

# Migration, Mobility, & Displacement

*Vol. 4, No.1 Spring 2019*

Raviv Litman 2019 “Singaporean Societies: Multimedia Communities of Student Migration” *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement 4 (1): 7-20*

---

Migration, Mobility, & Displacement is an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal. It seeks to publish original and innovative scholarly articles, juried thematic essays from migrant advocacy groups and practitioners, and visual essays that speak to migration, mobility and displacement and that relate in diverse ways to the Asia-Pacific. The journal welcomes submissions from scholars and migrant advocacy groups that are publicly engaged, and who seek to address a range of issues facing migrants, mobile and displaced persons, and especially work which explores injustices and inequalities.

We welcome submissions and inquiries from prospective authors. Please visit our website (<http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/index>), or contact the editor for more information.

## **Editor-in-Chief**

Dr. Feng Xu  
[mmded@uvic.ca](mailto:mmded@uvic.ca)

## **Published by**

The Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives  
University of Victoria  
3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, BC, V8P 5C2, Canada  
<http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/mmd/index>



Licensed under Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International.  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



# Singaporean Societies: Multimedia Communities of Student Migration

Raviv Litman

## Abstract

*As young Singaporeans are evaluating their obligations towards their parents at home, the state of Singapore is implementing policies to entrench long-term connection between overseas Singaporean students and their families by using financial support to guide overseas Singaporean student societies. These methods reach far beyond Singapore's borders and involve a combination of online and offline communities of practice that bring young overseas Singaporeans closer together by setting social boundaries across multiple media. Young Singaporeans learn about studying overseas through online communities, and Singaporean societies seek to control that form of communication. In this paper, the author describes the worldwide state-funded and student-run Singaporean societies and how they seek to govern overseas students' relationships with family at home using methods such as social media, finances, and parties. Drawing from ethnographic and online methods of inquiry over three months in 2015, this article explores how students experienced Singaporean societies as a tool to access social and financial resources, which set boundaries for them when reevaluating their responsibilities at home while they live abroad. The author looks at the critical language that is present in an online community of young Singaporeans and shows how Singaporean societies limit opportunities for criticism.*

## Introduction

The role of the state in managing family obligations in many aspects of everyday life has been well documented in contemporary Singapore. The state is active in defining children's obligations to their parents through institutions such as housing, marriage, and health insurance (Wee 1995; Göransson 2009; Y. Teo 2010). The small island city state of Singapore on the tip of the Malaysian peninsula has become one of the world's leading financial centres, in part because of top-down market-oriented policies implemented following Singapore's independence from Great Britain and Malaysia in 1965 (Shatkin 2014). In the words of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding patriarch of the state of Singapore and the biological father of its current prime minister, "I felt strongly that the people's morale and confidence would be decisive in the coming battle for Singapore's soul" (Lee 2000, 71). The battle Lee Kuan Yew was referring to was Singapore's independence as it transitioned from a colonial economy to an international market economy. During this transition, the national discourse on the Singaporean family as a pawn in a national struggle has been used to justify low taxation (which the state sees as necessary to attract international commerce) by shifting welfare responsibilities from the state to the family (Göransson 2009; Y. Teo 2011).

---

*Keywords: polymedia, migration, Singapore*

To fulfil this goal of low taxation, the state has emphasised its role in conceptualising a Singaporean family with close intergenerational ties and strong obligations to support elder family members. Since the 1990s, the government of Singapore has reacted to the nation's rapid economic growth by creating a discourse of shared national values in order to combat materialism and the breakdown of family they identified with consumerism and westernisation, particularly in association with Singapore's increasingly global reach and the growing number of overseas Singaporeans (Ortmann 2010, 31). This campaign addresses the contradiction between the state's goal of globalising its economy while also conserving a localised family. Vivienne Wee (1995, 187) argues that a triangular relationship exists among parents, children, and the state. In this multisided relationship, parents and the state together reinforce the obligation of children to give back to their family. Youyenn Teo (2010) shows how this triangular relationship has been driven by policies meant to encourage intergenerational dependence. In this paper I examine a specific example of this message communicated through a state-funded multimedia community-building project known as Singaporean societies (SingSocs) targeted at young overseas Singaporean students. I situate this project within a polymedia environment that includes anonymous online communities as well as SingSocs. The former may encourage expressions of discontent within family relationships, while SingSocs contribute to the state's goals by constraining space for criticism outside of Singapore's national borders. Both, however, are useful platforms for Singaporean students to communicate on.

## **Singaporean Students Overseas and Polymedia**

The content of SingSocs can be seen discussed across media platforms on what scholars of media in Southeast Asia refer to as polymedia: a network of related platforms of social media which are understood within the changing content created by their users (Miller et al. 2016). Different formats are used to convey different types of messages, for example, some are more personal, while others are more public. In this paper I look at how Singaporean students communicate in a polymedia network in which some platforms are government managed and some are not. The research was based on a survey of relationships between Singaporean international students and their families and polymedia examples of campaigns to influence international students from Singapore. The data was collected from interviews and social media surveys, then analysed by cross-referencing patterns between students' experiences and the narratives of campaigns to support Singaporean international students. The research parameter was the social media the students used and their interview responses. As a Canadian researcher, I was interpreting the cultural context and polymedia context of Singapore through the lens of an outsider. I had not been exposed to state media or Singaporean concepts of familial gratitude before conducting the research. I developed this research trajectory in the context of my own experience growing up in Canada and studying abroad in China, and from discussions with international students from Singapore and elsewhere about familial gratitude and migration. I attempted to place this data within the cultural context of Singapore as much as possible, although as a nonlocal researcher my definitions of family and social media influenced the research trajectory. The cultural

context is found in the state's definition of familial obligation compared to examples on social media not controlled by the state of Singapore.

In the case of overseas postsecondary students from Singapore, government policy has shifted, from accusing students studying overseas of disloyalty in the 1970s and 80s for emigrating abroad, to attempting to maintain ties with overseas Singaporeans by referencing traditions of reciprocal obligation between family members (Ho and Boyle 2015). The Singaporean government has focused on how to make sure the student diaspora returns home, using financial incentives and social obligations and marketing Singapore to overseas students with contractual scholarships, entrepreneurial funds, a vibrant food culture, and appeals to a sense of patriotic duty and obligation to family (Ho, Chiang, and Lin 2008; Hooi 2012; V. Teo 2012; Ho and Boyle 2015). In the case of international education, the state of Singapore encourages overseas education among potential white-collar workers by targeting elite schools and top students with scholarships and programmes that will set them up with jobs in Singapore before they leave to study overseas (Koh 2014). Closer ties to family and the culture of their home is one area where the state of Singapore has invested in multi-platformed projects of state-funded communities for overseas students, such as by setting up an overseas task force to engage with students through government websites, overseas university clubs, holiday parties, and social media groups on Facebook. This is a state polymedia network that includes content that crosses between offline and online communicative events.

Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1989 expressed the shift in the state's policies towards emigrating students to *The Straits Times*: "No country is perfect just as no family is perfect, but we do not leave our family because we find it imperfect or our parents difficult" (Heng and Devan 1995, 215). Particularly since 2006, the state has developed an increasing number of targeted scholarship and community financing programmes which are intended to promote students' connections with Singapore and family while they are studying overseas (Ho et al. 2008). The same metaphor of family was used in 2012 to show the unbreakable family bonds desired by the state over overseas students, when Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean described overseas students' importance to nationalist goals: "They are part of our family while overseas and the valuable skills and exposure they gain will enrich our economy and society when they return" (Hean, Pin, and Kiak 2012, 1). Teo Chee Hean describes in that quote the state's desire to create lasting relationships with students based on the marketable skills they bring to the Singaporean economy. The use of family in the above quotes is not only metaphorical, but a direct reference to the significance of obligations to family in appealing to overseas students' sense of place in Singapore.

This research is based on three months of fieldwork I conducted in Singapore in 2015 for my graduate thesis. The original research was primarily focused on interviews with young Singaporean men to discuss their experiences following conscription when they studied overseas, and how the former event influenced their experiences of the latter. I have no experience with conscription, but my experience with overseas education indicated that it is a formative event for many young men and women, and that our senses of national identity and family relationships can be reinterpreted when students first live abroad. I

explored how the regulation of the military, other state programmes, and the independence of studying overseas were related to intergenerational obligations. For the purposes of this paper I draw from a section of that research, which reviews the purpose and function of online community resources such as SingSocs for overseas Singaporeans. For this section, I searched both public online forums and state-sponsored websites for content related to overseas studies. Some of the young Singaporeans who posted in public forums were upset by their parents' expectation that they must give a set portion of their working salaries to their parents regardless of their own financial priorities. The student communities, in contrast, gave overseas students a consistent online and offline venue to stay in contact with home and immerse themselves in Singaporean culture without criticism of state values. These two formats were different, but both were part of the polymedia used by young overseas Singaporeans. To show the significance of SingSocs in creating communities that support the state objective of keeping overseas students connected to home, I first look at an example of Singaporean student discourse outside of the state's polymedia.

## **Anonymous Singaporean Communities**

There are countless online social media platforms on which people form communities around mutual interests based on varying degrees of privacy and formality, creating what Deirdre McKay (2017) refers to as a complex ecology of communication options. The content of more unregulated social media platforms is shaped by the content that is favoured by a large user community based around shared experiences and interests. In this case I offer the example of [reddit.com/r/singapore](https://www.reddit.com/r/singapore), an online community of young Singaporeans based on anonymity and a broad user base, which includes many overseas Singaporeans and prospective overseas Singaporeans. Reddit is an anonymous forum used generally by English speakers to form interest-based communities, in this case a community formed around the topic of residence in Singapore. As a platform it allows users of a similar age and background, usually college or high school aged, to speak directly about topics of mutual interest. In this example of one particular conversation thread related to intergenerational relationships, parents' feelings of dependency on their children were cast in a generally negative light. The obligations that children in Singapore have to their parents include the common practice of giving them a percentage of their income after they start working. In this conversational thread it was referred to satirically as "the parent tax." The question of how to discourage or subvert unfair or childish parents who may be too dependent on their children and take them for granted was a heavily debated topic among young Singaporeans in this anonymous context. As one commentator complained, the amount that parents ask of children can be unfair when the children are taken for granted. They wrote a scathing review of their mother's unreasonable requests:

*The next part is just gonna sound bitter as f\*\*k. For the record, I've not went on any holidays since I started work or bought any big ticket items besides a \$100 microwave. My mom has went on 4 holidays, got herself the latest iPhone and has plans to get herself a new laptop. Yet she constantly tells me that my contribution is not enough. #filialpiety*

The term **#filialpiety** is a Twitter tag the commentator used here to make fun of their mother's excessive demands for money and the traditional value of filial piety, under which they are expected to show gratitude to their parents. If you search "filial piety" on Facebook, the first result is a page run by the Singapore Ministry of Social and Family Development. In Singapore, filial piety is a term that has been used by state ministries to describe the aspects of children's gratitude to their parents that are valuable to the state. Reddit and other anonymous online social networks give commentators like the one quoted above a platform in which they can complain about things like family obligations, restrictions on their independence, and other aspects of Singaporean life and culture they and Singaporeans of similar ages and backgrounds are frustrated with, without directly identifying themselves as in conflict with state values.

In this Reddit community, filial piety, parent tax, and family obligations were generally framed as a source of frustration and obstruction of young Singaporeans' personal goals. One commentator said they would roll their eyes when their mom brought up the obligation of children to care for parents by appealing to children's sense of guilt, something they described as "guilt tripping." This kind of evocative language and subject matter was noticeably absent from the state-sponsored online SingSocs and offline events, where much more positive language related to home, family, and financial obligations was used. Message boards such as Reddit may contradict the state agenda around family.

*My mum used to tell me “到你養我了 [You'll care for me]” which made me roll my eyes a lot. I see it as her warped way of trying to justify the act of giving her allowance. Thrown in with some guilt-tripping of course. Classic stance.*

The responses to this statement were supportive of the commentator punishing her mother by distancing herself in order to make her mother appreciate her more and be less demanding. The use of the term guilt tripping linked to the parent tax shows that what the state of Singapore might see as financial prudence and parents might see as fair reciprocity, children such as the commentator above instead frame as unfair, passive aggressive, and out of touch with the children's needs. The term filial piety was not associated with intimacy and responsibility in this case, but with obligation and an unfair burden. It is a subversive use of the term filial piety when compared to its use by state media, in this case by subverting the idea that children are unconditionally obligated to care for their parents by inserting the expectation that parents must demonstrate value to their children first.

Kristina Göransson (2015) found that children in Singapore within the last thirty years have had increasing financial power to renegotiate their positions within family obligations because of a greater emphasis in the job market on technical skills learned in higher education rather than age-based seniority. Older workers who were unable to compete with younger employees in technical fields could also find themselves earning less than their children and having to defer to their children's priorities. Smaller families have also made the younger generation more important to their parents than before. If parents are not willing to make sacrifices for their children, or if they make unreasonable demands of them, then their children may be less present in their parents' lives in order to show

them that they must compromise if they hope to be supported by their children (Göransson 2009). Another commentator on the Reddit forum mentioned that her mother was asking for the same level of sacrifice that her mother had given to her grandmother, but the way her mother asked for money made her feel she was unfair and materialistic. This cross-generational comparison shows that young Singaporeans are not satisfied to practice filial piety in the same way their parents might have.

*No, she's not asking a lot from me, but it's the way she phrases it's considered little already okay! "When I was younger I gave everything to my mum and went penniless myself!" That annoys me I'll never be the "perfect" daughter because I'll never live up to the standard she set herself. Like okay, I can give you more if you want, but it sounds like filial piety is measured by monetary value, commodified in a competition to prove to ourselves that we are indeed filial children, and that's wrong.*

This commentator is clear that she thinks it is wrong to measure filial piety by monetary value, but she also mentions in another comment that she would have "given [to mom] of my own accord." She emphasises that it is not the amount but the request that is problematic. In other cases parents would not mention this obligation to their children at all, and children felt self-motivated to give to their parents in standard monthly amounts after they began working because they felt their parents had demonstrated they deserved it. This kind of filial piety emphasises reciprocity and not unconditional obligation. Many young overseas-educated men interviewed in this study described studying overseas as a lifetime investment that should be repaid to parents. One online commentator linked their obligations directly to their international education by stating their direct correlation: "I give because they paid for my overseas studies." In this case parents' willingness to fund this commentator's overseas education was enough to motivate them to give.

In a strained relationship between parents and children, as described by these online commentators, financially supporting their parents was something they felt forced to do out of obligation, but had difficulty doing when they felt their parents did not deserve it. Because these comments were directed towards an anonymous interest-based community, they were not meant to communicate with family but to share experiences with like-minded young people who would sympathise with them. Encouraging young people to study overseas, either with parental or state funding, is one means by which the state of Singapore can emphasise filial piety and gratitude towards home in a positive context. The state media expressed through SingSoc forums is not an alternative media in opposition to others, but one which provides another part of students' needs: a platform useful for accessing state benefits and meeting Singaporeans abroad. SingSocs are vectors through which the state of Singapore emphasises the message that young students need to take financial responsibility for themselves and their families' future after graduation and offers them the means to do so by returning to Singapore. That, however, is just one of many productive tasks of SingSocs, which are a means through which Singaporean students can network, share tips on living abroad, find housing, and organise events and holidays. In other words, SingSocs are productive both for the state and for the everyday communication needs of new students, and they form a part of Singapore's overseas polymedia network.

## Singaporean Societies

SingSocs are regionally based communities of young overseas Singaporeans, most of which are organised around university campuses. They are supportive of new students seeking advice from fellow Singaporeans about their studies, housing, and other needs. They are found across the globe. They promote networks between Singaporeans living overseas and are primarily funded by the Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU), a Singaporean government committee. The OSU claims there are more than 280 SingSocs in more than 120 cities (Hean et al. 2012). They are mostly concentrated in English-speaking countries where most overseas Singaporean students go to study, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. They connect overseas Singaporean students around issues related to their home.

The OSU is the main government organisation tasked with funding and organising SingSocs, as well as connecting parents, overseas students, schools, and ministries to share relevant information among them. The OSU was created in 2006 and the National Population and Talent Division runs it. The OSU has a mandate “to reach out more proactively to overseas Singaporeans and facilitate return migration” (Ho and Boyle 2015, 10). This mandate is realised through programmes like SingSocs, which create a geographically dispersed sense of Singapore, something one can not only feel at home but also take abroad and which is visible in the content of social media communities. The National Population and Talent Division is charged with fostering a “vibrant economy” with a “strong Singaporean core” (NPTD 2014). The OSU claims to have supported programmes that engaged with 90,000 overseas Singaporeans from 2006 to 2011 (Hean et al. 2012), which would represent a significant minority of the roughly 200,000 Singaporeans who study overseas. The National Population and Talent Division’s 2011 progress report to Parliament explains: “It is ... essential that we engage our Singaporeans overseas. They are part of our family while overseas and the valuable skills and exposure they gain will enrich our economy and society when they return” (as cited in Hean et al. 2012). What the OSU promotes is primarily the economic benefits of returnees, but the wording of its report integrates the idea of a Singaporean family around the world destined to come home. This is because the OSU is also tasked with providing a cultural anchor to home to keep young Singaporeans from forgetting their place in their family. This anchor helps to maintain family relationships for overseas students.

OSU recruitment events are full of games, prizes, and other fun activities to attract young students thinking about studying overseas or preparing to depart. I attended three of these public events at conference centres around Singapore. Not only was family a concept emphasised in OSU’s report to Parliament, these public events also clearly communicated the relationship between parental support and studying overseas. Parent-child groups attended most of these events. Parents were encouraged to ask questions about tuition costs or the financing provided through government scholarships in order to better understand their child’s needs. One conference speaker joked that the parents should pay special attention to the section on tuition, since they would foot the bill. This expectation is in part because Singaporean government scholarships require parents, or someone close to young students with secure financial means, to post a monetary bond to insure the scholarship



recipients will return and complete a scholarship work contract with a ministry or company in Singapore. At the recruitment events I attended, senior student volunteers who gave young students advice about studying overseas staffed the booths, while the ministry staff talked directly with parents.

In addition to representing the younger audience at OSU recruitment events in Singapore, SingSocs regularly host Singaporean cultural events in popular destination cities like Melbourne and London and publish articles and links to practical information about living overseas on their website and independent social media groups on Facebook or BlogSpot. New York and London SingSocs host regional meet-ups for other SingSocs in the US, for example, to give tours of New York City. SingSoc clubs are a key part of realising the OSU mandate of keeping overseas Singaporeans connected to home. The connections they foster are made both online and offline. SingSocs describe themselves as grassroots organisations run by students. The terms “ground up” and “grassroots,” common on the OSU website, at the events I attended, and in interviews with SingSoc organisers, are used by administrative staff to market the clubs to reflect their organisational structure, though not their financial structure. Elaine Ho (2008) found that overseas students in London would critique the top-down nature of SingSoc funding, but still found the organisation useful for networking with other young Singaporeans. The idea of grassroots SingSocs reflected the students’ goals for community organising, but not the restrictions that came with government funding.

In interviews I conducted with young Singaporeans, SingSocs were brought up in relation to topics such as getting used to living in a new country, finding new housing, and celebrating holidays abroad. SingSocs connected members to other information about studying overseas. When I asked one respondent who was living overseas with Singaporean roommates why he ended up living with other Singaporeans, he told me, “It was through the Singaporean society that we met each other,” and he explained that this was a common occurrence. Making posts about available housing was among the most common use of SingSoc web pages, along with posting news stories related to Singapore or host countries and reminders of event schedules. Members also used the platform to chat about what they missed in Singapore, such as food, holidays, and family. SingSocs regularly brought together overseas Singaporeans for community-building activities, such as charity events, sporting events, or any of Singapore’s many holiday celebrations.

Two interview respondents had run SingSocs in their universities and described the experience of being part of SingSocs as character building. Both explained to me how they saw student and government interests negotiated during the funding process in ways they felt were mutually beneficial. Both of them said they would create events on their respective campuses to satisfy one or two out of three criteria set out by the OSU on their website, which could grant up to 80% funding for their events. The three OSU criteria as stated on the website are that the events (1) celebrate Singapore’s culture and heritage; (2) keep Singaporeans abroad abreast of developments in Singapore; and (3) strengthen a sense of community among the Singaporeans abroad through meaningful projects and activities (OSU 2015).

The events held by SingSocs were most often casual or celebratory events that introduced Singaporeans to each other while sharing Singaporean food and culture. Respondents described SingSocs' roles in their lives as a way to get set up in their new country: "They would arrange with you after you arrive to orientate you to important places"; "Just get together, have a meal, catch up"; "They are mostly food events. Like Christmas dinner, [and] a mid-autumn dinner." The role of the OSU is to promote long-term connection to family and the nation, according to Singaporean social scientists and its own report to Parliament (Ho et al. 2008; Hean et al. 2012; Hooi 2012; Ho and Boyle 2015), but respondents described more casual networks as part of their regular activities overseas and did not associate OSU activities overtly with the OSU's nation-building goals. It was the structure of the events themselves and the increased interactions with fellow Singaporeans that allowed SingSocs to uphold their mandate of keeping overseas Singaporeans connected to home. Conditions for funding meant student organisers had to appeal to national heritage and promote networks among Singaporeans in ways that could be verified and audited by government as relevant to the OSU mandate, which was to make sure Singaporeans had positive and constant information about returning to Singapore. The OSU gave out an internationally consistent perspective about home.

James (a pseudonym), a 25-year-old social sciences student at an east coast American university, described his experience organising a SingSoc around these conditions. James was a SingSoc organiser studying and organising at a large American university. SingSoc student organisers were gatekeepers between the OSU's financial support and the real-life communities of overseas Singaporeans that SingSocs promoted. When they were outside of Singapore, the student organisers could be strategic about how they presented events and negotiated their relationship with the funding office. James told me what the term grassroots organising meant to him in terms of an example of negotiation between him and his supervisors.

*James: Did you go to the ... screening, To Singapore with Love? ... This film is banned in Singapore, it's all about Singaporean [political] exiles. So I don't know if you're familiar with Singaporean history, but in the [19]60s and 70s there was this huge exile of dissidents. So this filmmaker went to England, London, went to Malaysia, all these places, went to meet them, but the film was banned in Singapore.*

*Raviv: How does that work in terms of your task force (the OSU employees in charge of monitoring SingSocs), do they know [you showed the film at a SingSoc]?*

*James: That's a bit sensitive ... They know, but they don't fund it. So they cannot fund it, but they do not prohibit it from happening.*

The lack of funding for the movie night demonstrated that the OSU did not approve of *To Singapore with Love*. James was able to work around the government's restriction of the film by unofficially showing it as part of his SingSoc events. By doing so he placed that particular event outside of the OSU mandate. This example illustrates that students have more opportunities to engage with censored media and less risk of repercussions outside of Singapore, but they may still face repercussions when requesting state funding. As we

saw from the example of Reddit, this restriction does not exist in online communities that are not state sponsored. What James described was a mutual compromise, which he felt led to mutual benefit—his club could still receive funding for other events while fulfilling the OSU’s mandate. Even though he had challenged the state narrative by showing the film, he still fulfilled the OSU’s mandate by organising a SingSoc event that brought Singaporean students together and helped them stay connected while overseas. However, if he constantly challenged that narrative, it might have meant a loss of funding for his school or required his resignation.

Both the parents and young people I interviewed expressed relief that students had other Singaporeans to connect with overseas in addition to foreigners. James explained to me that he felt being part of a SingSoc wasn’t about closing your mind to another culture, it was a way of staying connected to home while experiencing immersion in another culture overseas. This cross-cultural connection with grounding in Singapore represents a success story from the point of view of the OSU and its goals, particularly because James, like 15 out of the 17 sons I interviewed in the original study, expressed a plan to return to Singapore and stay there to eventually take care of his family. These students had engaged with SingSocs and had maintained contact with their parents while studying overseas. SingSocs provided grounding because they kept the students close to their culture while also allowing them to take advantage of where they were living. As James expressed:

*I felt really supported by [SingSocs] and I didn't feel lost. But at the same time I didn't feel that I was obliged to spend time with my Singaporean group, I could still have my American friends, you know? It doesn't become social pressure for me to stick with Singaporean friends. So I can have my Singaporean fix.*

Being able to speak in Singlish, eat Singaporean foods, and share experiences from home to get a “Singaporean fix” was a positive experience that brought many students like James into these groups and motivated them to make the groups part of their polymedia. Many of the sons I interviewed maintained close connections with Singaporean friends while overseas; they lived with Singaporeans or went to Singaporean senior students for mentorship on school and living abroad. That finding indicates that the OSU may be successful in their mandate of sustaining overseas communities that connect Singaporeans. Another respondent said about SingSocs “It’s not just trying to be an association to get Singaporeans together, it’s more a networking association,” emphasising the connections built through SingSocs. Ho and Boyle (2015) critique SingSocs for favouring networking for business and technical fields, thus privileging global knowledge networks in overseas Singaporean communities. However, SingSocs do much more for students beyond business networking—they increase the social ties between overseas Singaporeans. Many overseas Singaporeans do significant tasks together, such as finding housing, picking classes, and celebrating holidays. In their initial years overseas, living with fellow Singaporean students was more common than living with non-Singaporeans. In interviews, some students described the close networks between overseas Singaporeans as a bubble that insulated students and kept them together, while others framed it positively as an anchor or root connected to home, which helped them stay close to family.

The example of showing the censored film *To Singapore with Love* in a SingSoc demonstrates that government control over overseas Singaporeans is not absolute, but that may not be a barrier for the state to reach out to overseas students. James's elevated anxiety about maintaining his anonymity in the interview implied the ever-present potential for serious repercussions to his career if he was found to be criticising the state discourse: A student could lose access to financial support for his SingSoc or lose scholarship support if he were perceived to have overstepped this line. More subversive discussions about family and the state that exist in anonymous online spaces would not be acceptable in a SingSoc environment funded by the OSU, but these spaces do not provide all the other social resources SingSocs offer Singaporeans. Media created by SingSocs are not strictly repressive, but the SingSocs put up flexible boundaries that involve a give and take between state values and students' criticism and compliance in their content on polymedia. The government of Singapore has the means to provide generous funding to many of its citizens to study overseas through scholarships and grants, and it does not hesitate to use these incentives to influence the content of polymedia for university-educated overseas Singaporeans, particularly to keep the conversation focused on their homeland. The question of whether the government has successfully met their goal of fostering national family values may be one that students and the state will have to answer themselves, but the answer to whether SingSocs have become a part of overseas Singaporeans' polymedia appears to be yes. The state's control of state-funded communities is not total, but it is enough to make otherwise financially independent scholarship students and community leaders consider self-censorship and regulate the content to bolster multimedia visibility of state values. The choice to take subversive action can come at a higher cost for students indebted with state loans and thus requires careful negotiation with the state based on the relevance of state funding in their lives across social media and beyond.

## Conclusion

The state of Singapore emphasises the importance of filial piety as a means of encouraging reliance on family for multigenerational social support. Singaporean young people who engaged in online forums often expressed ambivalence about their obligation to care for their parents when they did not feel gratitude towards them, and this ambivalence may in some cases subvert the state goals for family relationships. Therefore, the OSU has been given a mandate to connect overseas students to home and to promote the state discourse on a national family value system among those Singaporean students living abroad.

SingSocs are a means through which a sense of national community is maintained overseas, as well as a means for providing social resources students seek when moving overseas. SingSocs are not mutually exclusive of diverse polymedia in overseas Singaporean communities, nor would joining a SingSoc take away Singaporean students' capacity to criticise what they feel are unfair expectations of state values and family obligations in their lives, as some commentators did on Reddit and as James did by screening a censored film. Instead, SingSocs offer overseas Singaporeans a space influenced by state funding to provide positive examples of staying connected to Singapore and family, as well as

a constant reminder throughout their time overseas of employment and resettlement resources available if and when they return to Singapore. SingSocs reach a significant number of overseas Singaporeans and emphasise an obligation for them to return to Singapore. SingSocs are not overtly coercive, but through a system of mutual benefit and with limited alternatives, they convince students to keep Singapore in their lives so they can stay close to family and continue to enrich the Singaporean state by shouldering part of the financial burdens of their parents in Singapore.

SingSocs and the OSU encourage students to return and reintegrate into the Singaporean economy after their studies. Based on the National Population and Talent Division's mandate to encourage the reproduction of family for the sake of a vibrant economy, maintaining a bond between overseas Singaporeans and the nation is an important part of the more general state mandate to maintain an intergenerational family support system by reinforcing ties between children and their parents. This polymedia landscape both includes students' international experiences and promotes Singaporean national family values.

The tool of choice for the Singaporean government in promoting state values through SingSocs is financial incentives that allow SingSocs not only to host well-funded events, but to set up regionally relevant organisations with the capacity to engage local overseas students online and offline in building networks. Funding for SingSocs demonstrates recognition by the Singapore government of the strategic importance to state interests of reinforcing ties in the families of transnational students who have many options for employment, citizenship, and movement between nations (Ong 2006). SingSocs seek to give students a reason to take personal responsibility for their parents and their community by providing a cultural anchor to Singapore and reinforcing the networks of Singaporeans overseas across polymedia on Facebook, blogs, events, and more. This format of state-funded grassroots community is flexible, while the OSU's basic requirements for funding make the kind of social criticism that occurs outside of SingSocs unlikely to take a central role in content, even when these criticisms appear elsewhere on unregulated parts of students' polymedia. These programmes promote the state's and parents' expectations for their children overseas to stay linked to Singapore and family. The establishment of the OSU over a decade ago, and its promotion of SingSocs, is a new page in Singapore's history of managing family obligations. The success of SingSocs, even if limited, may motivate other states to attempt similar strategies of engagement with overseas students to manage family ties.

## References

- Göransson, Kristina. 2009. *The Binding Tie: Chinese Intergenerational Relations in Modern Singapore*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- . 2015. "Raising successful children: Children as accumulation strategy and the renegotiation of parenting arrangements in Singapore." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16 (3): 211–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2015.1028431>.
- Hean, Teo Chee, Sitoh Yih Pin, and Lim Wee Kiak. 2012. "Programmes by Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU)." The Twelfth Parliament of Singapore. [http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20120518003/order\\_paper\\_-\\_14\\_may\\_12.pdf](http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20120518003/order_paper_-_14_may_12.pdf) (accessed February 17, 2019).
- Heng, Geraldine, and Janadas Devan. 1995. "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore." In *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, edited by Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz, 195–215. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Ho, Derrick, Gracia Chiang, and Sharon Lin. 2008. "Wooing Overseas S'poreans: Time To Get More Personal? Food, Finances and Flying the Flag Fail To Draw Them Back. A Third F— Family—May Bring the Diaspora Home." *The Straits Times*, June 14, 2008.
- Ho, Elaine Lynn-Ee. 2008. "Flexible Citizenship or Familial Ties that Bind? Singaporean Transmigrants in London." *International Migration* 46 (4): 145–75.
- Ho, Elaine Lynn-Ee, and Mark Boyle. 2015. "Migration-as-Development Repackaged? The Globalizing Imperative of the Singaporean State's Diaspora Strategies." *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 36 (2): 164–82.
- Hooi, Joyce. 2012, October 9. "More than Half of S'poreans Would Migrate if Given a Choice: Survey." *The Business Times*. <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20121007-376116.html> (accessed February 17, 2019).
- Koh, Aaron. 2014. "Doing Class Analysis in Singapore's Elite Education: Unravelling the Smokescreen of 'Meritocratic Talk.'" *Globalisation, Societies, and Education* 12 (2): 196–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2014.888308>.
- Lee, Kuan Yew. 2000. *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, Times Editions.
- McKay, Deirdre. 2017. "Sent Home: Mapping the Absent Child into Migration through Polymedia." *Global Networks* 18 (1): 133–50. doi: 10.1111/glob.12174.
- Miller, Daniel, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Julianio Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman, and Xinyuan Wang. 2016. *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press.
- National Population and Talent Division (NPTD). 2014. "About NPTD." Government of Singapore. <http://www.nptd.gov.sg/About-NPTD> (archived).
- Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ortmann, Stephan. 2010. "Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28 (4): 23–46.

Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU). 2015. "Fundings For Communities." <https://www.overseassingaporean.sg/resources/students/staying-abroad/fundings-for-communities> (accessed February 17, 2019).

Shatkin, Gavin. 2014. "Reinterpreting the Meaning of the 'Singapore Model': State Capitalism and Urban Planning." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38 (1): 116–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12095>.

Teo, Valerie. 2012. "Returning Overseas Singaporeans as Sources of Social Resilience." S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cens/1808-returning-overseas-singaporean/#.XFOf3NF7nm0> (accessed January 31, 2019).

Teo, Youyenn. 2010. "Shaping the Singapore Family, Producing the State and Society." *Economy and Society* 39 (3): 337–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2010.486215>.

———. 2011. *Neoliberal Morality in Singapore: How Family Policies Make State and Society*. New York: Routledge.

Wee, Vivienne. 1995. "Children, Population Policy, and the State in Singapore." In *Children and the Politics of Culture*, edited by Sharon Stephens, 184–217. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

