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Returning Overseas Singaporeans as Sources of Social Resilience

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Synopsis

Tapping the talents of returning Overseas Singaporeans may be a way to reduce our reliance on highly mobile foreign talent and to reward both returning and local Singaporean loyalties.

Commentary

Much public angst and Government concern have been expressed about the overflow and integration of immigrants of late. While foreign and local talent are constantly weighed against each other, returning Overseas Singaporeans have been left out of the immigration debate, seemingly due to their small numbers which are not publicly available. However, if every Singaporean son is precious, what are we doing to encourage the return and re-integration of Overseas Singaporeans?

Beyond their economic assets and professional skill sets, returning Overseas Singaporeans bring with them a variety of social skill sets that could be tapped to aid immigrant integration and build resilience into Singapore society.

Why Singaporeans Leave and Why They Return

Most Overseas Singaporeans are not prodigal sons who have left to waste money on wild living. In general, Singaporeans leave for a year or more for practical reasons: retirement, tertiary education and/or employment. The Government's policy of building an external economy in addition to Singapore's open domestic economy is a double-edged sword. While it pulls in foreign talent, it pushes out local talent competing for the limited number of top corporate spots. As overseas experience is a highly valued quality in the global labour market, many mobile Singaporeans look overseas for opportunities to climb the corporate ladder.

However, with the United States' weak recovery, the European Union in deep financial crisis, the Middle East in political turmoil and the East Asian economies slowing down, countries at the top of emigrants' lists are themselves adopting hire locals first policies and tightening immigration laws. As a result, more Overseas Singaporeans are coming home. Aside from these economic reasons, many Overseas Singaporeans return for more affective reasons: to put their children through Singapore's education system, care for aging parents, connect with their families, seek employment and serve the country.

While they may have come back to contribute to Singapore's economy, what, by way of social capital and resilience, do returning Overseas Singaporeans have to offer?

Returning Overseas Singaporeans as Sources of Social Resilience

Returning Overseas Singaporeans have much to offer by way of building social capital and resilience. Overseas Singaporeans face not just a culture shock as new immigrants do but also a reverse culture shock when they return. While people generally anticipate culture shock when moving overseas, thanks to illusions of 'home sweet home', many often underestimate the challenges of re-integrating into their home countries.

In reality both returning Overseas Singaporeans and their home environments have changed since they left; thus they face double loss of attachments to both their host and home countries when they return. In her 2011 study of Asian students re-integrating after returning from the West, Rosalind Pritchard describes reverse culture shock as re-entry trauma "akin to bereavement, involving stages of a grieving process." Thus, returning Overseas Singaporeans who have learnt to cope not just with culture shocks but also overcome reverse culture shock ought to be a highly culturally sensitive and resilient lot.

Most Overseas Singaporeans have more opportunities to speak about the things they miss that are unique to Singapore – the chewing gum ban, hawker food, Singlish, comparatively efficient and good healthcare and transportation systems, etc. Reiterative rehearsals of the Singapore story overseas paradoxically builds a reserve of national pride that can be tapped for social resilience-building in Singapore.

Most would have learnt that it is impolite to live in the host country and reap the economic and social benefits thereof while openly criticizing the host country. Likewise, most would expect a reciprocal level of courtesy and respect towards their home country from the foreign talent they host and would more readily stand up for Singapore when aggrieved. Yet, having been a foreigner in someone else's country, they are likely to be more tolerant or less begrudging of the flow of foreigners into Singapore.

They bring valuable international interaction experiences and cross-culture communication skills back with them and can serve as nodes of communication between local and foreign communities. Having experienced the challenges of re-adjusting back to life in Singapore, they may be able to help new immigrants integrate into Singapore.

They also build communities by forming overseas university alumni chapters or associations in Singapore when they return to maintain or strengthen the Singaporean bonds formed while they were overseas. In short, most Overseas Singaporeans have much to offer when they return to Singapore.

What the Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU) Can Do

Yet there is no policy measure to encourage or welcome the return of Overseas Singaporeans, much less efforts to help them re-integrate into Singapore society. Most returning Overseas Singaporeans do not expect a hero's welcome nor is this an argument for one.

The argument, rather, is this: given that returning Overseas Singaporeans have that much social resilience-building capital to offer, OSU could go beyond simply providing information on baby bonuses, school admissions, second language exemption, housing policies, careers and opportunities to facilitate their return. While there is a "Finding People" and "Staying Connected" link on OSU's "Staying Abroad" webpage, it will be good to add those links to their "Coming Home" webpage since Overseas Singaporeans return for more affective reasons than "Housing", "Careers & Opportunities", "Money Matters", and "Education".

The OSU could form reverse culture shock support groups organized by host country to first connect returning Overseas Singaporeans with other returned Singaporeans. These groups could then double-up as culture shock support groups to ease the integration of new immigrants coming to Singapore from their former host countries.

Beyond these suggestions, we need to think of more ways to actively tap the talents of returning Overseas Singaporeans to reduce or avoid an over-reliance on highly mobile foreign talent and to reward both returning and local Singaporean loyalties.

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