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Global Health Security

COVID-19 and Sinophobia in Singapore

By Yasmine Wong

SYNOPSIS

COVID-19 triggered waves of anti-Chinese xenophobia worldwide. In Singapore, it has brought to light existing tensions between Singaporeans and immigrants. Singapore has done well to institutionalise racial and religious harmony but must now work towards managing xenophobia.

COMMENTARY

SINGAPORE'S FIGHT against the spread of COVID-19 has drawn international commendation, reflecting its capacity to manage resources and crisis communications, as well as carry out efficient detection and isolation of new cases.

Despite these best practices put in place by the government, public anxieties still displayed in [widespread panic buying](#) after the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) was raised to orange. Empty supermarket shelves in response to COVID-19 panic, however, are not unique to Singapore. Hong Kong, Japan, and more recently South Korea and Italy, among others, observed similar behaviours after experiencing spikes in infection cases.

Global Trend

Although this has calmed significantly over the past few weeks, public anxieties have persisted in other forms. A wave of anti-Chinese sentiments has swept the globe, from [restaurants in South Korea turning away Chinese customers](#), to [high schoolers in the United States physically assaulting an Asian-American teen, accusing him of carrying](#)

[the virus](#). In London, a [Singaporean student was assaulted](#) by a group of young people in a COVID-19-related attack.

In Singapore, a [petition](#) with over 100,000 signatures has made its rounds, calling for the ban of all travellers from China. In a Facebook post, a religious leader in Singapore remarked that the virus was “retribution by Allah” for China’s oppression of Muslim Uighurs in the Xinjiang province. These events stand amidst a backdrop of xenophobic rumours, posts and comments on social media.

Fear and blaming others are the usual reactions in a situation of helplessness and frustration. Witness the AIDS epidemic, the spread of Islamophobic sentiments after an extremist attack, and now Sinophobia in the wake of COVID-19. Experts classified this behaviour as “othering” and it serves to restore a sense of control in a crisis, especially when personal well-being is threatened and there seems no easy redress or solution.

Xenophobic Discourse and Immigration

However, anti-China sentiments observed in Singapore did not begin with the spread of COVID-19. Predating the COVID-19 crisis, xenophobia features heavily in the politics of immigration in Singapore. With the spread of COVID-19, xenophobic sentiments are now targeted towards the Mainland Chinese population in Singapore, emerging as Sinophobia, with some [Singaporeans shunning Chinese businesses and people from China](#) over COVID-19 fears.

This is reminiscent of other cases of Sinophobia in Singapore like the Curry Dispute of 2011, in which an immigrant family from China complained about the smell of curry coming from their Singaporean Indian neighbour’s home. This drew anti-China and anti-foreigner vitriol from netizens online who saw it as an attack on Singapore’s multicultural identity.

Other examples include [rental discrimination](#), where rental advertisements reveal prejudice against certain groups of people, notably potential tenants from China, and Indians.

Singapore brands itself as a cosmopolitan city with strong cultural sensibilities, engaging a top-down approach to managing inter-group relations. The discourse of racial harmony is salient in Singapore’s public sphere and has become part of Singapore’s shared values.

This framework of diversity that has remained the focus of Singapore’s brand of multiculturalism leaves out immigrants and migrants as groups whose relations with the rest of the populace need to be nurtured.

Immigration & Integration

When it comes to immigrants, social norms that prevent violation of sacred values like racial and religious harmony are less salient. Prominent immigrant groups like the Chinese, Filipinos and South Asians are often viewed as both a cultural and an

economic threat to citizens, with overcrowding contributing to an overall sense of unease.

The exclusionist stance remains the dominant narrative in conversations about foreigners. The Singapore government often justifies immigration by highlighting the [economic value](#) of immigrants and migrants. Emphasis is placed on the ability of migrants and immigrants to [contribute to the country's economic development](#), as Singapore suffers strains on its manpower resource with declining birth rates and an ageing population.

Despite the government's stance and continual efforts to remain attractive to immigration, its citizens are less convinced. These tensions culminated in a [demonstration against the Population White Paper](#), a 2013 policy paper that projected the population to grow by 30% by 2030 with immigrants accounting for half that figure. Similar conversations remain active online, with sensationalised instances of foreigners behaving in an unsavoury manner stoking the flames of xenophobia.

Furthermore, the narrative of immigrants having the [responsibility to integrate](#) with the rest of mainstream society trumps the celebration of the diversity that immigration brings. As such, when society casts doubt on the utility of the foreigner, and he is perceived to be the source of the problem, as with COVID-19, there is little left to defend him with.

Managing Diversity

Multiculturalism is the cornerstone of Singapore's identity. It is important for Singaporeans to understand diversity as a strength and to feel a sense of ownership toward pursuing a more inclusive model of multiculturalism that accounts for non-citizens and new citizens.

The government has acknowledged the conundrum of immigration, and the importance in finding a balance between maintaining an openness to foreign workers to sustain economic growth and managing growing tensions between Singaporeans and immigrants.

Expanding our understanding of social harmony and diversity will help Singapore deal with groups and issues that are yet to be part of the public discourse. This includes how we see foreigners, whether they are transient workers, new immigrants, or naturalised citizens.

Beyond our leaders standing in solidarity with China over the COVID-19 crisis, it is heartening to see the production of counter-narratives that combat xenophobia. Singaporeans have taken to social media to denounce the xenophobic comments that have surfaced online and to show support for the residents of Wuhan.

Ground-up initiatives to start conversations about xenophobia in Singapore indicate the community's grasp of Singapore's diversity and its dreams of a cosmopolitan future. During times of crises, such efforts reflect the strength of the community, that Singapore can be greater than the sum of its fears.

With calls for discussions on immigration-related issues, community-generated narratives can serve as the foundation for constructive dialogue. It is also a progressive step toward generating new narratives about diversity that exceed race and religion, and to address the gap between immigration policies and public anxieties.

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