

IPS SEMINAR ON MIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP

Speaker: Dr Elaine Ho

16 May 2007

Institute of Policy Studies

IPS organised a closed-door seminar on “Debating Migration and Citizenship in a Transnational World” on 16 May 2007. The speaker was Dr Elaine Ho, a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore and Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the Royal Holloway University of London. Dr Ho shared the results of her doctoral research on the impact of transmigration on identity and notions of citizenship among Singaporeans based in London. The study was based on ethnographic immersion in the community and in-depth interviews with 43 respondents.

Along with the increasing inflows of foreigners into Singapore and its implications for our bonds here as Singaporeans, we also need to understand how the growing numbers of Singaporeans living overseas viewed their Singapore citizenship and their sense of belonging to Singapore. How do they feel about being a part of the nation during the time that they spend overseas? How do they address questions arising from the formal sense of citizenship in terms of their rights and obligations as citizens?

Dr Ho’s findings suggested there was a need to re-examine the notions of citizenship in a globalised world and how we develop a sense of rootedness in Singaporeans today.

Citizenship connotes membership in a territorially delimited community; a shared sense of identity, rights and responsibilities. Given the complexity of contemporary migration flows, migration could no longer usefully be conceived as a linear trajectory in which migrants uproot and settle down in a new host country. Instead, transnational migration recognises the multiple ties of attachment that migrants develop in the places they have lived, and admits the possibility that sometimes, people do even wish to return to their former homeland. This study emphasised the kind of identities and ties that Singaporean transmigrants continued to sustain with family members, friends and institutions in different parts of the world.

Sense of Identity, Belonging and Community

Dr Ho's study found that there was deep ambivalence with regard to what "national identity" meant and the sense of national community overseas was limited to those who chose to join the Singapore clubs or associations. Even then, fragmentation by cultural and ethnic identities in these clubs suggested that the multiracial, multicultural ethos espoused in Singapore actually "dissolved" when Singaporeans moved overseas.

As for the Singaporeans who preferred to distance themselves from other Singaporeans, this attitude was a reflection of their distaste towards fellow countrymen who were "excessively Singaporean" in their behaviour and mindsets. It also indicated some measure of resistance towards the State's agenda to create an extra-territorial Singaporean identity and community. Many of such respondents expressed their preference for an organic approach towards the development of a Singaporean community overseas through their own spontaneous and informal networks of friends.

With regard to the social contract of citizen rights and responsibilities, citizenship was often talked about in very emotional but negative ways by her respondents. Yet these overseas Singaporeans still seemed emotionally anchored, especially in how they felt Overseas Singaporeans could contribute to Singapore. This finding should provide an opportunity to think about how multiple layers of attachment and identity among what Dr Ho described as "transnational Singaporeans" could be further developed.

The family was clearly an anchor for Overseas Singaporeans -- many of Dr Ho's respondents indicated an intention to return to Singapore to take care of their ageing parents or to bring up their children in Singapore. However, this did not seem like a strong enough, sustainable anchor of Singaporeans to the nation and country. After all, what would happen if family units themselves became highly fragmented and dispersed? There clearly was a need to bolster other elements of citizenship beyond the family to enhance what citizenship would mean to them.

For these reasons, Dr Ho recommended that more thought be given to how practices of transnational citizenship – such as overseas voting rights, the use of the Central Provident Fund, Medisave, National Service, child care support and subsidies, as well as programmes for reintegration into the Singapore society could be further developed to keep Singaporeans anchored to Singapore. She also advocated greater exploration of comparative models of transnational citizenship to see what Singapore could adopt or modify. An in-depth understanding of underlying reasons for migration was also needed to provide a more comprehensive picture of citizenship in a transnational global community.
