<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Mirror or mould: impact of newspaper reportage of unskilled labor migration in Singapore.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Ponnampalam, Lingam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/3152">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/3152</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rights</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paper No. 10
Mirror or Mould: Impact of newspaper reportage of unskilled labor migration in Singapore.

Lingam Ponnampalam
The New Paper
Singapore
Mirror or mould: Impact of newspaper reportage of unskilled labor migration in Singapore.

Introduction

In a world where labor flows are rising in volume, it falls upon the mass media to interpret and explain the issues that arise to the public. To be armed with the attitudes and drive to function successfully in this changing landscape, the public must be made aware of what is expected of them, in terms of skills, courage and adaptability. Only then can the workforce of tomorrow prepare itself to meet the challenges awaiting in all spheres of life. Public policy in Singapore is disseminated to the masses in a stratified manner, to engage the disparate segments on comfortable grounds. Providing perfect information is not a viable target for the mass media, given the intellectual disparities of its audiences. However, given the complexities of the issues and the wide-ranging manner in which they impact society, lowest common denominator methods of transmission would not be satisfactory either.

Given this scenario, the paper aims to examine to what extent are the salient issues of labor migration addressed in the reportage of local English newspapers in Singapore. The paper does not purport to present new theory or reevaluation of current concepts. It does, however, strive to highlight the salient issues that need to be addressed by the mass media in terms of its reportage, examine alternative modes of transmission given disparate levels of audience sophistication by way of review, identify the press function in the Singaporean context, and make recommendations on how this end can be achieved.

Labor migration issues

In recent times Asian transmigration, of which labor migration forms a significant portion, has risen in volume and grown diverse. And with it has grown the stance of restrictionism on the part of many host countries, borne of pragmatism and caution. Richmond (1995), citing Ohmae’s description of an emerging global marketplace with interdependence of economies in “The Borderless World”, points to the inherent contradiction within the current system where there is relatively free flow of goods and information, but not people.

Most host countries are selective on volume, proportion and socio-demographic characteristics of potential immigrants. To understand this approach, the political frameworks of the nation-states must be understood: the need to maintain political and geographical boundaries, to protect and enhance self-interest, and to form and maintain the sense of national identity among other factors. Some of the macro-level, economic issues that arise from this development are: the contradictory nature of restrictionism in the era of globalization and increasingly free trade and capital flows, the possible integration of trade, capital and labor flows for balanced world development and broadening of individual choice, and the equitable distribution of the gains from migration among the various groups concerned from the respective countries. (Chan et al, 1995)

Athukorala (1993) reserves the term labor migration for those who migrate for work reasons, including those who migrate for work and long-term settlement as well as those contract labor migrants who move for only a specific period of time. She predicts intra-regional worker emigration, which has prevailed since the labor scarcities of the early 1980s, from surplus-labor countries to labor-importing countries will be an ongoing trend that carries with it economic implications for both countries. Host countries will find themselves in the process of industrial restructuring. Source countries have accepted that the benefits of labor export (e.g. safety valve for unemployment pressure, foreign exchange gained through remittance and the attendant impacts on balance of payment, consumption, macroeconomic variables like money supply, real exchange rates and aggregate demand) outweigh the potential costs (e.g. loss of experienced
workers, sectoral relocation of resources if there is sector-specific labor outflow, wage increases, and adoption of capital-intensive methods with implications for future employment) which is reflected in the significance of its facilitation and promotion in their labor and employment policies.

However, purely economic analysis, treating migrants merely as factors of production, is not sufficient to cover the range of issues thrown up by transmigration. As Chan et al (1995) point out, this is because migration can potentially change the social landscape of the country in the domain of politics, social structure, religion, race, language, and social services, which is far more that economic analysis alone can identify. In striving towards a comprehensive analysis of the effects and consequences of international migration, there is a keenly felt need to incorporate macro and economic as well as micro and non-economic (e.g. socio-psychological dimension of motivation, perception, and emotion) variables in modeling migration. (5)

Here Athukorala (1993) looks at non-economic factors like potential drops in fertility rates for countries with large outflows of female labor, while host countries have to grapple with problems like congestion and increased demand for public services. Abdullah (1999) uses the Malaysian example to highlight the social and cultural implications (e.g. crime: murder, assault, robberies, extortion, rape, and smuggling which destabilize internal security, vice activities which raise health concerns, the emergence of squatter colonies and illegal immigrants) as well the economic consequences (e.g. wage depression, competition for jobs, and currency outflows.)

Other social costs could be pressures on social resources (e.g. housing, healthcare, social and recreational facilities), national security issues (social conflict might arise with tensions between locals and foreigners and xenophobia) and the exploitation of foreign workers. (Chan, R K H et al, 1999)

**Singapore labor policies**

Singapore, possibly more than any other country in the region, has met its economic imperatives and developmental requirements through a concerted policy of immigration and importing labor. From its beginnings in colonial times to achieving its present population of 3.9 million, ethnically composed of 77 per cent Chinese, 14 per cent Malay/Indonesian, 7 per cent Indian, and 1 per cent others, labor migration has featured significantly throughout.

Recently, the Singapore government has announced its intentions to recruit more foreign talent to fuel economic growth and meet the challenges of globalization in the midst of the slowing population growth resultant of a persistently low fertility rate (1.6 children per woman instead of the required 2.1 for population replacement). Increasing number of foreigners are being allowed into the country, both as guest workers and labor migrants, something reflected by the fact that Singapore s resident population is only 3.2 million. In 1998, the number of foreigners in Singapore stood at 702,100 more than double the figure for 1990. (Yap, 1999) Today, of these foreigners, more than 450,000 are work permit holders, amounting to almost in one five of the 1.97 million-strong workforce.

Foreign workers are an instrument of economic policy making in Singapore. At one end of policy interpretation Martin et al (1995) view it as foreign workers are to be imported when needed, charged significant fees that increase government revenue, and sent home when not needed. (117) This is not precisely true. The Singapore government has acted very pro-actively in the recent years, influencing the flow of people in and out of the country through coordinated economic, labor and immigration policies, acting on economic considerations while bearing in mind the socio-cultural and political implications. (Yap, 1999)
Necessitated by labor requirements for economic growth, the foreign worker influx has been growing and is likely to continue, though it will be carefully regulated by sectoral demands. Foreign talent recruitment is the priority, with multi-ministry committees like Singapore Talent and Recruitment (Star) Committee being formed towards that end. Foreign talents are high labor manpower, earning more than $2,000 a month and holding employment passes. They have the option of sinking roots into the country by taking up permanent residency after having worked for at least six months, they can marry while in Singapore and bring their dependants into the country. While their integration into Singapore society is encouraged, the government is still concerned with the issue of ethnic composition of the population.

Also necessary is the import of work permit holders, who earn less than $2,000 monthly and, by large, are unskilled workers to fill the 3D (dirty, difficult and dangerous) jobs. Work permit holders engage in construction work, marine and shipyard work, manufacturing and production line work, and domestic service. Employers who bring in work permit holders pay monthly levies, and there are dependency ceilings (the ratio of foreign labor to total workforce that is allowed) imposed. A clear distinction is made between skilled and unskilled workers and levies for the preferred skilled workers are significantly lower to those of unskilled workers. Work permit holders are generally barred from bringing dependants, they can only marry with the approval of the Minister for Manpower, and will find it difficult to sink roots in Singapore. Female work permit holders will be deported if they are found to be pregnant. (Chew et al, 1995)

The Singapore government tried to phase out unskilled foreign workers for easy access to such labor is thought to hinder economic restructuring towards higher technology and higher value-added production. Now it tries to maintain a revolving pool of such workers to meet temporary shortages and to work in sectors where it is hard to recruit Singaporeans.

An Interview

Divisional Director of the Foreign Manpower Employment Division, Ministry of Manpower, Then Yee Thoong elaborates on the complexities:

If unskilled labor is freely and cheaply available, if you allow companies to freely import such cheap low-skilled labor, these companies have no motivation to upgrade their operation. They will not buy new machinery when labor is so cheap. The typical example is the construction sector. The construction sector absorbed the largest numbers and proportions of work permit holders. And if you look at construction technology, 20 years ago and today I don’t think there is much change. We still see a few long human chains, people carrying bricks. If we allow that to happen, at some point in time, we will find that it is not going to be to our advantage to keep importing all this cheap labor. Basically Singapore cannot compete on cheap labor. We are surrounded by countries which are so much bigger in terms of manpower resources. We need to carve a separate niche for ourselves. The effect of allowing cheap foreign labor tends to drag down productivity. That’s why construction sectors for the last six years have become a drag to the economy.

The second problem is that large groups of foreign workers, cheap ones, tend to depress market wages. We have 450,000 Singaporeans over 40 whose education level is really low, who are actually competing for jobs with foreign workers in the production line and so on. And if you allow companies to import cheap foreign labor, eventually they will replace Singaporeans, because the Singaporean cannot afford to work for $400 to $500. We have an increasing problem where some Singaporeans become structurally unemployed. There are new jobs but these people don’t have the skills to perform in new jobs. They have limited areas to go into, like the service sector and to manufacturers and so on. These sectors are allowed to recruit foreign workers, Singaporeans will be out of jobs all the time. Our work permit policies are very strict to some of these sectors, like in the service sectors, the dependency ceiling is only 30%. These are essentially quotas imposed on the companies and they are not allowed to recruit non-traditional source
workers. If they have a dependency ceiling equivalent to the construction sector's where we get 5 foreigners for 1 local, we will see the same problem as in the construction sector. The service sector is one sector where Singaporean can still go and work in, or in cleaning. That's why we are privatizing the cleaning industry. The Minister said in the National Day speech, our employment rate still remains fairly high about 3 per cent because some people just cannot find work, or the pay is just too low and the Singaporean will not want to work.

If we let all the cheap foreign workers come into Singapore, we will have social problems from the growing number of people who are going to be structurally unemployed. Wage depression is quite serious. There are Singaporeans who really need to depend on some of these jobs and it will continue to be so for another half a generation or so. Those workers who can stay here for four years are unskilled and in the trades. Skilled workers can stay more than 10 years. Our policies encourage two things: one to employers to bring in better-qualified workers, and two is for the existing stock of foreign workers to upgrade. If they upgrade, they can stay on for 10 years. The reason for keeping unskilled workers here for only four years is so they don't sink roots in Singapore. The longer they stay the higher the chances of them meeting up with a Singaporean girl and so on, a lot of social problems follow. Our levy rates for skilled and unskilled and the whole system is geared towards encouraging employers to recruit better-qualified foreign workers.

Social problems are big issues: crime rates, clashes, Thais and Indians fighting. Who is paying for the hospital bills? Should it be the employers? But the employers don't pay for the health bills of Singaporeans. Some of them come in with the intention of sinking roots in Singapore, some of them break up local families. That's why we have a marriage restriction policy. Take congregation in public areas like Little India and Beach Road. The phenomenon itself is not good or bad when we have tens and thousands of people congregating in the public areas. When they leave, who is going to clean up the areas? And it affects the traffic and residents staying there. Who is going to house all these workers? And where can we house them? The construction workers staying in shop houses which caught fire, some of them died, all of them cramped there in a 6,000 square foot floor area. How do we improve conditions for them?

These are what we call management problems that are then translated into economic costs. We are working towards implementing solutions but it will take time.

General news media influence

A basic idea in communication studies is that media coverage defines the things that people think about, and worry about, through agenda-setting. Awareness of issues, is created through the coverage, and legitimacy and importance is conferred upon those issues. Most times, the media looks to and takes cues from the public when deciding the priority of coverage or reportage. (McCombs et al, 1990) Often the media contributes to social stability by creating shared rituals and foster social cohesion by affirming values and beliefs. However, this can be detrimental when dominant values are not challenged and wrong values are perpetuated. Through the gatekeeping process, journalists and editors are placed in position to arbitrarily decide what constitutes news and apply their biases to slant coverage or reportage.

Empirical evidence of agenda-setting have generally testified that mass media have a greater impact on people's perceptions of the collective salience of issues than the personal salience of issues to individuals themselves. While a person may not perceive a problem as having greater personal importance for him by seeing or reading it on the news, he might think that it is an important issue to other people. Thus, it constructs the citizens' perception of an important social problem. Mass media also leads people to develop ideas of the frequency and severity of a social problem, though not on a personal level, and therefore probably not enough for them to alter their behavior. (Mutz et al, 1997)
Anastasio et al (1999) state that in the U.S., mass media is a powerful force that "functions as a window to the outside world" and as such "what appears across its landscape actually may become people's reality. Thus the potential for distorting the view of that world is high if the picture provided is unrepresentative of actual events." (152) As such the media can also serve as a powerful creator of public opinions that it reflects in the news.

**Singapore press**

The Singapore media is not an adversarial entity to the government of the day. The Singaporean government has in fact enlisted the aid of the media in variety of campaign launches to forge nation building and national and cultural identity, create social order and stability, achieve economic progress and prosperity and to foster a civic society and responsibility, and health awareness. They illustrate how the Singaporean mass media "can be mobilized by the authority to mold public opinion and shape collective behavior in support of official policy. (Chang, 1999)

The Singapore press is comprised of nine newspapers serving the various ethnic communities, all owned and published by the same organization, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). The flagship newspaper, The Straits Times, is the oldest of these publications, first appearing in 1845, and with a readership of 1,361,000 (figures from the AC Nielsen Media Index 1999) it is the most important and influential of them. The Business Times, is well regarded in the business circles, has a readership of 117,000 and explores issues, especially those with economic implications, with greater sophistication than the other, more widely read newspapers. The New Paper (469,000) is the afternoon street-sale based tabloid paper that strives to reach out to the man on the street and seeks to explain complex issues in simple terms, often by way of illustration and case studies. Lianhe Zaobao (713,000) is the leading Chinese language paper of the country. The other two Chinese language papers are the Shin Min Daily News (375,000) and Lianhe Wanbao (524,000), both of which reach the news-stands in the evening. The Malay and Tamil communities are served by the morning dailies Berita Harian (250,000) and Tamil Murasu (39,000) respectively.

Chang (1999) holds that this consolidation of media ownership is the result of years of governmental effort to "co-opt, if not incorporate" through various laws and regulations as "a partner or a cheerleader of the power establishment in the country's arch to modernization." (13) Notably, appointment of SPH's board of directors is approved by the government. He refers to "the symbiotic press-government relationship" stating that the government is quick to point out the differences in the political system, the roles of public opinion and mass media in Singapore and other countries and assert its view that the mass media should work for, and not against, the government. This brand of developmental journalism focuses on the how of public policy, without too much concern over the whether and why, leaving the function of mass media in Singapore more informative than inquisitive.

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's speech at the Straits Times 150th anniversary dinner reinforces this view. He said that "the Singapore press should not adopt an adversarial role just because news organizations in other countries have done so." Instead "the press has a role to forge consensus and foment confrontation, facilitate nation-building and not fray the social fabric."

**Two interviews**

To that extent the reportage of labor migration issues in Singapore would be aligned to the policy wishes of the government, reflecting the desirable stand to be adopted. As reflected such by Mr Cheong Yip Seng, the editor-in-chief of the English and Malay Newspaper Division of SHP says. "Our editorial policy is to acknowledge that these workers are essential for Singapore's development. We recognize the realities
Mirror or Mould: Impact of newspaper reportage of unskilled labor migration in Singapore

- Singaporean labor in short supply; and the work (that migrant labor does) is frowned on by them (Singaporeans). Migrant labor is to be welcomed for these reasons. We of course recognize that these workers learn a skill and accumulate funds so that on their return, they will have a good start to another chapter of their lives. By acknowledging these realities, we are helping people to adapt to the changing face of Singapore. I do not see resentment against them, largely because the Singaporean establishment knows these realities and because the economy is growing fast enough to ensure no Singaporean is left behind.*

With regard to their place in society, and the risk and opportunities of such labor migration, he added: "I would not say they are marginalized. It is inevitable that they will socialize among themselves because they do the same work, speak the language they are comfortable with, and also culturally comfortable with each other. There are more maids, for example, who are accepted as part of the families they work for than those who are ill-treated. That is why the media is outraged by bad behavior of employers. The media does not say serve the maids right. The risks are that they might become a resentful group that will provoke a negative reaction from Singaporeans. If they are ill-treated they will be resentful. This could cause tempers to fray, and perhaps lead to violence. The opportunities are meaningful - they get to learn new skills. Construction workers, for example, return home and find good jobs because of skills they acquired here. They accumulate assets. My Filipino maid, for example, left for home after 14 years with me. She is now a landowner back home, with fine culinary skills picked up here!"

Mr Joe Nathan Lourdes, editor of The New Paper on Sunday, sheds light on The New Paper's approach to the issues: "The New Paper is driven by a strong human interest element, so we tend to focus on the most interesting people, stories and situations that develop as an offshoot of labor migration. This would include a regular dose of stories on foreign worker lifestyle stories, maid abuse, foreign worker-related accidents and crimes, including murders in worksites, etc.

One dramatic example would be the case of Bashar, a Bangladeshi who was injured in a worksite accident and left for dead in a drain. He was rescued and found paralyzed from waist down. His story touched the hearts of many Singaporeans - some who actually visited him to make up for their countrymen who had treated him so badly, and others who donated money to help pay his hospital bills. Our reporting team even followed him back to Bangladesh to see how he would be able to fit back into life in the village.*

On educating the public and helping them adapt to this change in the face of society, he responded: "Certainly we strive to do this, as there is a certain amount of culture shock both ways - from foreign workers as well as local employers. Just earlier this year, we had a package in which one of our staffers went to Indonesia to interview maids who were on their way to Singapore. It turned out to be an eye-opener for most Singaporeans, to see the conditions which maids are used to living in and the big change in their lifestyle in adjusting to city life, especially in a place where space is a premium."

Singapore is also making room for these migrants and improving their conditions, he noted. "There are more training centres for them to have some idea of the Singaporean world and the cultural complexities. Housing for foreign workers has been improving slowly, at least there are dormitories in same locations now. The government agencies have also recognized the need to provide some form of entertainment for the crowds. They have big screen shows inSerangoon Road, introduced some community clubs for foreign workers where workers can play games, watch TV and relax. At the same time, I would not be blind to the exploitation that is taking place, especially of some foreign workers who are desperate.

With regards to foreign workers' place in the fringes, he responded: "Our Maid of the Year contest would be one of our responses to that problem. The nature of news is such that in any country, reportage of foreign labor tends to focus on the bad news, so invariably you end up with a skewed view of reality. A lens that is focused on one point invariably has everything else in a blur. Take the global reportage of Singapore and you would think the only major issues are the chewing gum ban, Michael Fay's caning,
flushing in public toilets, and that Singapore is this squeaky-clean, sterile metropolis. But Singapore is much more than that and this surfaces when special reports are run. So to our credit, our editor came up with the Maid of the Year contest. This allows us to focus our lenses on the good people who actually help contribute to the success of this country by taking care of the homes while Singaporeans go out to make a living. It was one of the things the editor decided in his wisdom to do and it afforded us the opportunity to create a positive agenda for our reportage. The other factor is the uniqueness of an event: the first time it happens, it’s news, every subsequent occurrence reduces its news value. Unfortunately it’s got to the stage where a foreign worker who dies in an industrial accident that is not unique is reduced to a one paragraph mention, whereas someone who dies in a more unique situation, for example, a man who was recently killed in a freak accident involving a nail gun, gets front page treatment.”

Content analysis: A review of reportage

Purpose/aim

The issues surrounding both skilled and unskilled labor migration have been briefly enumerated, from those of global and regional scope to those particular to Singapore. Their implications have been identified from the perspectives of policy-makers and academics. The impact and influence of mass media coverage of issues in general on public perception and opinion, as well as the considerations of, and the functional model for, the Singapore press have been examined briefly. The nature of the media environment in Singapore has been established. Therefore it would be of interest to examine the actual reportage in the Singapore press, to identify the issues that have been tackled, and the ones that have been ignored, for several reasons.

Firstly it will give us an approximated overview of the Singaporean agenda pertaining to unskilled labor migration issues, by showing us the areas of interest with regard to those issues, and the emphasis placed on each of these areas. Secondly, it will illustrate the press function in Singapore as propagators of policy decisions and arbiters of public ethics. Thirdly, it will reflect the realities of Singapore in relation to labor migration through the news events that reported. The extent of distortion brought about by the slant of the reportage, however, is hard to gauge. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it will provide us with a gauge of the breadth and depth of exposure the Singapore people have had to issues surrounding unskilled labor migration, enabling us to formulate future strategies to create a more comprehensive understanding of the topic among the public.

Methodology

The scope of this study was restricted on two fronts. Firstly, the subjects of this study were limited to only foreign domestic workers (maids) and blue-collar foreign workers. Principally, this was done because these two categories for study satisfactorily highlighted most of the socio-cultural and economic issues raised by labor migration. It also stood to reason that these groups of migrant workers account for the bulk of labor migration into Singapore. And finally, for feasibility reasons, it seemed reasonable that this study should be thus defined to make it practicable and comparable, as opposed to foreign talent who face different set of conditions upon their arrival. A study of contrasts would have been interesting, but not practicable, given the constraints faced at the time of this study. On the other front, for purely logistical reasons, the breadth of this study was also restricted to the reportage in the English newspapers.

The literature review conducted on labor migration allowed the salient issues to surface, giving an academic framework to the study. It became apparent, however, that this would not be an adequate yardstick to examine the content of the reportage due to the theoretical complexities and, especially with regard to the economic analysis, the technical terms and jargon present in the literature. It would have
been a bad place to cull for key words. An informal survey of 20 journalists and editors yielded a long list of key words they felt were salient to the reportage of unskilled labor migration. However this approach too was rejected upon consideration, on account of its subjectivity and arbitrariness.

The method decided upon was to perform electronic searches on the database of reportage (NewsLink). The process was two-pronged: first general searches on the key words “maids” and “foreign workers” were performed for the base years of 1990, 1995 and 2000. Based on the results, a list of 30 key words were culled. Then secondary searches were done using these key words along with the words, “maids” and “foreign workers” from January 1, 1990 to the latest possible date, August 17, 2000, restricting the search only to Singapore. The results were then analyzed to determine the nature of the reportage that surrounded these two faces of labor migration, the foreign maid and the foreign worker.

This paper extrapolates the extent and type of reportage that unskilled labor migration received for the past decade in the Singapore press, acknowledging of course the limitations of such a study. While this study examines the manifest content of the reportage, it has not looked at the latent meanings present in the texts through a qualitative analysis. As such there is room for further exploration into that area to form more focused research questions for future investigation.

Limitations

Apart from the above-mentioned restrictions to its scope, this study also presents other limitations that warrant mention. The study was conducted under severe time and manpower constraints, and as such, did not live up to its initial promise. Connotations of the reportage have not been exhaustively scrutinized, as mentioned earlier, and this could be the basis for another study in itself. Non-discursive symbols, such as photographs and illustrations, which are part of the presentation of most newspaper reports, have been omitted in this study. Their inclusion can dramatically change or magnify the reader’s perception of the report and subject, and therefore, ideally, should be analyzed in conjunction with the text report.

The validity of this study is also called to question due to a variety of factors. Key words may have been overlooked, narrowing the field and undermining its reflexivity; key words were culled to represent forms and topics of reportage somewhat arbitrarily, again having an adverse impact on reflexivity. One problem with the selection of categories is that they are non-equivalent — maids yielded an aggregate result of 7,609 reports compared to the 5,306 returns for foreign workers, although they were both anchored in the same time-frame. There are also overlaps where the same report was yielded for both categories making them non-mutually exclusive. Intracoder reliability is impacted by the repetition of reports from different key words yielding the same story. The sampling is also non-exhaustive because 1. studying only English newspapers potentially omits other forms of reportage that may have ethnic slants, and 2. key words culled from base-years may not reflect the full range of reportage.

For these reasons, the original intention to perform a strict content analysis of press reportage has been moderated to performing a review of the reportage by adapting the methods of content analysis. The idiosyncrasies of the search returns are elaborated on later. These limitations preclude this study from being authoritative on the topic of press reportage of unskilled labor migration to Singapore and the attendant issues. However, it can still be indicative, in the capacity of a limited review, of the type and extent of reportage that the topic receives in the Singapore press. In that capacity, this study could be useful.
Frequency table

The table below presents the returns to searches conducted with the constants of "maids" and "foreign workers" against variable key words ascribed to types of content in reportage, as well as types of reportage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key word</th>
<th>Maids</th>
<th>Foreign Worker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influx</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levy</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bond</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living conditions</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonely</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>1706</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>1085</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardworking</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social problems</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molest</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangs</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>923</td>
<td>742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affairs</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>639</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interpretation

In terms of purely descriptive content analysis, these are the raw figures derived from story counts based on the respective searches executed. The respective key words appeared in the reflected number of reports along with the respective categories of "maids" and "foreign workers". However, these figures are not reflective of the volume of reportage on unskilled migrant workers in Singapore.
Mirror or Mould: Impact of newspaper reportage of unskilled labor migration in Singapore

There must first be a direct relationship between the key word and the category in order to qualify the report as one on the state of unskilled labor migrants or issues pertaining to them. For example, if a report presents the case of an emotionally unstable maid who killed her young ward, and the key word "murder" appears in the report with the category "maid", then we would count that report as valid. However if the report focuses on a loan shark who killed his debtor, while his son was at home at the material time being watched over by the maid, as is mentioned in an obscure paragraph, then though the key word and category appear in the same report, it is defaulted due to the absence of a direct relationship between them. Moving away from purely descriptive methods, the content must be placed in context to derive the manifest content. In the range of articles highlighted, on average, only one in ten reports are validated through a direct relation between key word and category. On the remaining nine occasions, the occurrence is merely coincidental. Conversely, the matching of the key word to the category has on several occasions yielded reports on other aspects of unskilled labor migration which are not defined by the key word. Here again the matching is coincidental, but the range of the review has been broadened by way of overlaps.

The relevance of this sample to the population (all media coverage in Singapore) is debatable. On one hand, with the limited number of news events occurring in a small state like Singapore, there is almost always replicated coverage and reportage across the media. On the other, the nature of broadcast, with its dependence on audio and visual elements, might not lend itself to the coverage certain stories. The policy imperatives of the newspapers that service the ethnic communities, may also alter the slant of their reportage on certain stories. These instances, however, would be exceptional rather than the norm. The review of the three English newspapers is likely to yield the majority of events, angles and opinions presented in the media in Singapore, unskilled labor migration included.

Review

Influx

In 1990 there were reports in the press of the business community calling for more foreign labor to be allowed in to fill vacancies. In 1995, companies like Seagate, Goldtron and Hewlett Packard increased their recruitment activities due to a lack of local skilled workers. More maids were brought in from Sri Lanka, India and Thailand as supply from the Philippines was cut off. Analytical pieces were written on how they contribute and the alternatives available.

Rules

All new foreign maids were made to go for AIDS tests in 1990, prior to obtaining their work permits. And they were required to pay income taxes between $18 to $54 which upset several employers who felt compelled to pay the amount on their maids behalf. In 1997, the issue of the tourist-maid, where Filipinas came into Singapore on visit passes to stay on and work as maids, was point of contention between the Singaporean agencies (some of whom were blacklisted) and the Philippines government. The issue received reasonable play in the press at that time. While they were not breaking any laws in Singapore, these agents were still in violation Philippine law.

Levy

The two-tier levy system for skilled and unskilled foreign workers in the construction industry was announced in June, 1990, amidst speculations of impending changes to the employment quotas aimed at improving the sector. On the domestic front, foreign maid levy tax relief first offered to married women to encourage them to rejoin the workforce was extended to divorced women and widows with children. They were anticipating a levy hike of $20, after having just faced a $30 hike a month earlier. The levy then was $230.
Safety
One maid died in an accident in 1990. In 1995, a maid falls to her death in an accident. Accidents at worksites is a cause of concern, and safety training courses for workers have been conducted. In 1990, the consideration was whether to make it compulsory after accident rates went up by 86 to 612. The Asian Recruitment Council was set up in April 1995 to safeguard the welfare of foreign workers from Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In 1999, employers are urged to provide safe working environments for domestic workers to avoid accidents from happening. Six maids had died from window cleaning accidents in this year, eight the year before. Meanwhile a case of worker being injured in construction site after a fifth floor scaffolding crashed down was reported with much drama. This year, window-cleaning for maids is still a talking point. "The desire for spotlessly clean windows has cost the lives of 20 women in Singapore since 1996" began the report that called for caution. ("Don't subject maids to unnecessarily high risks", ST, 2.1.2000)

Training
Maids were being given training in skills like fire-fighting and first aid and lessons on safety. Employers taught how to reduce risk for their maids. The bulk of stories concerning training and foreign workers concerns the re-training and upgrading of the local workforce to avoid structural unemployment.

Recreation
In 1990, a Filipina beauty contest was organized which allowed maids to take part. There was a show at the Zoo put up in 1998 that was reported. And sporadic reports filter in about more recreational facilities to be provided for foreign workers within their worksites. But it is not high on the agenda. Conversely, the crowding of public areas is a sore point to Singaporeans. There was even a case where Filipino maids were chased away from Lucky Plaza, their traditional locale for meeting their peers on their off-days.

Living Conditions
In 1990, when Sunds, (sudden unexplained nocturnal death syndrome) claimed the lives of Thai workers in Singapore, their living conditions were thrown into the spotlight. In April 1995, the government sets minimum standards for workers' quarters in construction sites covering layout, lighting, and ventilation. The Keppel Group also revealed their $60million project to house their foreign workers. But even this year, reports have been run on "Hellhole" which squeeze 120 workers into old four-room apartments, pointing to daring of contractors in their bid to save money. "The house that maids built" was another first in that it took the reader to the villages in Indonesia to show them how their maids lived and where their field of experience lies. It also give tangibly presents the motives for these women to come here and what they can achieve back home for their families by being our maids. (TNP, 21.6.2000)

Human
In 1990, heart-stirring calls for decency and graciousness in our treatment of foreign workers came from the press while lamenting the extent of abuse that maids suffered. ("If you prick us, do we not bleed?", 3.11.1990) In 1999, human cargo in the form of ten foreign workers with thousands in cash were caught trying to leave Singapore. They were either illegal immigrants or law-breakers trying to escape. The "$1 for a maid" slogan adopted by employment agencies is human exploitation said some readers also last year, given that the maid would have to work four months without pay to make this bargain possible for employers. And in 1998, the case of the Indonesian maid allegedly forced to eat dog faeces by her employer and her teenage son raised much protest of inhuman treatment.
Discrimination
The matter of maids not being allowed into country clubs perfectly highlights the sort of divide we have in
Singapore towards the unskilled foreign labor. While appreciate their contributions, especially the maids',
others are keen to draw the line of distinction and maintain the class difference between them and the
domestic help.

Children
The issue of leaving the children alone with the maid has been presented many times, especially in the
early 90's. The essence of it was that it would weaken the bond between mother and child and impart
undesirable cultural values to the children. Recently a story asking children where they came form (as in
how were they conceived?) a four-year-old boy said simply, “The Philippines.”

Marriage
In 1999, the Ministry of Manpower received about 1,500 marriage applications from work permit holders
and ex-work permit holders, granting half of them. It is concerned with the rise in unskilled workers in
Singapore that this might bring about. One lucky maid had her $5,000 wedding paid for by her employer.
This year a man was fined and his wife, an ex-maid, was sent to jail for using forged papers to apply for
permanent residency. She was afraid that she would not be considered on account of having worked as a
maid. (TNP, 6.6.2000)

Communicate
One report “How to get along with your maid” (TNP, 30.10.90) advised readers to be mindful of cultural
sensitivities, to temper expectations and be fair and patient with the maid.

Hardworking
The Maid of the Year series portrayed maids as extremely resourceful, diligent and hardworking members
of the family. From looking after the old and the frail, to caring for the disabled, to keeping home and
hearth in order, they achieved new stature in reportage by having a contest devoted to them.

Charity
A maid risks her own life to save her three wards from a fire and is hailed for her heroic act by the press.
“She’s the unsung hero right under your roof” read the report “Stand up for supermaid!” (TNP, 26.5.2000)
It was the first of it’s kind to present maids so explicitly as valued members of the workforce in a concerted
campaign.

Social Problems
A maid committed suicide in 1990. Four ran away from their employer’s homes. A maid abandons here
baby after giving birth. In 1998, a report highlighted the problem of men hiring maids for sexual
gratification, rather than for domestic chores. The report said the men would hunt down the best looking
help available, ignore biodata and say suggestive things, “I’m looking for a maid to service me.”

Crime
In 1995, the foreign workers used other names and identity cards to apply for phone lines and make
international calls. A maid stole her employer’s cheque an forged the signature. Unscrupulous agents are
taking away jobs of foreign workers and cheating them of their money ran one report this year. Concern
mounted in 1998 with the rising crime situation in Little India with retrenched foreign workers running
gambling, prostitution, extortion and cellular phone subscription frauds. One report simple stated it, “They
have to go”. (ST, 2.8.98)
Illegal
More than 100 illegal foreign workers were nabbed in a construction site in a raid in 1995. It was the enforcement of an Act passed to make contractors liable for employing illegal worker at their sites. A mounting concern in 1999 was the issues of moonlighting foreign workers. And in the face of growing numbers of illegals trying to sneak into Singapore, maids and foreign workers were given indentification cards with better security features to carry with them at all times.

Molest
Six cases of molest of maids were reported in 1990, four by employers, one by robbers and another by an unknown man. In 1999, one report told of maid who was found by her five-year-old ward, struggling under the weight of her employer. Her ward allegedly told her, "Just kiss him the way Virginia does," Virginia being the previous maid. ("Maid molest: What the little girl said...", TNP, 2.10.99) This year, one maid claimed that her employer molested her 15 times in the throughout her service.

Rape
Two Malaysian workers were sentenced to 20 years’ jail and 24 strokes of the cane each for robbing and raping to Filipina tourists in April, 1995.

Murder
In July, four youths murdered 28-year-old Evangeline Dioso, a maid. Miss Bled Ilda Gonzales was found dead with a knife wound in her neck at the end of August, believed to have been robbed, then killed. 1995 was the year the media was awash with reports of the hanging of Flor Contemplacion for the murder of Delia Maga and a child and the ensuing diplomatic row. There were 650 reports in the press on the subject. In December 1999, there were reports on the disappearance of maid Mary Joy Magupa who was found dead next to the body of her boyfriend, 44-year-old Lim Siew Hwa. Suspicions were aroused if she had been murdered by the boyfriend she was in love with.

Gangs
An investigative report on how illegal workers smuggle in and out of Singapore, using fake passports at airports, hiding in car-boots and hidden compartments in vehicle undercarriages, or in overcrowded boats under the cover of darkness. It is suggested that some of them rob and even murder for the cash before making their getaway. And behind the scenes, syndicates provide passports, pick-ups and even "jobs" to these illegals and overstayers, making a huge profits from the rackets. ("Hit-and-run artistes", TNP, 4.12.99) Another report last year pieced together how unscrupulous labor agents keep bringing in cheap labor from India and Bangladesh and abandon them in weeks after collecting their agent’s fees of $6,000 to $8,000, a racket worth $560 million a year.

Prostitution
Two reports were printed in 1999 on maids moonlighting as social escorts, cleaners, massage girls or sales, sneaking out of the house after their employers had gone to bed and violating the conditions of their work permits. It reads, "On weekdays, she is the dutiful maid. But come Sunday, she could be leading a double life as an escort or prostitute." (ST, 3.12.99)

Abuse
Two cases of maid abuse from employers were reported, the maids were sent home and the employers fined or jailed. It was also announced that abusive bosses will be barred from any other employing maids, was the stand in 1990 after the Philippines Embassy reported that it had received 164 complaints in by August, including physical assault, molest and ill-treatment. Meanwhile the Consortium of Indonesian Labour Suppliers revealed that received between seven and 10 complaints from maids a day, 70 per cent of them charging physical abuse. Employers countered that maids lied and vented their frustrations on their charges. In the latter part of the year, two reports of maids being beaten with sticks and scalded with hot water, burnt with hot irons and spoons. In another a maid collapsed of exhaustion and was found to
malnourished. Her employer had overworked and underfed her, it was reported. Five new reports of abuse in 1995. And one of falsely alleged abuse ran the headline: "Employer of lying maid victims of evil" (TNP, 10.2.95) Another maid denied repeatedly in court that her employer had assaulted her, claiming that she had accidentally sprayed insecticide in her right eye, blinding it. In 1999, one report pointed to the increasing incidence of maids being abused.

Affairs
The torrid affair of Julaiha Begum to an Indian labourer that led to their plotting to murder her husband, ex-Inspector Maniam received wide play in the press this year as the sensational trial proceeded led to the death sentences of Begum and her tow accomplices.

Analysis
"Why so many? What alternatives?" examined the reasons fuelling the growth in the number of maids in Singapore at the time, examining the economic benefits to Singapore and the options available to the family at the time of the Contemplacion furore. One comment called for more collaborative work between policy researchers of sending and receiving countries in labor migration so as to foster better understanding, and take the single-country studies that had been done a step further. This was rare few pieces that addressed the issue on a macro level. In the midst of the economic crisis in 1998, a lengthy, analytical and reassuring piece on the implications of the governments policy to bring in foreign talent was examined. Here the role played by unskilled foreign workers toward economic growth and how this pool of labor should be managed was discussed. The analysis came up with conclusions that were in line with policy, that foreign talent creates rather than removes jobs, that Singaporeans must upgrade themselves to meet new challenges and that Singaporeans would always come first in policy considerations.

Policy
In January, 1990, the Labour Minister said that Singapore had a policy on foreign maids more liberal than any of the developed countries, but could not price them too cheaply for fear of wage-depressing effects and their detrimental impact on child-care, part-time work and family support as alternatives. The service sector could employ 20% of their workforce from Malaysia as of 1990, in a bid to counter illegal employment of foreign workers. And happy reports of 9 per cent growth rates were dampened with "dilemma" of higher growth at the cost of greater reliance on foreign workers. Yet organizations like the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce called for government planners to "accept the reality" and prepare to allow more foreign workers, a call that was met with policy relaxation.

Representation and non-representation
The reportage on unskilled foreign labor is fairly representative of the realities and planned policies within the Singaporean context. Almost all manner of new events have been reported in the past ten years, policy and schemes have been highlighted and explained. In that respect, reportage serves as good mirror of the descriptive and policy realities. Ethics and moral responsibilities have been drilled into the reader off various soapboxes. The effectiveness of this in actually altering the behavior of the reader is uncertain. There is also a perceptible shift in the representation of the person who is the unskilled foreign worker. From a nameless and faceless shadowy entity, he or she has taken form, name and human characteristics. From throwaway reportage where the subject is hardly even noticed, a dehumanized shell, the foreign worker has become a character with all the pathos, and history of any other one of us. The reportage seems to be making a transition from dismissive to acknowledging. While the foreign worker among us is getting a face, his country and way of life is also explained to us in occasional reportage. In this aspect, perhaps reportage want to mould the Singaporean public into adopting certain postures towards migrant workers.
Meanwhile, the analysis of the regional situation, the challenges that faces Asia in terms of labor flows and the trickle-down effect it will have on Singapore are conspicuous in their absence.

Positive/negative news

Unfortunately, the better part of reportage on foreign unskilled labor falls under negative news: from a crime, to a calamity, to a pathetic tale of woe. Rarely are there uplifting or happy stories of maids and foreign workers. In this preponderance of the negative, reportage is presenting a distorted mirror, alarming us with the violence, the deceit, the abject horror that surrounds these people. But news is precisely that, that which is out of ordinary, removed from the norm. As such newspapers are expected and required to adopt that stance of reportage. At the end of the day, they have to sell newspapers.

Recommendations and conclusion

In closing, adjustments could be made to improve the reportage of labor migration issues. Firstly, easy access to information surrounding policies would facilitate explaining the issues. In Singapore, most information is readily available, excepting that pertaining to aspects of policy that the government agencies may not want to delve into. In such cases, obtaining comments and explanations can be more demanding. If the government agencies could adopt a more consultative approach towards journalists, the task of informing and educating the public would be made simpler. The press should also strive for more balance in reportage, perhaps employing more inventive means of capturing the public imagination, without having to compromise on accuracy of the realities being presented to the people.

NGOs have to play too. Migration scholars owe it to themselves to guide the grounding of policy formation in theory and research, thus insistently completing the cycle of theory-model, research-data, and policy, as well as linking theory and research. (Chan et al., 1995: 6) Furthermore they must adopt objectively a full cost-benefit analysis of migrants in both economic and non-economic terms (ibid.: 7) to go on to educate the masses and the state as well as to shape public policy. It would be advantageous if NGOs can function in this capacity, to bring about better understanding through better research and information, and to consult with government on policy formation. With better information available, the press then will find it easier to present the issues to the public.

References


