

There was a sense that Jay felt that he had failed to live up to the "standard" of the SM1 scholars, a standard that he saw as involving ambitiousness, independent thinking, and autonomous agency. Having stayed in Singapore and enrolled for an engineering degree at UIS due to practicality, he found himself instead surrounded by the SM2/3 scholars, whom he felt were comparatively dream-less and lacking in individuality, although he was quick to add that he thought I was an exception, perhaps worrying that his comments would offend me, as I was an SM2 scholar.

Nevertheless, he carried on sharing his opinions: He thought many SM2/3 scholars just do whatever everybody else is doing, and don't really think what their true passions are. "Like my course mates, they study engineering al-right, and actually score "A" for every paper, but they don't even really like engineering! When they graduate they just follow the trend to apply to banks or other investment companies, because the pay is better," he said in a slightly contemptuous tone. Later I realized that there was also a little protectiveness blended into the contempt, as he continued: "They [his course mates] spent four years studying logistics and transport, get all the "A" and "Distinctions" and "Dean's Lists," and now suddenly they are all taking exams to qualify for CFA,[3] and want to make big bucks in the banks! Turns out actually I am now the one who is really doing *proper* logistics and transport stuff." He referred to his entry-level job at a Japanese multinational company specializing in cargo transport.

While we were eating and chatting, he received a phone call from his colleague from the workplace, requesting him to fix some work-related matters ASAP. Apologizing to me, he took his laptop out of his salaryman-style bag,[4] turned in on, plugged in a mobile connection USB key, and started focusing on the screen and clicking the mouse for a couple of minutes. When he was done, he showed me what he was working on: cargo vessel schedules and stowage plans onboard. I knew these were considered pretty much the most boring and repetitive jobs in the transport industry, and could now understand his previous protectiveness a bit better. He was frank with me: his salary at the Japanese company was barely 3,000 SGD/month—decent for a recent graduate, but nowhere near his ambition and what some of his proselytized course mates were making in the banks and investment funds. He also lamented how

there is “no future” in Japanese companies because of the culture of hierarchy and the racial glass-ceiling: he said, an expatriate from Japan would cost four times as much as a locally recruited employee in Singapore, but the Japanese still fill the management positions exclusively with their own people. It was only a matter of time before he switched job, he intimated.

After these relatively heavy topics were gone over, both of us were a bit bored and tired—perhaps going through such self-reflections with sighs and laments is indeed a tiring business. Before we bade goodbye to each other, as we walked toward the bus stop, I remembered one of the last random if also bizarre remarks he made—He said, in Singapore, given the tropical climate, guys are even deprived of the opportunities to dress up fashionably, since you typically just wear a shirt…

Portrait Two: Sun Tao

Sun Tao came to Singapore in 2002 under the SM2 scholarship program, and had majored in computer engineering at UIS before graduating in 2008 with a First Class Honors degree. Subsequently, he landed on a job at the Singapore office of a globally well-known business management and technology consultancy company.

Tao came from a rural village in the landlocked Chinese province Jiangxi, and considered himself one of the several SM2 scholars with really humble backgrounds in his cohort. In his own words, “Immediately outside my house in my village are just paddy fields!—So it was really a great contrast when I first came to Singapore.”

Both parents being peasants, Tao considered being chosen as a “foreign talent” an event that really changed his life, and he had been trying to do his best with this opportunity. But his humble rural background did initially present him with some difficulties during the 18-months “bridging course” period before university matriculation. Tao recalled that most scholars in his batch had either brought laptop computers from China or had purchased one soon after settling down in Singapore; whereas he, lacking the money, did not get a laptop until he was in the first year of university, and even for that, he was only able to buy it with an interest-free loan

provided by the university. For scholars in the "bridging course" period, especially the boys, "playing the computer" (*wan'r diannao*: surfing the Internet, watching online movies, downloading music, playing games etc.) was the main form of entertainment, and had even ironically become a basis for sociability.[5]

At the same time, Tao's rural upbringing also meant that there was often a sense of barrier and distance between him and his more affluent urban peers. He recalled how his rural Jiangxi accent meant he couldn't distinguish the "*s*" and "*sh*" sounds in Mandarin, and was often made fun of by fellow scholars. Somewhat marginalized among the cohort, Tao recalled feeling a bit lonely and depressed during the long months leading to university matriculation, and he tried to alleviate this by venturing into the social circles of local Singaporeans. Such circles were mainly Christian church groups who were interested in including a new arriver such as Tao in their services and social events, and Tao recalled that the people he met in those circles were friendly and kind. He attributed his subsequent success in integrating into the Singapore society to this pleasant initial encounter.

While he was an undergraduate at UIS, Tao stayed away from the typical PRC scholars in campus. For instance, he remarked that some scholars coming from relatively privileged backgrounds didn't treasure their opportunity enough and had lost the drive to work hard, either with regard to studies or otherwise. Others, in contrast, were too fixated on studying and neglected more well-rounded self-development. Then, there were also those Chinese scholars who were sociable but mainly socialized amongst themselves, in PRC-dominated student clubs or societies in campus. He fell into neither of these categories, out of a vaguely felt desire to be different.

Not being able to rely financially on parents as many other scholars still did during the undergraduate years, Tao worked during holidays as well as during term time in part-time manual jobs to earn money. Air-tickets being too expensive, he didn't go back to China as often as did most other scholars, some of whom went back as frequently as two or three times a year. Eventually, by the first semester of his third year, he had saved enough money to afford to go on a half-year exchange program to the UK—an expensive but prestigious destination. In the realm of campus social life, he joined a

cultural activities focused ECA society with predominantly local Singaporean membership, where he eventually rose and became a "main-comm," i.e. a senior office-holder in the organization. He still recalls this with a sense of pride and achievement: "I was the only person from China in the entire Society, the rest are all locals, but we really got along well. Some didn't even know I wasn't local. This I really consider an achievement, and a good experience."

During his second year in university, Tao even dated a Chinese Singaporean girl, although the relationship lasted just a few months. This was/is something very unusual for a "PRC scholar,"[6] and Tao knew that. But he admitted that the relationship began to have problems not long after it started: for instance, the Singaporean girl would take Tao to pubs or night clubs to have "chill-out" evenings with her local friends, but such occasions were both financially taxing and socio-culturally awkward for Tao, because "pubbing" and "chilling-out" had never been part of his upbringing. Eventually the girl suggested they broke up, and there wasn't much Tao could do. He suspected that her parents had been putting pressure on her as well, knowing that Tao was a scholar from China with humble backgrounds. During his final year in university, Tao started dating a girl from Thailand. When I returned to Singapore for fieldwork, Tao had been in a stable relationship with the Thai girl for more than three years; soon after I left fieldwork, I heard news of their wedding in Thailand.

Now working for a big-name consultancy company as a systems integration engineer, Tao can be considered to be doing quite well compared to fellow scholars of the same cohort. Just three years after graduation, his salary was already over 6,000 SGD/month, he revealed to me. He had also been able to bring his parents to Singapore for a trip, after which he posted on his Facebook the picture of his smiling parents standing by the Merlion. "Considering my background," he said to me, "I have really been quite lucky."

However, despite all this, he seems not that fulfilled deep down. He told me over tea, "I thought I should feel quite happy and fulfilled, but not really. Growing up in the kind of environment I grew up in, I didn't even *dream* that I'd be earning this kind of salary before thirty. Now all seems quite okay: steady job, food and shelter, girlfriend,

and a good salary…but then what's the meaning of all this? Everybody is just doing the same, isn't it? Everybody is having a job, earning money, dating someone or marrying someone… I haven't thought through what meaning life has for me, at least not yet."

Surprised by this sudden existentialist rumination, I asked further what he thought would be a "meaningful life." He didn't know, but said: "I read an article recently, it urges the reader to become an 'interesting person' (*youyisi de ren*); I thought *that* was an idea! Looking at my life now, I find myself precisely the opposite of being 'interesting!'—I'm too uninteresting, don't you think?" To be interesting means to be unusual, unconventional, daring, Tao explained, citing the example of a mutual friend of ours—another SM2 scholar of the 2002 cohort who majored in material science, but who decided to work in an admin position for a Chinese heritage museum in Singapore after graduation. "The salary in a museum is probably not great, but she still went there because that's what she enjoyed; isn't that good too? Why should everybody be like me: engineering degree, then consultancy job, then slowly climb up the corporate ladder… How boring! Why not do something interesting with one's life?" he elaborated.

"But I guess this is a cultural thing, isn't it? How is it in Western societies like the US? I'm sure it's different?" After several hours of informal interviewing, Tao finally retaliated by throwing a question back my way: "It must be different in the West, right? You've lived in the West for several years now. After all it's Singapore here, the society is conservative, and everybody is following convention, like everybody else…"

Portrait Three: Hongxuan

Hongxuan was an SM3 scholar hailing from the southwestern Chinese city of Chongqing. He came to Singapore in December 2003 from the northeastern province of Jilin, where he was already a freshman in a university there. As is the case with SM3 scholars, he went through a half-year "bridging course," before taking up the major of Civil Engineering at UIS. While I met Hongxuan quite often during our undergraduate years as we lived in the same block of campus dormitory, I didn't manage to keep in touch with him since graduation. When I contacted him again in October 2011 during my

Singapore fieldwork, Hongxuan said, "Good that you contacted me now, 'cos I probably won't be here in two months, I'm going back to China in December—for good."

Hongxuan suggested we meet in UIS campus and have lunch together in a canteen which we used to frequent when we were students living in the dormitory nearby. It was a cloudy Sunday during the mid-semester recess, and the campus was atypically quiet. After lunch, we moved to a nearby bench under shadow; sipping *kopi*, Hongxuan told me more about his past and present.

Like most scholars, he chose to come to Singapore because this represented a great opportunity. However, the first six months of "bridging course" was one upon which he now reflected with regret. "My English was poor, so I scored really badly in the English tests during the bridging course; I felt really disappointed with myself, and gradually lost the drive to study hard—anyway we were all guaranteed a place in the university, we all knew that." Having been a top student from primary school through to senior middle school in China, Hongxuan was dealt not a small blow by the bridging course. He subsequently somehow "muddled through" (*hun*) the six months without applying himself diligently to studies. If there was something that he really regretted over his nine years in Singapore, he told me, perhaps it would be the bridging course—He now felt he could have made much better use of the time and entered university in a better shape.

He chose to major in civil engineering out of both a vague sense of interest and a pragmatic consideration that the entry criteria were slightly lower than most other disciplines. He characterized his undergraduate years as relatively uneventful and lackluster, "I went through the four years pretty much 'numb' (*mamu*)—just study, pass exams with okay but not great results, and then go back to Chongqing during holidays…and then the same cycle again." He joined several ECA clubs/societies, where he kind of tagged along, without playing any leadership role or pulling off any extraordinary achievements. In his opinion, his "high"-est point during the eight years in Singapore was the last semester of his university and the summer following that—

"With a lot of struggles, I finally finished and submitted my FYP,[7] and just a week after my last exam paper, I was on a plane to France for summer studies. 2008 was

really an exciting year, a lot of good and bad things were happening, not just in my personal life, but big events too—like the Tibetans' protests all over the world and their attacks of the Olympics fire convoy… Then there was the disastrous Wenchuan earthquake on the 12th of May, days after which I flew to Paris, and spent three carefree months in France, also traveling a dozen European countries. After the summer in Europe, I returned to Chongqing again, and was just in time to watch the whole Olympics from the comfort of home. That was the most eventful and exciting period of time since I came to Singapore, I think—In fact, I wasn't even in Singapore for nearly half of 2008!" Hongxuan narrated in a rosiness that affected me too.

But after the "high" came the "low"—Hongxuan considered the first two years of working life in Singapore a trough that he was now finally going to pull himself out of by leaving the country altogether. Returning to Singapore in September 2008 from China after the Beijing Olympics, he went back to the civil engineering consultancy company where he spent his half-year university-sponsored internship as a student. At the time this seemed a relatively secure and straightforward option, with the economic uncertainties to be triggered by the collapse of Lehman Brothers just in the offing.

However, the work life of an entry-level civil engineer was dreary. "For two years it was the same everyday—get up seven in the morning, take bus and train to work, sit in an office for the whole day facing the computer, get back home around seven or eight in the evening, and perfunctorily cook something to eat before going to bed just past ten… This kind of dull life numbs you, it blunts your edge away," Hongxuan poured out to me, "I thought I was going to use this time to build myself up, both in terms of knowledge, experience and finance, and then to move to my next and higher goal; but this kind of work life really just lowers your spirit into the gutters." Aside from the dreariness of work which consumed the bulk of his time, he also felt that he didn't have so much as a social life, and didn't feel human warmth, being far away from family and his best friends from school years, who were most in Chongqing.

He told me that he initially set himself the plan to accumulate work experience and savings patiently for two years, after which he would apply to study for a Masters degree in architecture in the Europe. But these two planned years of patient "incubation"

(*yunniang*) and "accumulation" (*jilei*) had proven to be far more physically and emotionally exhausting than he imagined when put into practice; he asked himself if this was what he really wanted. As an entry-level engineer, his salary for the two years remained at a relatively modest 2,800 SGD/month, which meant he wasn't able to save enough money for the Masters degree in the Europe. Was he to work another few years like this to further "build up" and "accumulate?" As he gradually approached thirty,[8] he decided that living in a society where he still felt strange and working in a job that didn't seem to promise much wasn't the way forward. He changed his plan, and decided to apply to a local university to do a Masters, and to return to China as soon as he bags the degree.

He had wanted to enroll on a highly prestigious MBA program in the National University of Singapore (NUS), but wasn't accepted due to the intense competition for admission. Facing the prospect of having to carry on in a job that seemed a dead-end to him, he "burnt off the bridge," so to speak, by resigning from that job in August 2010, exactly two years since his "high point" of the Olympic summer and the rosy months before it. Afterwards, he applied for a Masters degree in a civil engineering related subject at NUS, and was admitted. Not looking for a new job, he studied full-time and lived on the savings originally earmarked to finance his degree in Europe.

When I met Hongxuan in October 2011, he was just two months away from completion of the year-long Masters degree and his final return to China. But there was a small twist: half a year into this Masters degree, he ran out of money, and was forced to find a job to supplement his incomes. In order to suit his classes which usually took place in the mornings, evenings and weekends, he found a modestly-paid (2,000 SDG/month) civil engineering supervisory job that required overnight and afternoon shifts. He described to me the typical weekday routine that he had been living since taking on this job four months ago:

7-9pm:	Masters degree classes
10pm-3am	Night shift work involving supervising road construction sites
4-8am/11am	Sleep (depending on whether there is a morning class)
12-6pm	Afternoon work shift

He said, at the time of our interview, he was at his thinnest in the recent five years.

I was astonished that Hongxuan managed to live this kind of routine for several months in a row, but he said, "For once, I want to push myself to the limit. I want to know where my limit is!" This, he quickly admitted, was to put things in a positive light, as he took up the odd-hour job mainly for financial reasons—he didn't want to burden his lower middle-class parents in China. But compared to his previous two years of dreadful desk-bound engineering job that didn't seem to lead anywhere, he strangely felt that he was doing something different and perhaps more meaningful now, not least because such limit-testing hard work would eventually pay off by allowing him to finish his Masters degree and then to go back to China. Going back to China, to his hometown Chongqing, was the change that he ultimately needed to make life more meaningful. There he'd be with his family, friends, and people that he feels less strange with; he'd probably also have a more satisfying job, now that he has accumulated both academic credentials and work experiences in Singapore.

Ending our afternoon of reminiscing the past and brooding over the future, I walked him toward the MRT station where he was going to take train to go back to his place—he had to start his routine again tomorrow. "Singapore isn't for you then?" I asked redundantly. "No."

Portrait Four: Sainan

"My ambition is to retire before I reach 45. Before 45 I will fight and earn as much money as I can, but after that I want to do charity work. I always had this dream—I want to build the largest care home in the world for the elderly," Sainan told me with a smile at a trendy café which she chose for our conversation. She ordered Irish coffee with Brandy in it.

Sainan came from Jinan, the capital city of a prosperous Northern coastal Chinese province—Shandong. She was among the SM2 scholars of the 2003 batch. Sainan hails

from a solidly middle-class family, with her father being a civil servant and her mother a doctor. "My mum has always taught me to be ambitious," Sainan emphasized this aspect of her upbringing. She said that her mother was a highly competent doctor who deserved to be in a more important position than she is now. She had an opportunity to study in Japan in the late 1980s shortly after giving birth to Sainan but didn't go because she preferred to stay back to raise Sainan. Had she gone for that great opportunity and obtained Japanese training and credentials, she would likely to have become the director of a hospital or something equivalent in China by now, according to Sainan. Thus, Sainan's mother has always urged her that when one is young, one ought to be ambitious and willing to challenge and develop oneself.

Compared to many of her peers, Sainan also believed that she had cultivated a wider horizon since young. "When I was little, my parents would take me to travel to various places in China. You know the northern provinces still lag behind the coastal provinces in the south. So my mum always told me, 'don't be complacent with our comfortable life in Jinan, there is a bigger world out there.' My parents never took me to any place in the north except Beijing; instead, every summer holiday, they would take me to visit fast-developing southern cities like Xiamen, Guangzhou, and even Hong Kong. So when I came to Singapore, although I was impressed—but I've been to Hong Kong already, so…you know what I mean…"

Like many SM2/3 scholars I interviewed, Sainan also reflected on her student days, especially the "bridging course," in a sorry tone. She wasted too much time that could otherwise have been spent on improving herself, she said, pointing out that many other scholars lost their ambitions during this period, because life was simply too easy and comfortable. The difference that Sainan saw between herself and some of her cohort mates now, however, is that Sainan had been able to rekindle her ambition since starting work after university graduation, while she regarded many of her peers as having become even more complacent after finding a stable job. "I always set objectives in my life, whether about work or otherwise. But others may not. They graduate, get a job, earn a salary, and suddenly lose the drive. They may just want to spend the weekends watching TV or eating out… They get married and have children, and suddenly become

banal! I think the years between twenty-five and thirty is a crucial period of time in your life. If you did the right thing during this period by focusing on career, you will eventually get far ahead of those who slowed down during this period. Your energy level is still high in your 20s, but afterwards it goes downhill. If you don't grasp these few golden years, you won't go far. I'm ambitious and I want to strive. So socially I don't want to mingle too much with those who are not ambitious enough. If they are too lazy then we probably wouldn't have much of a common language to speak (*meiyou gongtong yuyan*)."

Although Sainan majored in Electrical Engineering at UIS, she was determined to become a banker. In her final year at university, she applied for an investment banking position in Citibank Singapore and made it to the final round of a highly competitive selection process; the position, however, was later withdrawn due to the economic downturn in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. She compromised, joining a futures trading company first, hoping to jump to investment banking as soon as the right opportunity came. She called this strategy *qilü zhaoma*, a Chinese idiom which literally means "ride on a donkey while searching for a horse." As a futures trader, she was drawing a good salary, and she started dating a Singaporean boyfriend working in the same field. But, having by the time of our interview broken up with the boyfriend and changed job to another trading company, Sainan reflected that during the past year she was at the danger of becoming complacent—she spent most of her weekends watching movies, eating out and shopping with her boyfriend. While she didn't reveal more details about the relationship, on the career side, she said she wanted to keep on moving higher and therefore resigned from the first trading company, which she saw as no longer able to offer her a steep learning curve. Not able to join an investment bank just yet, Sainan went to her current employer, a bigger trading company which offered higher remuneration packages and greater career-development opportunities.

Alongside her current job, she is preparing for the CFA exams by studying on her own. "Every weekday I get up at five o'clock to study the CFA, and I spend most of my weekends studying too," she revealed. "UIS's reputation isn't strong enough, that's why I'm having a hard time moving into banking. Now I'm taking the CFA; afterwards I may

take a long distance Masters course in finance with the City University London. I won't stop trying until I get into an investment bank!"

However, it is not only in the area of work/career that Sainan's ambition has urged her to keep on testing her boundaries. With regard to life more generally, she has also been exploring new and different selves. At the time of our interview, at least, Sainan, aged 26, was in no hurry to settle into a stable relationship or marriage. In fact, she implicitly considered early marriage a sign of lacking ambition. "Why not explore more things and people? Different people can bring you many different and unexpected things and enrich your life, isn't it?" she posed the rhetorical question with a self-assured smile. Although she has broken up with her Singaporean boyfriend, she was grateful to him for helping her explore herself. "He would take me to fine dining and glitzy night clubs. You know my family background is kind of conservative—father a civil servant and mother a doctor—so I was raised like a 'well-behaved obedient girl' (*guaiguai nü*). But my BF helped me discover aspects of myself that I didn't know existed." According to Sainan, this involved, among other things, her becoming more daring in expressing her feminine charm and sexuality through dressing more sexily on social occasions and hence in receiving the admiring attention of others. "I started to realize that actually I really enjoyed night life and enjoyed expressing myself. This has given me a lot of self-confidence."

Curious as to how she had explored and experimented with a different and previously unknown self, I asked her for examples. "Well, just things," she hesitated, "like being 'crazy' (*feng*); like doing *whatever I want to do* while clubbing."

"*Doing whatever you want to do* while clubbing…For example?" I dared her.

"That's too private. I can't tell you," she replied with a confident smile, with a hint of performative naughtiness in it.

Portrait Five: Yaxin

"I was never a bright kid. I never did brilliantly in schools: from primary to junior middle to senior middle… My parents always said I wasn't bright. So I was really lucky

to have come to Singapore," Yaxin told me. She attributed her being chosen for the SM2 program in 2003 to her extra-curricular talents, which include badminton and singing, for both of which she had received school or city level awards in Hebei Province, where she came from.

Throughout her four years in UIS studying toward a bachelor's degree in Maritime Studies (MS), Yaxin always got "mediocre" (*pingping*) exam results, despite having in the first two years studied hard in the hope of getting flying colors. In fact, she had chosen the MS major because she heard there were less mathematical and engineering contents in it, and hence would be less demanding. But then she found herself also ill-prepared for the extensive business and management subjects in the MS degree curriculum. "Anyway, I wasn't made for academic studies, that's all I can say," Yaxin concluded our discussion about her academic experiences with brevity, in a tone of resignation. She only added that she remembered never daring to speak to people about results after exams, fearing that knowing others' superior grades would make her feel depressed—she recalled feeling exactly that way when she once overheard a course mate of hers complain about not getting an "A" for just one subject which ruined that course mate's "straight A" record.

But Yaxin's apparently low self-esteem did not just manifest in her low appraisal of her academic abilities; she also seemed to regard her life trajectory since coming to Singapore with much criticism. "I kept on doing things that made me regret," she said, as we sat in a deserted corner on a weekend evening for our second interview, "I'm like 'won't cry until I see the coffin' (*bujian guancai budiaolei*); I've seen so many 'coffins' in my undergraduate years and after that too."

According to Yaxin, during the long 18-month SM2 "bridging course", she didn't do anything meaningful as far as she could remember. She went around Singapore's many shining shopping malls for shopping or, more accurately, window shopping, because her modest stipend wouldn't allow her to really buy much. She visited Chinese restaurants with friends almost every weekend to "seek gastronomic pleasures." In the dorm, she downloaded and watched soppy TV dramas galore; in particular, she remembered viewing the Taiwanese pop-star studded "Meteor Garden" (*liuxing huayuan*)

from start to finish four times! “I wasted my time, my youth! I really could have done differently, but I just lacked self-control and self-discipline.”

During the university years, it was the same, said Yaxin. The contradictory character of the university environment in Singapore as a tough yet relaxing place further made Yaxin unconfident and under-motivated. On the one hand, there were many highly motivated and talented people around who seemed to be doing well not just academically but also socially and otherwise; this often made Yaxin suffer from much self-doubt and something of an inferiority complex. On the other hand, under a formally Westernized pedagogic culture, students were given a high degree of freedom in managing their own time and affairs; and this, Yaxin believed, entrenched her deficit in self-discipline and motivation. “I watched too many Taiwanese variety shows on computer. You know how it’s like—people just cram for the two weeks before the exam, and slack for the rest of the time.”

Perceived achievement in the undergraduate campus context takes various forms, including obtaining good academic records, clinching an overseas exchange study experience (especially to more prestigious institutions than UIS itself[9]), being socially successful in having many friends, and developing romantic relationships. A trade-off between two of these has become one of the greatest regrets Yaxin had about her undergraduate years. As a part of the Maritime Studies degree program, all students were guaranteed to spend a semester in an internationally recognized university in Norway; this was considered a great perk of the MS degree, as students in other majors normally had to apply for exchange programs on their own, and face stiff competitions. To all her classmates’ surprise, Yaxin declined to go to Norway because at the end of the semester before she had just begun a relationship with another SM2 scholar—a rather handsome young man from a different major from a year above. Fearing separation at an early point in a relationship would end it, she decided to stay back. However, their relationship didn’t last much longer in any case, and Yaxin felt she had made a stupid choice. When her course mates came back from their semester in Norway, talking about their exciting experiences in Europe, Yaxin felt more of a loser than ever.

The frustration and self-criticism in Yaxin's discourse, to me, seemed precisely the expressions of her strong desires for success and for some affirmation of her self-worth. In our second interview, Yaxin revealed to me something that she had not told many other people: during her "bridging course" and first year in university, she had a misguided dabbling in a pyramid selling scheme with a local company. It all started with her search for part-time work for the summer vacation after the end of the "bridge course" in 2005, during which she stumbled over a company that specialized in what they euphemized as "multilayered selling."

"They fooled me, I didn't realize it was *chuanxiao* [the Chinese term for pyramid selling, with explicitly negative connotations—author]. They said the product was really good—it was a kind of magnetic mattress with supposedly medicinal properties—and selling it would hone my interpersonal skills and so on. They made it sound really fascinating (*shuode tianhualuanzhui*). I was so naïve that I actually believed them, and believed there was potential in selling the product. I thought I could earn some money while developing my abilities through this. So, soon after joining, I bought from the company a mattress worth SGD1,000, which was two months' worth of our living stipend then! And then I tried to sell the mattress to my friends and course mates, but suddenly I realized people viewed me with suspicion. Finally the penny dropped that I had fallen for a scam… I was so naïve, I was cheated." Finishing speaking, Yaxin let out a long sigh. If this was two years earlier, she wouldn't have been able to even talk about this because it was to her an experience loaded with too much shame and stigma, she said. Now, after a good six years in between, she felt she could finally talk about it, and she was glad she told me.

Graduating in 2009 amidst the impacts of severe global economic slowdown, Yaxin struggled greatly to find a job. She recalled her final year in university as a tormenting one, during which she shed many tears of frustration and self-doubt. Finally, she found a job at a small Indian-owned shipping company, doing entry-level operational tasks such scheduling, stowage planning and vessel monitoring. She knew that I'd been interviewing other scholars and therefore might be privy to information such people' salaries, career development, promotions and so on; so, throughout our two interviews,

she seemed particularly careful in steering clear of such topics, just as she would avoid discussing exam results while in university. But, by now two entire years had lapsed since entering professional working life, and Yaxin had finally attained a level of comfort with herself, a calmness, and a relatively optimistic outlook on future.

"I enjoyed working for this company, even though it's small and doesn't present the kind of opportunities big companies have," Yaxin said calmly; "I have been learning a lot of new things, and my understanding of shipping is growing day by day." Yaxin recalled how at the beginning, she wasn't learning as much and as quickly as she should on the job. For this small, low-profile company, Yaxin had actually been the first degree holder employee; hence, her Indian boss, who also personally owned the company, had had great expectations of Yaxin, paying close attention to her work, trying to develop her by giving her various challenges. "I didn't understand my boss's intention (*liangku yongxin*), and wasn't responding to it well. Later when I realized all this, I became really thankful to him, since he seemed to care about my career development. Now, after working for nearly two years in operations, he recently moved me to a chartering team, so I'm again learning a lot of new things everyday, and I'm developing a fuller picture of the shipping industry."

Yaxin confessed that previously, especially in the university days, she was way too fixated on comparing and competing with others around her. This, in her opinion, had led to much unhappiness. Now, being more mature, she believed she is more comfortable with who she is and hence also more comfortable with making her own choices. What is good for others, no matter how glamorous and enviable, is not necessarily good for herself, she now believed; she must find out what's good for herself.

"Never compare with others, only compare with your own self," she shared with me her motto.

Conclusion

These five mini ethnographic portraits offer us glimpses into the ways in which a shared

"technology of the self," involving "desiring different selves," threads through otherwise divergent personal biographies and experiences of these five ordinary PRC "foreign talent" scholars. The five portrayed subjects, as with many other "foreign talent" scholars that I cannot afford to portray in full in this thesis, continuously reflect on their past and present experiences and evaluate them in order to form some ideas as to what they "should have done," "ought to do," and what is "good" for them. This constant reflection places them on an ever-present starting line, where they are always poised to break a new path or set higher and more desirable objectives. Such a mentality reveals the ethical import of *desire/desiring*, which is conventionally seen as either ethically neutral or even immoral.

In the five individuals' various affects of desiring for different selves, the influence of a neoliberal governmentality which, at the level of personal conduct, stresses individuality, self-enterprise, self-responsibility and perceived self-autonomy (N. Rose, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; N. Rose & Miller, 2008) seems to hold sway. Such a governmentality regime values certain subjectivities while devaluing others, and regulates human thoughts and behaviors through normalizing and establishing the desirability of those valorized subjectivities. While all five portraits instantiate this, Sun Tao's desire to be an "interesting person" seems the most cogent case in point: he desires to be an "interesting" person that incites the interests of others and the society in general; in other words, he desires to be a desirable—not sexually but socially and ideologically—object-subject dyad to the impersonal societal "gaze" (Foucault, 1977). In this sense, for my research subjects, desiring a different self is also to desire a *desirable* self. They learn how to desire by learning what is desirable.

The existentialist tone (i.e. seeking/questioning the meanings of life, the conditions of existence) of my research participants' discourse is better understood as part and parcel of their "technologies of the self" and their fledging neoliberal subjectivities, rather than an indication of some form of idealism. In an article examining mainland Chinese university students' "farewell to idealism" in the 1990s, Luo Xu (2004) argues that university students in the 1980s

> still upheld the conviction that they must attach certain significance to their life, and they *tormented* themselves with the ultimate question of 'why one lives'. They would regain self-confidence only after they believed they had discovered or rediscovered the *meaning of life*, whatever it might be. (ibid., p. 798, emphases added)

In contrast, with the onset of extensive market reforms and blossoming of a consumer society, Chinese university students of the 1990s and onwards by and large abandoned their former elitist idealism, and replaced the *existentialist* question "why one lives" with the primarily *ethical* question "how one lives." This, as Xu and other scholars (e.g. Hoffman, 2010; F. Liu, 2008) argue, reflects the incursion of the neoliberal "regime of living" (Collier & lakoff, 2005) in the postsocialist Chinese society.

Although the Chinese youths and young adults of the twenty-first century that I examined in this study have a slightly different collective biography from Xu's mainland Chinese university students in that the former have experienced inter-/transnational mobility earlier through becoming "foreign talents" in Singapore, it remains the case that they share with their counterparts in China the increasing embodiment of neoliberal "technologies of the self" in regard to their reflections and outlooks on life. The privilege and security obtaining in becoming Singapore's "foreign talents" have actually provided them with some extra space to entertain, tokenistically, existentialist questions because objectively their life chances and professional future are brighter. Xu characterizes Chinese students in 1980s as "tormented" by the existentialist questions; I contend, in contrast, that the level of anxiety found in my research interlocutors' discourses is far from tormenting or paralyzing. In fact, the anxiety that emerges from their narratives about work and life seems to amount to no more than an "existentialist itching" that does little to distract them from doing what they are doing, or doing what everybody else is also doing.

10 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have mobilized the trope of "desire" to explicate the "foreign talent" situation in Singapore. The term *desire* is spoken of not in relation to sexuality, but conceived of more broadly and abstractly to include various forms of drives, needs, hopes, longings, and aspirations. It is also a master category for certain kinds of psychosocial relationalities and dynamics, which can be matters of grand politics, policies and sociopolitical discourses, but also mundane feelings, perceptions, affects, opinions, attitudes and practices in social intercourses. Desire is the most appropriate term to capture these dynamics at individual and social levels because what I wish to emphasize are the visceral and sometimes sub-conscious aspects of the "foreign talent" related phenomena in Singapore.

"Foreign talent" is caught awkwardly in between the Singapore state's desire for human capital from beyond the island's shores and a dissenting local desire for an "authentic" nationhood and, based on which, a sense of national bonding. Singapore society's constitutive hybridity means that this local desire for bonding could not be easily fulfilled through the construction of (a) regime(s) of cultural authenticity. The "foreign talent" unwittingly provides a solution to this problem. By being discursively framed as "inauthentic"—inauthentic talents, bogus moral subjects, and ultimately, inauthentic citizens ineligible for incorporation into the national body—the "foreign talent," as an alienating figure of otherness, enables many dissatisfied Singaporeans to feel a sense of unity amongst themselves. The "foreign talent" could be understood as an imagined figure of otherness that the Singaporean society *must* conjure up in order to delimit its own boundaries and find its own identities. In other words, it is an "Other" that the self "fear[s] of losing" (Hage, 1996, p. 121), lest the self no longer knows whom it is "up against", is opposed to. It is worth reiterating, however, in Singapore, when it comes to "talented" foreign subjects, the state does not otherize, but indeed defines

inclusivity toward these subjects as one of the nation's key values; rather, it is the discontented mass that seems to experience strongly the need to keep the "foreign talents" as an "other" at an arm's length—neither too close, nor too far.[1]

But the "foreign talent" is not just a passive object of desire (for the Singapore state) or repulsion (for the disaffected Singaporean public); when this abstract figure is embodied by real human beings, and is therefore rendered plural, "foreign talent*s*" must also be recognized as *subjects* of desire. They are social agents who desire. In fact, this desiring subjectivity is always already an implicit part of "talent"—the desire to create, the desire to improve, the desire to excel. The Singapore state knows very well that when they import talented human subjects from abroad, they are really importing the individual desires that are often characteristic of these talented subjects, whose strivings to fulfill their own individual and/or collective desires unleash the energies that will boost the city-state's economy. But desire can never be fully harnessed or controlled, even though the contractual nature of Singapore's "foreign talent" schemes seems to suggest such an intention; instead, desire seems to always overflow, exceed, escape, outstrip and self-transform.

The bulk of this thesis has focused on the "foreign talents" as subjects of desire, through ethnographically investigating the lived experiences of those middle school students in China who are recruited by Singapore as "scholars." Being successful products of the Chinese schooling system, these PRC scholars embody specific desires, educational or otherwise. While I intend neither to essentialize or reify Chinese middle school students' subjectivities, nor to offer reductionist explanations for their behaviors and experiences, I nevertheless argue that the Chinese schooling regime as an infrastructure powerfully and intimately shapes these young people in important ways. They are inducted into certain ideologized rhetorical habits and imbued with certain moral and idealistic imaginaries; they are driven to become ruthlessly pragmatic and utilitarian when it comes to academic achievements; they are also shown the global horizons of their educational possibility, and thus let to desire accordingly. When these students are presented with the opportunity to study in Singaporean universities on full scholarships, multifarious desires are incited, matched and fulfilled, but also

disappointed, mismatched, and re-educated. As international educational sojourners, the PRC scholars' desire for contact and connection with the host society and people seems more often than not frustrated due to a mixture of prejudice and misunderstanding. This unique situation of China-to-Singapore student mobility breeds an micro cultural politics in which symbolic capitals such as language, accent, appearances, and personal styles become involved in subtle struggles for status and recognition. But present in the self-other relation between the PRC scholar and their Singaporean host is not just tension and angst, but also the opportunity for agentic self-making. In encountering otherness, becoming self-conscious, and subsequently overcoming perceivedly undesirable selves, desiring the "other" is synonymous with a process of self-transformation—a process that the PRC scholars struggled with but also relished. The PRC scholars' scholarly desires are also met with fulfillment, disappointment, and transformation. Idealistic imaginations of the undergraduate education are shattered in face of what was perceived by some to be an overly pragmatist university pedagogy, but the grousing undertone of the PRC scholars' discourses did not just stem from unsatisfied educational desires, but also betrayed the compromises some PRC scholars made in taking up the scholarships offered by Singapore in the first place.

The "foreign talent" situation in Singapore is thus suffused with desires. Perhaps this thesis has focused more on the mundane dissatisfactions, disappointments and failures of these desires than it looked at their fulfillment, but that is exactly my point. Pertaining to "foreign talent" in Singapore, no party seems quite satisfied. One of my main purposes of offering this ethnography is to show how desire obstinately outstrips itself and evades satisfaction. Without such concrete ethnographic knowledge, what we are left with in relation to the "foreign talent" situation tends to be only the unhappy politics of blame, anger, and hate. With such ethnographic understandings of desire, an ethical re-imagination of the issue becomes possible.

* * *

"Foreign talent" and Singapore appear to be each other's object of desire; or, at least, such seems to be the optimistic assumption behind Singapore's "foreign talent" policy. In G. W. F Hegel's philosophy, to desire an "other" is eventually to negate it, through internalizing it.[2] Indeed, from the viewpoint of the "foreign talent" immigrants, this internalization is achieved through the acquisition of Singaporean citizenship or resident status, which is usually assumed to be a desirable objective. Similarly, from the viewpoint of the receiving state/people, internalization takes the shape of the "assimilation" or "integration" of the immigrants into the local society, which is also commonly taken as a desirable outcome. When such mutual internalization or, in Hegelian terms, *synthesis*, takes place, it seems all should be at peace. But apparently that is not the case with the "foreign talent" situation in Singapore. Instead, more desires seem to be incited and unleashed—desires that lead to unhappiness, estrangement, and resentment. This is perhaps because:

> Desire, strictly speaking, has no object. In its essence, desire is a constant search for *something else*, and there is no specifiable object that is capable of satisfying it, in other words, extinguishing it. Desire is fundamentally caught up in the dialectical movement of one signifier to the next, and is diametrically opposed to fixation. (Fink, 1997/1995, p. 90 emphasis added)

The "something else" as found in this formulation is an abstract entity that cannot be fixed and will never be negated. Concrete objects temporarily embodying or standing in for otherness may be fixed, desired and negated, but otherness in its abstraction will persist, so that there is always something else for desire to desire. In other words: desire desires to desire.

This means that desiring cannot only be seen as negation—an act of convergence, reduction and simplification—but should be simultaneously seen as negation's reversal, i.e. splitting, multiplication and complication. As I have shown in chapter 5, in the earlier stages of their Singapore sojourn as "foreign talents," many PRC scholars craved

for interaction and communication with their local host, the Singaporeans. Interaction and communication ideally lead to mutual understanding, and the negation of strangeness and otherness; this is perhaps the reason why communication has been designated as "a technology of desire" (O'Shea, 2002, p. 937). However, what the ethnographic findings also illustrate is that their efforts to communicate are simultaneously frustrated by an impulse of othering—the impulse to accentuate and exaggerate the otherness of the other. Only when the other is sufficiently different, then can the desiring subject attempt to bridge the gap through a self-heroic act of negation. In order that desire can keep on desiring, otherness has to be continuously found and invented. This analysis applies both ways between "foreign talents" and their local hosts. With regard to Singapore's desire for an authentic ethno-national identity and the entanglement of the "foreign talent" in this desiring (chapter 2), if the lack of an authentic ethno-nationhood is one of the fundamental lacks that keeps the desiring machine of Singapore going, then the constant othering of the "foreign talent"—as instantiated in the various vignettes I provided in the Introduction—is precisely what the "desire desires to desire" precept requires.

"Foreign talent" and Singapore, each does not make up the other's ultimate object of desire, even if it might have once appeared so. Each is perhaps no more than a temporary objectification of the other's desire, but desire is always after "something else." They pass each other by, just as satisfaction always passes desire by.

* * *

The "foreign talent" situation in Singapore is also about *recognition*—the social recognition of value, its presence or lack. In the endless official and dissenting discourses in Singapore about "foreign talent," there is often a discursive tug of war over the question of "more-versus-less," "have-versus-have-not." The "foreign talent" policy is founded on the premise that certain foreigners have talent, and perhaps have more talent than the local pool of human resources; the contending voices emanating from many Singaporeans invert this assertion by arguing that many "foreign talents" are

actually "foreign trash" who are woefully lacking.

French philosopher Alexander Kojève says, "all human desire…is finally a function of the desire for recognition" (quoted in Butler, 1987, p. 76). As Judith Butler explicates (ibid., p. 77), "for Kojève, the kind of action which satisfies human desire is that in which one is 'recognized in (one's) human value, on (one's) reality as a human individual.' For Kojève, all human value is individual value, and 'all desire is desire for a value.'" According to Agamben (2005), the modern (nation-)state is founded on the arrogation to itself the role of the supreme arbiter of human value and worthiness; hence, while in theory individuals as agentic social actors are capable of recognizing each other's value, in reality, individuals and social groups' senses of being recognized or not are almost always mediated through or constitutively framed by the sanctions of the sovereign nation-state.

In the political consciousness of Singaporeans, which is characterized to not an insignificant degree by paternalism and often discursively constituted by a heavy dose of familial metaphorization (Heng & Devan, 1995; K. P. Tan, 2009), the "foreign talent" is arguably the neighboring family's "smart" child that the parent (the sovereign state) always invokes in order to goad her own mediocre child to study harder. The Singaporeans become antagonistic when they are told or are shown that the "foreign talents" are more talented, just as the PRC scholars may be equally antagonized when they are told or are shown to be "very China" or discriminated against in other ways (chapters 5 and 6). In each case, the antagonistic embitterment arises from an insufficiency of recognition that is arguably rightfully due to the subjects concerned. In the case of the embittered Singaporeans, this may be the recognition of their own talents and their worthiness as citizens; in the case of the embittered "foreign talents," this may be the recognition of and respect for their own cultures, backgrounds, aspirations and desires. In the "foreign talent" situation in Singapore, arguably, the state's imbalanced management of recognition, in terms of its judgment and distribution, aggravates the misrecognitions between the "foreign talents" and local Singaporean society.

Notes

Chapter 1. Introduction

1. http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1224317/1/.html last accessed 15 September 2012.
2. *Population Trends 2013* (ISSN 1793-2424), Department of Statistics, Singapore. http://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/publications_and_papers/population_and_population_structure/population2013.pdf last accessed 11 February 2014.
3. Hong Lim Park contains a Speakers' Corner, and is the only venue in Singapore where people may gather for protest/demonstration without having to apply for prior permission from the government.
4. Of late, the notion "integration" has been frequently heard in the dominant socio-political rhetoric in societies facing issues relating to multiculturalism and immigration; meanwhile, it is also a concept sometimes used in the academic social science discourses. Indeed, pertaining to the issue of "foreign talents" in Singapore, we can detect the influences of the "integration" discourses. In this work, I do not find engaging with the question of "integration" very necessary, agreeing with sociologist Michel Wieviorka (2013) who critically argued that "integration" is often "an ideology" (p. 6), and that instead of "a concept that can be used for explanation or illumination, it should be considered as something that itself requires explanation and illumination, particularly in the political discourses in which the term is used" (p. 2). I particularly agree with Wieviorka (ibid.) on the point that as an analytical concept, "integration" is obsolete, "or even reactionary, because it does not take into account major contemporary changes which have deeply marked the contexts of people's or individuals' lives and real or 'imagined' relations with others" (p. 4). Indeed, as it shall become plain, this latter point is key to my arguments in this work, especially in relation to the role of the imaginary and imaginations for the "foreign talents."
5. Given the extent to which the "foreign" is valorized and desired in Singapore, "foreign's" antonym, the "local, " is often devalued, if not stigmatized. Thus, attending a local university is sometimes seen by the most talented and ambitious Singaporean students as a second-best choice. This "foreign" vs. "local" angst is central to this study, as I shall develop further later in the text.
6. Many fast-developing Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia have such talent fostering programs; China has since the late 1980s sent scientists and academics to develop their skills in academic institutions in Western countries, and such state efforts have dramatically intensified in recent times, see Xiang (2011).
7. Catherine Gomes (2014), in writing about the online xenophobic discourse in Singapore toward "foreign talent" migrants, gives what seems to be a widely acceptable definition of the term—"White collar workers are professionals often in management positions, hold university degrees and are colloquially known as foreign talent" (p. 23) and that "Foreign students studying in post-secondary and tertiary institutions have also been classified as 'foreign talent' since they may eventually take up white collar positions in Singapore" (p. 23). Christensen's (2012) definition of "foreign talent" seems to emphasize those more experienced adults—"persons with managerial, entrepreneurial,

scientific and advanced technical skills" (p. 46). Montsion provides a slightly more idiosyncratic definition in the context of discussion Singapore's gateway strategy (Montsion, 2012, p. 471): "privileged and/or very bright students, mostly Chinese or American, young professionals and successful or ambitious business people who provide knowledge, business and market-driven opportunities." Echoing Gomes, Ho and Ge (2011, p. 269) also see "foreign talent" as encompassing those foreigners working in Singapore on an "Employment Pass" (EP)—for professional commanding a certain level of salary and above as opposed to "Work Permit"-holders who are low-skilled workers—and those international students who to become EP holders.

8. The notion of *hospitality* is also an interesting angle from which to look at Singapore's "foreign talent" politics, not least because some recent debates over this issue revolved around the idea of *xenophobia*, as I shall touch on later. Philosopher Derrida suggests that hospitality is "a name or an example of deconstruction" (quoted in Still, 2010, p. 4); accordingly, by asking how Singaporeans have enacted the "Law of hospitality"—the idea that hospitality is an unquestionable ethical demand—and what are "laws" of hospitality (ibid.) in the interactions between Singaporeans and their "foreign talent" guests, we might perform useful deconstructions of the situation.
9. In studying migration experiences in other contexts, some scholars have similarly observed cases where people apparently having high degrees of ethnic or cultural affinity assert identity differentiation against each other. For example, John Rose (2001) looked into how relatively more established Asian communities in Richmond (Canada) received more recently arrived Asian settlers with ambivalent attitudes; Yuhui Cheng's (2010) study of the experiences of belonging of the Taiwanese expatriates and their families in China mentioned how, despite the extremely high degrees of ethnocultural and linguistic affinities, they nevertheless developed certain stereotypes and perceptions of the Mainland Chinese hosts as an "other."
10. At the beginning of their article on "new" Chinese immigrants to Singapore, Yeoh and Lin (2013) offered another such high-profile case in 2012, involving a Ferrari-driving Chinese millionaire killing three people, including himself, by beating the red light and causing a traffic accident. While I largely agree with Yeoh and Lin's analysis, pursuant to my theoretical lens of desire in this work, I wish to argue additionally that an envy underpinned by intense materialistic desires should also be considered in accounting for Singaporeans' reactions to the PRC Ferrari driver.
11. Ironically, what may have escaped many Singaporean respondents to this poll is the reverse question, namely, whether in Malaysia, the ethnically Chinese Lee Chong Wei might be regarded a "true" Malaysian, given Malaysia's overt *bumiputra* policies—institutionalized privileging of the indigenous Malay population in all aspects of social/political life. I leave it as a matter of speculation whether Singaporeans voted for Lee Chong Wei in this poll only really because they, being Chinese Singaporeans, simply can identify with another Southeast Asian Chinese, with a name that sounds and spells familiar.
12. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjDg_w8raDw last accessed 15 September 2012.
13. The nature of the Mainland Chinese identity in the Singapore context is subtle and complicated, and a central theme that I explore in this study. This shall be revisited upon

in various subsequent chapters, but particularly the coda.

14. In Singapore, a stereotypical image of women from Mainland China is that of the gold-digger who would not refrain from using morally condemnable means such as prostitution or developing affairs with married Singaporean men in order to achieve their materialistic objectives. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a popular Chinese phrase to refer to these immigrant Chinese women was *xiaolong nü*, or "little dragon girl;" Mainland Chinese author Jiu Dan's semi-autobiographical novel *Crows* (2001) controversially depicts the life ventures of these little dragon girls, and may have contributed to entrenching this stereotypical image.
15. Calling someone dog is a common insult in Chinese language/culture, and is by far not the most vicious one available. However, in light of Singapore's significant Malay-Muslim community, the invocation of dog as an insult takes on a different valence. Whether the PRC scholar invoked dog deliberately to provoke a particular community can only be a matter of speculation, but I personally do not believe the scholar would have used it had he been more sensitive to Singapore's multiculturality/multireligiosity. Chinese "foreign talents'" lack of certain cultural, historical sensitivity and knowledge is an issue that I have mused on elsewhere (Yang, 2013a, 2013b).
16. In the recent few years, but particularly in relation to the public's responses to the Population White Paper released in February 2013, "xenophobia" has been a frequently invoked and debated term. See, for example, Lim and Ong (2013).
17. American sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2004) offers perhaps one of the strongest criticism of the social sciences' fixation with identity. In the contexts of ethnic, racial and national identities, Brubaker suggests fundamentally rethink identity "in terms of practical categories, situated actions, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects and contingent events" (p. 11)—a position that I agree with. The difference I bring to this de-/constructivist and emergent view of identity is my focus on "desire."
18. Social/cultural identity as an academic topic has now evidently fallen from the height of its "fashion"—if one could use such a word—during the 1990s, and its fashionability then was both a necessary consequence of and, indeed, an integral part to the intense theoretical interests at that time in postmodernity and/or the so-called "discursive/linguistic turn" within the social sciences and humanities. As a laymen's term imbued with concrete social efficacies in the everyday realities of an incessantly globalizing world, however, identity has not and is unlikely to exit the center stage any time soon, if at all. Samuel Huntington's (1996) famous and ominous "clash of civilizations" theory and what subsequently seemed to be its vindication in the tragic events of the "9/11" and so on only highlight the potential deleteriousness and toxicality of identity politics which was and still is proliferating, thanks to the physical and virtual mobilities that have come to fundamentally characterize human societies in the early twenty-first century.
19. Indeed, Rose's this statement is deeply ambiguous in the sense that it seems to me to undermine the Foucauldian tradition, of which he is widely regarded as a standard-bearing figure. However, as Walter Benjamin (quoted in Bhabha, 2004, p. 26) elegantly put once, "[a]mbiguity is the figurative appearance of the dialectic, the law of

the dialectic at a standstill", I see the ambiguity in Rose's statement as supportive of my adoption of a position of dialectic synthesis.

20. Imagining/imagination is a broad category, and arguably encompasses other concepts that also prominently figure in the two disciplines, namely sociocultural anthropology and psychoanalysis, that I draw extensively from, such as *aspiration* (e.g. Appadurai, 2004) and *fantasy* (e.g. Žižek, 1991). Thus I clarify these notions by arguing that while both can be regarded as forms of imagining, aspiration easily carries a positive connotation and normative valence whereas fantasy often denotes imaginations that are wildly unrealistic or perhaps even perverted. Imagination, on the other hand, remains a less loaded and more neutral term.
21. In a similar vein, Judith Butler (1993, p. 105) articulates the connection between identification and imagination as follows, "Identification belongs to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitations; [...] Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted, and as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way."
22. See Castoriadis (1987a, 1987b). For a recent ethnographic study adopting this notion of the imaginary, see Gammeltoft (2014).
23. Amidst Homi Bhabha's typically dense prose, we nevertheless find moments in which he states his position regarding identity/otherness/desire relatively lucidly, such as when he writes: "the demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics (2004, p. 71)," or when he rhetorically asks, "have our fables of identity ever been unmediated by another; have they ever been more (or less) than a detour through the word of God, or the writ of Law, or the Name of the Father; the totem, the fetish, the telephone, the superego, the voice of the analyst, the closed ritual of the weekly confessional or the ever open ear of the monthly *coiffeuse*? (ibid., pp. 81-2)"
24. See also Buchanan (2008). The Deleuzian approach to desire is seen as the polar opposite to Hegel's negative dialectics; Delezue was supposed to have said, "What I detested more than any thing else was Hegelianism and the Dialectic" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 517).
25. Moore (2011, p. 15) defines ethical imagination as "the way in which technologies of the self, forms of subjectification and imagined relations with others lead to novel ways of approaching social transformation." This thesis, through the interpretive angle of desire, aspires to create spaces in which the various parties to Singapore's "foreign talent" libidinal politics can develop alternative ethical imaginations of each other.
26. Specifically, I found Rumsey's analysis (pp. 282-285) of Anna Tsing's (1993) use of *marginality* as a "macro-trope" in her classic ethnography *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* particularly relevant in describing my own use of desire in this thesis.
27. Although ethnographic studies of sex and sexuality, of which there is a large body of literature, also readily fall under "the anthropology of desire," as I have elaborated earlier, this study intentionally departs from the narrow conceptions of desire as sexuality-related and focuses instead on broader social, cultural and political libidinalities.

Anthropologies of sex/sexuality do not directly inform this thesis.

28. With a per capita GDP that ranked 27th out of a total 34 administrative regions in China as of 2010, Jiangxi is perhaps one of the lesser developed and hence less familiar Chinese places to an international readership. Nevertheless, the city of Nanchang, being the provincial seat, more or less exemplifies the typical, average Chinese urban milieu.

Chapter 2

1. It is infeasible and unnecessary to trace the trajectories of such organizational developments, but the following fragmentary information as found in existing literature can be illustrative. For instance, an International Manpower Division was said to have been set up in 1991 within the Economic Development Board (EDB), "which effectively meant that the Board's role of attracting overseas investment to Singapore had been supplemented with the added function of attracting skilled manpower" (K. C. Ho & Ge, 2011, p. 268). In 1998, The Committee on Singapore Talent and Recruitment (STAR) was formed, "mandated to develop and implement strategies to attract and retain foreign talent to make Singapore a hub for international talent while remaining socially cohesive" (Low, 2002, p. 415). At present, at the highest level, a National Population and Talent Division, which is a ministry-level department of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, oversees strategic policy making in relation to population and talent development in the city-state
2. See http://www.contactsingapore.sg/ Contact Singapore operates under the International Manpower Division (IMD), which is currently a division of the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). With twelve branch offices spread across five continents, Contact Singapore's sole mission is to promote Singapore as a land of career and business opportunities to talents around world.
3. Following Yeoh and Lin (2013, p. 36), "talent" here is defined as those holding the "Employment Pass" and the "S Pass," which is a category for professionals commanding lower salaries. See Ministry of Manpower, Singapore http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/s-pass/before-you-apply/Pages/default.aspx last accessed 9 April, 2014.
4. See Ministry of Manpower, Singapore http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/personalised-employment/before-you-apply/Pages/default.aspx last accessed 8 April, 2014.
5. See Ministry of Manpower Singapore, http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/entrepass/before-you-apply/Pages/default.aspx last accessed 8 April, 2014.
6. See Contact Singapore, https://www.contactsingapore.sg/investors_business_owners/invest_in_singapore/global_investor_programme/ last accessed 8 April, 2014.
7. See Ministry of Education, Singapore. http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/scholarships/asean/ last accessed 5 April 2014.
8. See "CGames: Ruthless Singaporeans bring China to Commonwealth", 12 October 2010, Agence France Press.
9. See "Imports 'failed', but locals will take up baton: Athletics chief", 24 September, 2007,

Singapore: Channel NewsAsia.
10. See Ministry of Education, Singapore. https://tgonline.moe.gov.sg/tgis/normal/index.action last accessed 15 April 2013.
11. For example, the 2006 cohort of SM3 scholars were said to have been chosen from the following institutions: Beihang University, Chongqing University, Dalian Science and Technology University, Southeast University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Jilin University, Nanjing University, Shandong University, Sichuang University, Wuhan University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Zhejiang University, and Zhongnan University.
12. See "Yiyuan jianyi xuejian waiji xuesheng jiangxuejing shumu" [MP suggests reduce numbers of scholarships for foreign students], 9, March, 2012, *Lianhe Zaobao*.

Chapter 3

1. Here, I borrow again the phrase "pragmatics of desire" from Julie Chu's *Cosmologies of Credit* (2010, p. 5).
2. From the website of Jiangxi Education Bureau. http://www.jxedu.gov.cn/jytj/2011jytj/2012/04/20120420032442400.html last accessed 11 February 2014.
3. It is said that the Chinese Communist Party revolutionary veteran and first Premier Zhou Enlai vowed to read/study for the purpose of China's "revitalization" when he was young ("*wei zhonghua jueqi er dushu*").
4. Andrew Kipnis prefers the term "imperial governing" ideology to the term "Confucian" ideology, for he rightly notes that Confucianism as a philosophical thought system must be distinguished from Confucianism as used in imperial China for governing and for social regulation. While I quite agree with Kipnis's reasoning, in this chapter, I do not mark this distinction.
5. As China was traditionally a patriarchal society, this applied only to men. Women, actually, were thought to be virtuous if they were not educated or talented; as the old adage went: a woman is virtuous who has no talent (*nüzi wucai bianshi de*).
6. Normally a senior middle school would have five to more than a dozen classes in each grade cohort; each class normally has 45-60 students.
7. *China Educational Daily* 26 May 2011, page 1; 5 May 2011, page 6; and *China Youth Daily* 19 May 2011, page 2.
8. *China Youth Daily*, 13 May 2011, page 2
9. In China, household registration (*hukou*) remains a significant tool for social regulation. People with rural household registration are denied many social welfares that apply to urban registered citizens. Similarly, people with household registration in a particular place may not be entitled to certain rights in other places, including education (see Solinger, 1999; Woronov, 2004).
10. 20 to 30 points out of 610 may seem modest, but given the number of candidates and the fierce competition in the Chinese system, 20 points could actually make a great difference.
11. See http://www.jxsdfz.com:8000/show.aspx?id=2541&cid=100 last accessed 2 January 2014.
12. See http://news.163.com/09/0603/02/5AROBFUU0001124J.html last accessed 2

January 2014.

Chapter 4.

1. *Suzhi*, literally meaning "quality," is a powerful and ubiquitous discourse in contemporary China. Various scholars have explored the multifarious meaning of this concept in different contexts (Fong, 2007; Kipnis, 2006, 2007, 2011b; Murphy, 2004; Woronov, 2008, 2009; Jinting Wu, 2012). In the present context, the term roughly refers to a person's level of education, sophistication, civility, politeness, and moral integrity.
2. It is interesting how the offensiveness of these views and statements seems to escape not only the teenage candidates, but also many Chinese adults. In fact, in my opinion, something Lee Kuan Yew said decades ago must be held greatly responsible for a tendency of some Mainland Chinese people to belittle Singaporeans as "stupid" or "intellectually inferior." According to Lee Kuan Yew's own memoirs, in 1978, just before China's open-up and reform, Deng Xiaoping visited Singapore; at the state banquet, Deng lamented that China would take a long time to get back on its feet, but Lee "countered that they [the Chinese] should have no problem getting ahead and doing much better than Singapore because we were the descendants of illiterate, landless peasants from Fujian and Guangdong while they had the progeny of the scholars, mandarins and literati who had stayed at home" (Lee, 2000, p. 662). While people (e.g. Barr, 2000; Heng & Devan, 1995) have indeed argued that Lee believed in human racial hierarchy and genetic determinism, it is not clear, given the context, whether Lee's above statement to Deng simply meant what it appeared to say. This notwithstanding, Lee's this remark became widely known in China since Lee's memoirs became available in Chinese, and often gets invoked when the topic comes to Singapore/ans. In 2006, the Taiwanese cultural/intellectual pundit Li Ao controversially said in a widely watched talk show of his that "(Chinese) Singaporeans are stupid," further making calling Singaporeans "stupid" something that Chinese people might just do even if they did not believe it. As I show in Part II (particularly chapters 5 and 6), these odd cultural and discursive genealogies find surreptitious expressions in the PRC scholars' encounter with Singapore and Singaporeans and how they perceived them initially.

Chapter 5

1. See Introduction chapter note 4 for my critical take on the notion "integration." Here, I use "integration" is a commonsense way to refer to the PRC scholars' fuller participation in UIS campus life in ways that university authorities and their local hosts would find desirable.
2. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld calls those aspects of a cultural identity that could be considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with an assurance of common solidarity *cultural intimacy*, and he argues that such cultural intimacy is a crucial force that binds the nation-state community together. In the Singapore context, Singlish seems an example of cultural intimacy par excellence; on the one hand, it is cherished by many as a unique local identity marker, yet, on the other hand, it is also a source of "cultural cringe" (Mattar, 2009) and embarrassment to Singapore's aspiration to be a truly global city boasting human talents with global-standard cultural and educational capitals, so much so that in 2000 the Singapore state officially launched a "Speak Good

English Campaign" (Hoon, 2003; Rubdy, 2001).

3. See Pakir's (1993) article entitled *Two Tongues Tied*.
4. "Meaningful contact," in this context, is spoken in opposition to superficial contact which does not create some form of positive impacts on the student-sojourners. Lorraine Brown (2009a, p. 184) suggests that meaningful contact between local hosts and international students should ideally bring to the latter "improved language capability, increased satisfaction with the total student experience and greater host communicative competence."
5. *Zhai*, literally meaning "house" or "home" in Chinese, is a Sinicized appropriation of the Japanese notion *otaku*. While in the Japanese sociocultural context *otaku* arguably has a richer set of meanings and connotations related to the manga/anime geek subculture (see Ito, Okabe, & Tsuji, 2012), in its Chinese appropriation, the meanings of *zhai* seem more akin to another Japanese notion – *hikikomori*, or the phenomenon of youth social withdrawal (Furlong, 2008). Speaking of *Zhai* in the Chinese social/linguistic context may refer to geek cultures and behaviors, but may more broadly refer to the act of withdrawing oneself from social contact and immersing oneself in one's own world. *Zhai* behaviors seem to have particular pertinence to Chinese college students (X. Zhang, 2013).
6. There appears to be no academic research pertaining specifically to masculinity in the context of Singapore's National Service. Popular culture productions in Singapore, however, have long drawn inspirations from this national institution that is unique and idiomatic to the city-state's citizens' life experiences; see for example Singaporean film director Jack Neo's 2012 and 2013 productions *Ah Boys to Men* I & II.
7. *San Guo Sha* or "Three Kingdom Kill" is a strategic card game developed in China in 2008, which since then became very popular. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legends_of_the_Three_Kingdoms
8. Rojak is a traditional fruit and vegetable salad dish commonly found in Southeast Asia, including Singapore. The term is now often used as a metaphor for the eclectic mix of cultures and peoples in the societies of this region.

Chapter 6

1. In an article reflecting on Singapore society's anxieties over "foreign talents," Aaron Koh (A. Koh, 2003, p. 244, emphases added) pointed out how it was perceived, if not also feared, that "foreign talents" possessed the "*hegemonic potential* to define their cultural space and positioning in the terrain of Singapore's ethnoscapes." In the microcosmic space of the UIS campus, these Chinese student-dominated ECA organizations—few as they might still be in number—arguably conjure up this anxiety over the hegemonic potentials of the PRC "foreign talents;" but it must be pointed out that alternatively this phenomenon could be interpreted as these international students' agentic act of claiming and creating spaces of their own amidst real or perceived marginalization and exclusion (cf. Robertson, 2013).

Chapter 7

1. This ideal construction of the university education was perhaps epitomized in the Oxbridge pastoral approach of yesteryear that emphasized educating generalists rather than specialists. Famously, Cardinal Newman—himself an Oxford man—believed that the university's sole

purpose should be the cultivation of the students' *intellect* (Newman, 1912). This intellect is not in the form of specialized knowledge, but rather, general intellectual capabilities that make the individual student a "gentleman." Similarly, the Spanish philosopher Gasset believed that the primary concern for university education should be the transmission of what he called a "general culture" (Gasset, 1944), which gives the students a sense of orientation to life and the world. Such traditions, it is believed, had strong influences on the liberal arts college education model in contemporary North America, which prioritizes the well-rounded intellectual development of the students over specialization. To this end, teaching—the intellectual nurturing of students—is prioritized over pure scientific research. Some of my informants' discourses on their expectations of university education seem to show clear influences of such philosophical ideals. It should also be of interest here to mention that in recent years, higher education in Singapore came under increasingly strong influences from this pedagogical philosophy, which apparently led to the establishment of the Yale-NUS College in 2011, the first and only liberal arts in Singapore—a join venture between the National University of Singapore and Yale University into which the Singapore government invested heavily. Even at UIS itself, which has had a strong focus on technology and engineering, transformations had been ongoing to make the undergraduate education more "broad-based." Judging from my informants' comments, however, it seems such transformations could be more thorough-going.

2. In this alternative idealist vision, the university is a place for the pure pursuit of knowledge. With its roots in the archetypal research university of nineteenth-century Germany (O'Boyle, 1983), the idealism in this vision resides in the belief in "learning for its own sake" and in understanding the university as the privileged and protected domain for such a noble and dedicated pursuit. This German research university philosophy is said to have greatly influenced the development of the large research universities in the United States, which arguably embody the most valorized or perhaps the hegemonic imaginary of what a great university ought to be in today's world. American pragmatist philosopher Peirce said at the end of the nineteenth century, "a university's function is the production of knowledge" and "teaching is only a necessary means to that end" (cited in Thyer-Bacon, 2005, p. 321). As historian Sorkin (1983, p. 63) writes, "The main function of the university was to congregate students in a community devoted to learning (Wissenschaft), and to vouchsafe their total freedom to interact with their peers in an environment which, saturated with learning, proffered numerous models of consummate cultivation." Thus, the devotion to learning and the passion for knowledge may be seen as the core imaginaries in this idealistic view of university education; again, somehow, my PRC scholar interlocutors' discourses reflected such a view.

Chapter 8

1. Corresponding to the dramatic rapidity at which the contemporary Chinese society and culture develop is an incessant emergence of new linguistic expressions, such as new shorthands and portmanteaus, humorous puns, satirical anagrams, etc., in the Chinese socio-discursive space. See Tang and Yang (2011) and Yang, Tang and Wang (forthcoming) for some examples.
2. http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4969c68301009t3z.html last accessed 13 February 2014.

Notice also the gendered character of this phrase: a *luoguan* is almost always a man.

3. http://news.nfmedia.com/nfdsb/content/2012-02/21/content_38395262.htm last accessed 12 September 2013.
4. See Kato (2013, pp. 21-22) for Japanese "self-searching" sojourners' similar discourses regarding the lifestyle in Western countries in comparison to that of their own country.
5. Singapore specialist Lai Ah-Eng (1995, p. 49) indeed noted that in Singapore there was a "high frequency of eating out."
6. See, for example, Max Weber's (1976) classic discussion of the "iron cage."
7. See Solinger (1999); also chapter 3, note 9.
8. See Tang and Yang (2011) for an example of discursive events on China's Internet that dissent against state control and propaganda. See http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon for a list of the various popular phrases and words on China's Internet space that allude to issues of social inequality, immobility and injustice.
9. According to Pollock, "A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 13).
10. See Rosen (2009) for an exploration of the sociocultural meanings of the "post-1980s generation" in China.

Chapter 9

1. Williams explains "structures of feelings" in the following terms, "We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feelings against thought, but thought as felt and feelings as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies (Williams, 1977, p. 132)." Regarding "structures of feeling," Ahearn (2013, p. 245) perceptively points out, "Many scholars mistakenly take the concept out of context and assume it has more to do with emotions or feelings than with social change or hegemony." Similarly, in this chapter, I tell the stories of these PRC "foreign talents" with a view of exploring what their "ordinary affects" and emotions signify in relation to larger social formations that precondition and give rise to their stories.
2. "Poly," shorthand for the polytechnic, is a less academic and more vocationally oriented form of post-secondary education in Singapore.
3. Certified Financial Analyst.
4. "Salaryman" is an English word coined by the Japanese. It basically refers to an ordinary company employee who earns a living in the form of receiving monthly salary. The term

carries connotations of dreariness, boredom, and high work intensity associated with low-/middle- level white-collar work. Salaryman has become a cultural icon for the Japanese society and lifestyle. At the same time, salaryman is arguably also an aesthetic style; I use this term in this sense here, because the subject of the portrait, Jay, happened to be working for a Japanese company.

5. See Liu (2011) for an account on how mainland Chinese youths experience the computer and the Internet socially and culturally.
6. Various studies have noticed the rising prevalence of dating and marriage between Chinese/Asia women and non-Chinese/Asia men, but the reverse scenario remains rare due to complex intersections of gender, power, and racial ideologies. See Constable (2003, 2004), Eng (2001), Farrer (2012), Fong (2011), Jankowiak *et al* (2008), Kelsky (2001), Nagel (2003), and Nemoto (2006).
7. "Final Year Project."
8. The subject of the previous portrait, Sun Tao, also attached some significance to the age thirty. Thirty seems to be a threshold age in many Chinese people's minds, and perhaps this is not unrelated to the fact that Confucius famously said, "At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right" (*Analects*, Book II, Chapter 4; trans. James Legge, 1893). According to this precept, at age thirty, one is expected to stand firm in regards to this world, which in contemporary terms may mean finding a clear career path and/or having a clear orientation to living a life. Interestingly, Kato (2013, p. 36) obverses that among Japanese "self-searching" sojourners in English-speaking countries, age thirty seems to be imbued with a similar significance. Instead of seeing this as primarily the influence of Confucian ideology, however, I am more inclined to the simpler view that thirty is a convenient age mark between youth and adulthood.
9. Rivza and Teichler (2007) observe the same phenomenon elsewhere.

Chapter 10

1. This contrasts with the case of UAE/Dubai, which otherwise closely resembles Singapore in terms of its heavy reliance on non-citizen subjects for economic development, where the state itself actively excludes foreigners from citizenship in order to construct a primordialist ethno-nationhood that in turn legitimizes the ruling state (Vora, 2013).
2. In philosophical psychoanalysis, such as exemplified in Jacques Lacan's work, otherness is a pivotal idea, and is essential to the formation and articulation of desire. This tradition, in turn, is deeply indebted to the Hegelian idealist philosophy, which through early twentieth century reception in France influenced theorists like Lacan himself (J. Butler, 1987; Fuery, 1995, p. 18; Silverman, 2000). In the Hegelian scheme, desire is "a movement of negation whereby the subject fixes its other in order to objectify it, know it and then negate it" (O'Shea, 2002, p. 927). Similarly, as one of Hegel's most eloquent interpreters Judith Butler (1987, pp. 8-9) puts it, "the Hegelian subject expands in the course of its adventures through alterity; it internalizes the world it desires, and expands to encompass, to be, what it initially confronts as other to itself." In Hegel's such "ontological optimism" (ibid., p. 8),

otherness—objectified in the object—is encountered and desired by the subject; but eventually it is negated as the subject achieves a more encompassing and thus more true status, in retrospect of which the otherness of the object was merely a reflection of the limitation due to the immaturity of the former subject itself. In the familiar triumvirate formulation of Hegelian dialectics as "thesis-antithesis-synthesis," subject may be seen as the *thesis*; otherness the *antithesis*; and a more encompassing new subject the *synthesis*, which, as Hegel's philosophy would have it, will eventually become the "absolute knowing" subject that abolishes the very subject-object dichotomy.

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APPENDIX I

Questionnaire distributed to pre-interview candidates for the 2011 "SM2" selection in Jiangxi Province

-------------------问卷 (Questionnaire)------------------

姓名：(Name)

学校：(School)

出生年份：(Year of Birth)

最近一次年级排名（请按这样填：排名/年级总人数）：　　/

(Most recent exam ranking within your grade cohort)

平均年级成绩排名（请按这样填：排名/年级总人数）：　　/

(Average exam ranking within your grade cohort)

父亲职业：(Father's occupation)

母亲职业：(Mother's occupation)

你对新加坡是什么印象？
(What's your general impression of Singapore?)

你觉得新加坡政府出于什么考虑开展 SM2 这种项目？

(Why do you think Singapore government implements programs such as the SM2?)

你觉得新加坡的考官会看中哪些方面？或者说，你觉得新加坡要什么样的学生？
(What kind of qualities do you think Singapore is looking for among the candidates?)

SM2 项目对你的吸引力在哪里？

(In what ways is the SM2 program attractive to you?)

离开中国去新加坡读大学，你觉得你会失去什么？得到什么？
(Leaving China to study in Singapore, what do you think you'll gain and lose?)

在你的想象中，新加坡的大学教育是怎样的？（具体不清楚没关系，可以和中国比较着谈）
(In your imagination, what is university education in Singapore like?)

SM2 对你来说，是不是最好的一个选择？

(Is SM2 your best option?)

SM2 的那些方面让你对它有所保留、踌躇？

(What aspects of the SM2 program make you feel reservation or hesitation toward it?)

对于新加坡要求的 6 年服务，你是什么看法？

(What's your view on the 6-year bond?)

你觉得他们这样要求是否合理？
(Do you think such a bond requirement is reasonable?)

你如何理解新加坡和中国两个国家的相对地位、关系？这对你选择 SM2 有何种影响？
(How do you understand the relationship and relative status between China and Singapore? Does this affect your decision to apply for the SM2 program?)

你填报了哪个大学？什么专业？
(Which university and major did you apply to?)

SM2 有专业方面的限制，你怎么看？

(What's your view on the fact that the SM2 program restricts your choices of university major?)

除了你上面回答了的，与 SM2 相关，你还有没有什么特别关心、担心、纠结的问题？
(Apart from your answers above, is there anything else about the SM2 program that you wish to say?)

你还有一些什么想法、问题、或要求，请任意写下。
(Please write down anything else you may wish in the space below.)

APPENDIX II. Profiles of interview participants during Singapore stage fieldwork

(1) Undergraduate interviewees

Name (Pseudonym)	Sex	Age	Home province or place scholarship was awarded	"Foreign Talent" program	Year of arrival in Singapore	Year of undergraduate study	UIS undergraduate major
Xiuli	F	20	Undisclosed under interviewee request*	SM1	2006	1	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Na Na	F	21	Fujian	SM1	2005	2	Business and Accountancy
Rong	M	22	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM1	2005	2	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Fu Di	M	24	Heilongjiang	SM1	2003	4	Maritime Studies
Zhang Ran	M	23	Shaanxi	SM1	2003	4	Maritime Studies
Gao Mei	F	18	Jiangxi	SM2	2009	1	Mathematical Sciences
Heng	M	19	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM2	2009	1	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Han	M	19	Jiangxi	SM2	2008	2	Bioengineering
Lu Xuan	F	19	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM2	2008	2	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Meng Yu	M	19	Jiangxi	SM2	2008	2	Electrical and Electronic Engineering
Shan Shan	F	20	Sichuan	SM2	2008	2	Material Science and Engineering
Wen Shu	F	20	Shandong	SM2	2008	2	Maritime Studies
Xuan Jia	F	21	Sichuan	SM2	2008	2	Environmental Engineering
Yin Le	F	19	Jiangxi	SM2	2008	2	Information Engineering and Media

Junheng	M	19	Jiangxi	SM2	2008	3	Physics
Yuntao	F	21	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM2	2007	3	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Shao Jun	F	22	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM2	2007	3	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Zhou Peng	M	23	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM2	2006	4	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Shengshi	F	19	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM3	2010	1	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Cui Yin	F	19	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM3	2010	1	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Cheng Yi	M	20	Harbin	SM3	2009	2	College of Engineering (sic)
Leiluo	M	20	Jilin	SM3	2009	2	College of Engineering (sic)
Huang Fei	M	21	Wuhan	SM3	2009	2	College of Engineering (sic)
Bai Yu	F	20	Shandong	SM3	2009	2	College of Engineering (sic)
Meijie	F	21	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM3	2008	3	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Haotian	M	22	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM3	2008	3	Undisclosed under interviewee request
Shifen	F	23	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM3	2007	4	Electrical and Electronic Engineering
Yushu	M	23	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM3	2007	4	Electrical and Electronic Engineering
Gang	M	22	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM3	2007	4	Electrical and Electronic Engineering

* I usually invited informants for interview after some prior casual contact and hanging around; and I found that it was only at the stage of doing a sit-down interview and when I asked them to put down their names on an informed consent form that some of them became a little more guarded about their participation. When I explained to them their rights to anonymity and to withhold personal information, the majority were relaxed about it, but some also decided to exercise such rights. The more significant number of interviewees who requested partial non-disclosure among undergraduate scholars reflected the fact that I more often conducted group interviews with this category of campus-based informants; when interviewed in a group, if one participant decided to exercise the anonymity rights, the rest tended to follow suit. In contrast, for informants in the postgraduate category, most interviews were one-to-one—as these scholars no longer lived together in a campus community—and in the end only two SM1 interviewees asked not to have their places of origin disclosed.

(2) Postgraduate interviewees

Name (Pseudonym)	**Sex**	**Age**	**Home province**	**"Foreign Talent" program**	**Year of arrival in Singapore**	**Year of undergraduate completion**	**Occupation**
Xun Ge	M	25	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM1	2001	2010	Architectural agency consultant
Bin Bin	M	26	Undisclosed under interviewee request	SM1	2000	2008	Banking operation executive
Yue Lin	F	27	Fujian	SM1	1999	2008	Global oil company executive
Rui	M	26	Zhejiang	SM1	2000	2009	Shipping company executive
Aijia	F	26	Heilongjiang	SM2	2002	2008	PhD candidate in Civil Engineering
Bei Bei	F	26	Sichuan	SM2	2002	2008	PhD candidate in Bioengineering

Zhi Cong	M	26	Hubei	SM2	2002	2008	IT system consultant
Kexin	F	26	Sichuan	SM2	2002	2008	Shipping company operation executive
Sima	M	27	Sichuan	SM2	2002	2008	Civil engineering consultant
Peng Shuai	M	27	Jiangxi	SM2	2002	2008	Entrepreneur, free lance IT consultant
Qu Ping	F	26	Sichuan	SM2	2002	2008	Pharmaceutical company sales manager
Tong Mei	F	26	Heilongjiang	SM2	2003	2009	Shipping broker
Min Jian	M	25	Jiangxi	SM2	2002	2008	PhD candidate in Electrical and Electronic Engineering
Zi Guang	M	25	Jiangxi	SM2	2002	2009	Civil engineering consultant
Da Wei	M	26	Hubei	SM3	2003	2008	Shipping company executive
Nan Feng	M	26	Hebei	SM3	2003	2008	PhD candidate in Electrical and Electronic Engineering
Wu Min	M	24	Jiangxi	SM3	2005	2011	Computer gaming company sales executive
Ren Jun	M	26	Sichuan	SM3	2003	2008	PhD candidate in Electrical and Electronic Engineering
Shuyi	F	25	Liaoning	SM3	2005	2010	Global commodities company executive
Xingwei	M	28	Shandong	SM3	2002	2007	Global automobile company sales executive

APPENDIX III

Reflections on some fieldwork problems

> *[T]hank you for your letter. I am sure that you will do whatever is best in the circumstances.*
> *E. E. Evans-Prichard.*

At the end of his 2009 inaugural lecture as Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford, David Gellner offered a funny anecdote: Professor Michael Gilsenan, a now distinguished social anthropologist of the Arab world, was distraught during his doctoral fieldwork many years ago and sought advice from his then supervisor—the famous E. E. Evens-Prichard; Gilsenan recalls:

> My memory is of writing to EP in total panic, city of 5 million, no cattle byres, no sacrifice, no wet season, dry season and basically saying 'help, what do I do' while knowing perfectly well that that was a fatal thing to ask. His reply—on one of those flimsy little blue airmail letter forms that you always opened somehow on the wrong join [...]—was, more or less: 'Dear Michael (or was it simply Dear Gilsenan), thank you for your letter. I am sure that you will do whatever is best in the circumstances. Yours ever, E.E.E-P.' (quoted in Gellner, 2009, p. 136)

Originally a sort of "in-joke" among the anthropologists whose disciplinary rite of passage invariably involves living in faraway lands and learning about distant cultures, this anecdote in fact captures something that many ethnographers nowadays, whether anthropologist or not, whose work involves extended fieldworks are also likely to encounter. How the field settings turn up to be and how the fieldwork pans out, more often than not, does not fall into the ethnographer's neat pre-fieldwork imagination or hypothesization. Faced with unexpected difficulties and opportunities, often the panicking/excited ethnographer has no other option than, as Evens-Prichard so pithily put, "do whatever is best in the circumstances." To do whatever was best in the circumstances, such as altering and fine-tuning research questions, changing unworkable data collection plans and research designs, and testing out and following up on newly emerged interesting lines of inquiry, was also exactly what I had had to do.

In what follows, I reflect on three sets of the major difficulties or issues, methodological and/or theoretical, that I had had to deal with during the course of my fieldwork: (1) access related issues and difficulties; (2) the nature of "data" and how I struggled to separate useful data from an overflowing mumbo-jumbo of mere information; and (3) how the sense of disorientation I initially experienced due to the highly fragmented nature of the ethnographic data was brought under control by developing the overarching theme of desire.

Access related issues

Being a graduate student at a department of education, the sensitivity of doing research on

students and young people, and consequently the potential difficulty of accessing informants and institutions was not something that ought to have taken me by surprise. However, the PRC scholars in Singapore are not just any student and young people; they are very specific subjects entangled in additional local sensitivities and controversies, as I have shown throughout this work. But apparently even that was not all I could expect.

January 2012, on the eve of the Chinese New Year, an email was circulated among students and staff members of UIS, announcing the sad news that a student was found dead in her campus dormitory room. In various local newspapers of the following day, brief reports appeared about this suicide incident, which revealed that the deceased was an SM2 scholar who had been in Singapore for just over a year. While case such as this was extremely rare and entirely isolated, it nevertheless and most certainly intensified the sensitiveness about carrying out a research project such as mine—just imagine me approaching either the Ministry of Education or the UIS for information/data about PRC scholars after such an incident!

Indeed, even prior to this unfortunate incident, my various requests to the UIS authorities for assistance and cooperation—in terms of putting me in touch with students and sharing statistics etc.—were all politely but firmly declined. With the hindsight of this unfortunate incident, authorities' reluctance and concerns were more appreciable. But, "in the circumstances," recalling Evans-Prichard, it also meant that I had to be content with whatever data that was collectable through whatever means that were realistic. In particular, this meant that in terms of the basic facts and key statistics about various scholarship programs, such as the numbers of students throughout the years, the dropout rates, the retention rates after graduation, etc., there were gaps that were impossible for me to fill. I tried my best to compensate for this handicap by carrying out meticulous search on the Internet and by piecing together fragmented pieces of information fed to me through my many helpful research participants. The results from these efforts were not all that disappointing.

In chapter 4, for instance, I was able to provide a considerable amount of relevant facts and details regarding the "SM2" program over the years. One great help here came from the Internet. It turned out that some PRC scholars, mostly from the SM2 and SM3 programs, had actually come together in the virtual world to build an online discussion forum dedicated to the SM 2/3 scholarships. Aptly named "SMiracle" (http://www.smiracle.com/bbs/), this forum facilitated information sharing amongst scholars from different cohorts and provinces. Previous successful candidates wrote about their exam and interview experiences for the benefit of aspiring candidates, and shared about what life was like in Singapore as scholars. Most useful to me, the most active members of this forum even compiled and made available a little e-booklet, putting together various kinds of useful information about the SM2 scholarship that I cited in chapter 4. (Accessing and using the data from the "SMiracle" forum took place mainly during my China stage fieldwork, but occasionally also during Singapore fieldwork. When I revisited "SMiracle" a year or so later in late 2012, the forum looked moribund, showing very little recent traffic and few signs of activities; many spam posts had also infested the forum. It seemed that I had luckily discovered and used this source just when it was most active.)

The absence of institutional support precluded any large scale surveying during my fieldwork, as only the relevant authorities held such access and capacity. Devoid of these, I was left with no choice but to go about getting to know informants through snowballing and personal networking, which were comparatively time-consuming methods. Ethnographically

speaking, however, this was perhaps the most effective method, because I developed personal level interactions and relationships with many informants. Necessarily, the lack of access to the relevant authorities, such as the universities and the Singapore Ministry of Education, deflected my initial plans to include in this study some evaluations of the scholarship schemes from a policy angle, but on the other hand, in having to collect data almost entirely from the PRC scholars themselves, I was able to more deeply explore the scholars' own perspectives of being Singapore's "foreign talents."

Data "overflow"

While the lack of institutional access and consequently the paucity of certain kinds of data was a considerable source of frustration, the opposite situation, i.e. an overflow of certain kinds of "data" proved to be another major issue that I had had to grapple with in the process of this research.

For example, when I carried out online search into public discourses pertaining to "foreign talents" in Singapore, I was confronted with a deluge of raw "data," particularly in the form of vitriolic commentaries made by "keyboard warriors" on all kinds of online discussion forums and new social media spaces. These commentaries were often very similar in their tones, so much so that after a while one realized that little new could come out of them. At the same time, these comments were also often nasty, and I felt the need to be judicious in deciding whether or not these constituted useful data, although there was no doubt that they certainly reflected a perceptible, ongoing sentiment in the Singapore society. A characteristic of the "keyboard warriors" is that they tend to be a small number of people who make a disproportionate amount of noise on the Internet space, which means giving too much emphasis to these views and voices flirts with bias. Consequently, in this study, I have by and large avoided treating this deluge of online vitriolic as data in the interest of fairness. Instead, I mostly relied on the more balanced and moderate forums in the print media, such as The *Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao*.

The overflow of "data" was equally a problem when it came to ethnographically examining the PRC scholars' experiences, particularly concerning their scholarship programs. For instance, the "SMiracle" online forum contained a huge amount of mundane details about the operational aspects of these programs, such as the dates of the selection exams/interviews in China, different individuals' experiences of the selection process in different provinces etc., or the accommodation and transport arrangements, "bridging course" course structures and holiday dates etc., for scholars who have started their lives in Singapore. Although some of these details were relevant, most were tedious facts that did not deserve places in a doctoral thesis. True, ethnographic research is grounded in details, and it thrives in details; but it is never detail for detail's sake. Every minute in human life on this planet, immeasurable amount of things are done and said; what a good ethnographer does, in my opinion, is to find in this immeasurable amount those things which pertain to theoretically interesting questions that have relevance to how we think and act as subjects of culture and society.

Separating mere information from useful "data" had not always been straightforward, and I tried to strike a balance in this thesis between providing enough relevant information on the one hand, and exploiting the theoretical opportunities presented by this ethnographic

enterprise on the other. Unfortunately, data did not come forward to me carrying a label saying whether they were useful or not; as the ethnographer/interpreter/author, I used various theoretical discourses and debates found in existing literatures in education, sociology and social anthropology to sieve through the raw data. This was also the reason why in each substantive chapter of this thesis, there is often a localized literature review, which forms the localized framework through which data is interpreted in that specific chapter.

Between a single research theme and multiple research questions

The final major issue that I struggled with throughout the process of this research was one pertaining to the idea of "research question." It is conventional in the social sciences to speak of "research questions" or "hypothesis," which the social scientist is supposed to answer or confirm/disprove through implementing rigorously designed methodology, robust data collection, and meticulous analysis. However, this elegant and logical model runs into all sorts of problems when it comes to an ethnographic research of a social phenomenon located at the intersection of multiple lines of theoretical significance. Let me not beat about the bushes: the positivistic language of "research question" and "hypothesis" ill suited an ethnographic study such as this one. Even were such research questions and hypotheses proposed at the outset of the study, the real problem is often not whether the questions are answered or whether the hypotheses are confirmed/disproved; rather, the real problem often is that the proposed research questions and hypotheses were shown to be irrelevant in the process of actually examining the social phenomena.

When I first began this study, a major proposed "research question" was with regard to what I called the "instrumentalization" of the PRC scholars by the Singapore state. Echoing a number of scholars who have critically written about the Singapore state's instrumental attitude toward the citizenry as well as a diverse range of migrant subjects (e.g. Cheah, 2006; Yao, 2007; Yeoh, 2006), I wanted to find out what the experiences were like for these Chinese "foreign talent" scholars to be appropriated by the Singapore state, to be "instrumentalized" in the sense of being groomed as the future human capital of Singapore. In many ways, this question has never been abandoned, and my theoretical focus on desire can be viewed as a long detour via which I ultimately answered this question. However, at the same time, it was also true that what emerged from the fieldwork far exceeded what this initial research question could encompass. Of course, being "appropriated" as "foreign talents" was a significant fact, and my interlocutors had many thoughts about it. But was this the only or main thought in their minds? Did this bother them that much? Did they really feel so much "instrumentalized?" Fieldwork convinced me that it was much more complicated.

Instead of a single leading research question about "instrumentalization," I found in the fieldwork all kinds of different questions nagging at me from all directions. This was because the PRC scholar is a figure entangled in not one set but many different sets of social forces and relations, and therefore must be recognized as such.

As "foreign talents," the PRC scholars are deeply implicated in the local politics of state, citizenship, meritocracy, and alienation in Singapore. In this regard, it seemed not the PRC scholars but actually the Singaporeans who were more fixated on the fact that these scholars were appropriated by Singapore and given various privileges. The "foreign talent" figure, as I

show in the Introduction chapter and chapter 2, has become an indispensable one in the civic discourse and the libidinal politics around national identity and nationhood in Singapore.

As mobile students desiring international/transnational higher education, however, these PRC scholars are also subjects embodying an increasingly common mode of educational subjecthood in the era of neoliberal globalization. Like students pursuing education in any foreign country, these PRC scholars experience typical problems involved in educational sojourn such as language barrier, cultural misfit, failure of social integration, and ambiguities in subjective belonging and identification. These dimensions to these scholars' experiences cannot be ignored because my interlocutors often shared with me about such issues.

At the same time, as mobile cosmopolitan subjects who possess coveted social capitals such as internationally recognized educational qualifications and fluency in English, these PRC scholars' experiences also easily link into the ongoing academic debates on migration, citizenship and transnationalism.

Furthermore, the cultural specificities of the PRC scholars as subjects of a postsocialist China were inevitably accentuated when these students were "transplanted" to Singapore—a distinct sociocultural space. The dislocation, self-awareness, reflective thinking and subjective transformation that accompanied this process of transition could not be sufficiently examined without an understanding of the relevant subjectivities of these PRC scholars as products of the Chinese society and the Chinese education system. This constituted another line of inquiry in this trans-boundary ethnographic project.

I could go on…

But in short, once I realized the constitutively multifaceted nature of the PRC scholars' experiences in Singapore as "foreign talents," there was no way of going back to a monolithic narrative about this peculiar group of people and the social phenomena in which they are entangled. My initial, doomed struggle to rein in the rhizomatic way in which lines of research developed gave way to an admission that the social world is fragmented and yet interconnected at a deeper level. Fortunately, if there is one academic discipline that is prepared not only to come to terms with fragmentation and "messiness" (Marcus, 1998, p. 189) but also to thrive on it, it surely must be sociocultural anthropology.

As the research progressed and as I started to write up the findings and analyses, I also started to realize that perhaps there is, after all, a unifying theme behind all this. At the core of the "foreign talent" issue in Singapore is a them-and-us divide, a self-other dichotomy that drives much of the tension that is characteristic of "foreign talents" related matters. In philosophical abstraction, the self-other relation is about desire. And as I tried to show in the Introduction, where is desire not present or not crucial when it comes to "foreign talents" in Singapore? I realized that understanding desire/desiring tremendously helps us understand the "foreign talents" social phenomena in Singapore. This, ultimately, was what I hoped to achieve in this thesis.

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