EDUCATION, MIGRATION, GENDER: POLICIES OF EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

This paper, based on 12 months of fieldwork in Singapore and Malaysia, analyses policies of education as contested fields in these two countries. Malaysia is a multicultural society with 65% of Malay Malaysians and other Bumiputeras, 26% Chinese Malaysians and 7% Indian Malaysians. Ethnic categorizations build the basis for the Malaysian society, in which the Malay Malaysians benefit more from governmental policies than Chinese and Indian Malaysians do. Despite cultural diversity, Islam as the religion of the Malay Malaysians is the dominating one. The ethnically and religiously based social segregation has its rootedness in British colonial policies. Ethnic exclusion and inclusion were introduced through the education system also along gender- and class-specific lines. The emphasis on ethnic inclusion and exclusion in Malaysia so far hindered an expression of women’s and gender issues referring to women of all ethnic groups simultaneously.

Singapore as a Southeast Asian Metropolis is a destination for migration for reasons of labour and education. Due to low birthrates, the city state promotes so called foreign talents from Primary School on, i.e. young people classified as intelligent, who shall be beneficial for the economy later on. The education and migration policies are related to ethnicity, class and gender. The majority of educational migrants in Singapore are Chinese Malaysian middle-class women.

Not only are governmental policies factors for educational migration, the parents of young Chinese Malaysian women actively choose Singapore as a destination for further education of their children. By means of migration to Singapore, the young women develop their own ways to achieve social agency. The neoliberal education system and meritocratic society offer opportunities and access for migrants from “modern”, Christian, middle-class backgrounds.

Keywords: Education Policies; Intersection of Education, Migration, Gender; Multicultural Societies

1. Introduction: Connecting Malaysia and Singapore

Singapore and Malaysia are connected through a daily flow of people, goods and ideas. This normality of travelling between Malaysia and Singapore becomes evident, among other things, on the level of school attendance. A lot of primary school kids from Malaysia’s border town Johor Bahru (“JB”) attend schools in Singapore considered as “better” on a daily basis. People from Malaysia and Singapore – at least from Johor Bahru – stay in contact which each other on a regular basis.
Statistical data confirms daily travelling from Malaysia to Singapore. Besides school kids, 150,000 Malaysian workers commute daily from JB to Singapore, according to recent estimates. 200,000 Malaysians are assumed to live in Singapore permanently (Asiaone 2009). Thus, in addition to every day commuting on the level of school attendance and work life, there is primarily the level of long-term migration from Malaysia to Singapore.

The exact numbers on migratory flows to Singapore may be only approximated. In 2000, nearly half of the Permanent Residents, who were born outside Singapore, are from Malaysia. This number shows the tendency, that a large – if not the largest – proportion of people, who live in Singapore in the medium to long term, comes from Malaysia.

Beyond concrete exchange of goods and experiences, Malaysia and Singapore are linked together through a shared history, which becomes evident in the multicultural situation in both countries. The societies are segregated into “Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others” (in Singapore: “CMIO”). In Western Malaysia, Malays form the biggest group, in Singapore the Chinese. Indians are the smallest group in both countries.

This multicultural situation with all its linkages with class, gender, and religion leads to educational migration of young “modern”, Christian, English-speaking, middle-class female Malaysians to Singapore. This paper seeks to look at the meaning of these categorization within the specific local context. In the following section, the historical development and the current factors that influence Malaysian and Singaporean education, migration and gender policies will be traced.

2. Ethnic and gendered segregation through formal education in colonial times

The multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore is based on former immigrations from China and India especially during British colonial times in the second half of the 19th century. The colonial government forced immigration flows in order to build port cities like Penang, Malacca and Singapore. Tens of thousands of Chinese came especially to Singapore (Gunn 2008, pp. 16-21). The island therefore became a special part within the Malayan Archipelago as a Chinese dominated port and trading city.

Migration flows were not only motivated by economic aspects. In colonial times, large sections of the Chinese population linked their migration destination with educational prospects. In Mayla, the British founded primary and secondary schools

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1 In 2010, 44.9% of the Permanent Residents, who were born outside the city state, were born in Malaysia (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010, p. 39).
2 Before independence, Singapore and Malaysia together formed one state, called Malaya.
3 In 2007, 50.7% were Malay Malaysians, 11% ‘Other Bumiputeras’ (so called indigenous groups), 23% Chinese Malaysians, 6.9 % Indian Malaysia and 1.2% ‘Others’ (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2008, p. 9).
4 In 2010, out of a population of 5,076,700, 3,771,000 people were Singaporean citizens and Permanent Residents. Out of this 3,771,000, 74.1% were Chinese, 13.4% Malays, 9.2% Indians and 3.3% ‘Others’ (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010, viii).
5 By educational migration I will refer to migration on grounds of getting further education.
6 The empirical data for this paper was collected on ethnographic fieldwork in Singapore and Malaysia from September 2008 to August 2009 in the context of my PhD-project in Cultural Anthropology on educational migration and gender in the regional context.
with English as language of instruction for all ethnic groups without treating it as
to educate more Asians in order to deploy them in the flourishing trade and
administration areas. The British schools were subject to fees and therefore only
affordable for a small, relatively wealthy group of people from the cities
(Malakolunthu and Rengasamy 2006, p. 121). Primarily Chinese, then Indians and
only very few Malays (who usually lived in rural areas), attended these schools (v.
Kopp 2002, pp. 38ff.). The urban Chinese population benefited most from British
formal education, and as a consequence, that strengthened their social position.

There were two types of British, English-speaking schools: National “Free-Schools”
and private Boys´ and Girls´ Schools founded by Christian missionaries. In the Girls´
Schools, the students were taught English language and housekeeping. To educate
them in reading, writing, Mathematics and Geography like the Boys in the Boys´
Schools came second (Singam 2004, pp. 14ff.). Social mobility on the basis of
British, i.e. English-speaking and mostly Christian, education was therefore most
profitable for the urban male Chinese population.

3. Contemporary Malaysia: educational possibilities for whom?

In Malaysia, gendered and ethnic education policies have been intensified through
implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 by United Malay’s
National Organization (UMNO) after so called “racial riots” in 1969. The political
agenda of the NEP was to improve the condition of the (mostly rural) Malay
Malaysian population economically through wider access to employment and
education. Primarily, Malay Malaysian women, regarded as so-called “cheap
labourers”, benefit from these feminized economic policies (Norani 1998, p. 173). In
the educational area the impact of the NEP becomes evident through university
matriculation numbers: since the mid-1980s, Malaysian women outperform men at
universities, polytechnics and colleges. From then on, the social status of these
women has been served as an indicator for modernization in Malaysia.

Due to the ethnic focus in the NEP, Malay Malaysian women form the largest group
in the universities. This ethnic line in Malaysian education policy has been expressed
in an ethnic quota system. Student enrollment at national institutions of higher
learning depends more on ethnic belonging than on final grades. As a result, in 1985
already 2.5 times more Malay Malaysians than Chinese Malaysians were enrolled in
Malaysian universities, whereas in the 1970s Chinese Malaysians formed the biggest

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7 In 2006, 268,491 women attended the tertiary education sector in Malaysia in contrast to 193,825 men. At
the prestigious Malaysian university Universiti Malaya (UM), 15,583 women and 9,435 men were enrolled in
2006. Until Master’s degree women outperform men, in social science as well as in science and technology
(Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2007, pp. 130-134).

8 Theoretically, the quota is meant for all Bumiputeras (literally “sons of the soil”), i.e. for Malay Malaysians
and indigenous groups like Iban, Kadazan, Orang Asli. Practically, the quota is primarily used for the Malay
Malaysians.

9 In 2002, the quota system has been officially replaced by a meritocratic system (Lee 2004, p. 14). But on the
practical level, the ethnic majority ratio got worse since then: In 2002, 69% of the Bumiputra got a place at
a national university in contrast to 55% before. Chinese Malaysians got 26% of these places, Indians 5% (Lee
2004, p. 58).
The quota system is not only used for places of study, but also for scholarships. Approximately 80% of all national scholarships were meant for the Malay Malaysian population until 2008. After strong criticism especially by Chinese Malaysians, the government gave access to 40% of all scholarships for Non-Malays (Syed 2008, p. xviii).

An alternative for Non-Malays, who still get relatively little access to institutions of higher learning and scholarships, is to study at private universities in Malaysia. Students get admission to these private universities if they can obtain private funding from their parents. Because of high tuition fees, only children of the middle-class can afford a place. Primarily Chinese Malaysians attend these institutions (Syed 2008, p. xiii), based on the development of the old Chinese Malaysian urban middle-class during British colonialism. The majority of female students also apply for admission to these private universities.

Besides attending private institutions, to study abroad is another alternative for Non-Malays. Many Chinese Malaysians don’t even apply for a place at a private Malaysian university but plan early to go to study in a foreign country. This is the link to the beginning of this paper, where I had described (daily) migration flows between Malaysia and Singapore. The enormous exchange between both countries, the insufficient educational possibilities for Non-Malays and the proportion of Malaysians in Singapore lead to the assumption that relatively many Malaysians migrate to Singapore for further education.

The socio-political dynamics in Malaysia is not the only basis for this spatial mobility. Social processes in the country of destination are equally important for migratory flows. Social conditions and political strategies of the Singaporean government have resulted in large immigration flows of female Chinese Malaysians in the last few decades. In the following section, those policies which are important for an understanding of gendered educational migration from Malaysia to Singapore will be outlined.


After independence, governmental policies in Singapore under the rule of the People’s Action Party (PAP) focused on the development of a prosperous nation by means of a capitalist economy and a meritocratic society. The 1960s to 1980s were primarily marked by economic growth (Chong 2005, p. 47).

For this economic growth, human labour has been of great importance. However, Singapore is one of the countries with lowest birth rates. In order to maintain and increase the economic standard, the state needs migrants who will stay in the country in the medium or long term.

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10 1975 7,677 students were enrolled; out of these were 3,084 Malay Malaysians and 3,752 Chinese Malaysians. In 1985, 22,271 Malay Malaysians and only 9,142 Chinese Malaysians were enrolled. In the meantime, only 6,034 Malay Malaysians but 13,406 Chinese Malaysians studied abroad (Chong 2005, p. 50).

11 In 2006, 164,792 women graduated from private universities in contrast to 158,995 men (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2007, p. 146).
In order to maintain the economic standard, the Singaporean government developed a specific strategy. It focuses on incentives for so called foreign talents, i.e. for young people from abroad who are regarded as intelligent as measured by their grades and intelligence quotient (Yeoh, Huang and Willis 2000, pp. 150ff.). Foreign talents get recruited through the offer of governmental scholarships by Singaporean schools. Those who don’t migrate to Singapore as a school student have the chance to get a governmental scholarship out of the ASEAN- or A-Star-Program for one of the three autonomous universities National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) or Singapore Management University (SMU). The young people regarded as „intelligent“ are expected to stay as long as possible in order to make the highly desired contribution to the local economy. Immediately after graduation, they get offered permanent residency, which is linked to special advantages, e.g. in obtaining housing (Lam and Yeoh 2004, p. 153). Especially since 1990 the number of students migrating to Singapore as an “oasis of talent” (Yeoh, Huang and Willis 2000, p. 151) has increased. As a consequence, more than three times of Non-Singaporeans graduate at Singaporean universities than Singaporean citizens (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000, p. 19).

The centrality of education in Singapore has led to an expansion of the necessary institutions with an orientation on “western”, neoliberal elite standards. In fact, NUS as the most important elite university in Southeast Asia takes position 25 of 200 in the international university ranking in 2012.12

The education sector in Singapore is inextricably interwoven with ethnicity and gender politics. The schooling system already focuses on creating a Chinese elite through the introduction of bilingualism in schools in the 1980s. Besides English language, one “native language” is required. In this way, Mandarin became the option for the majority of the Singaporean population. Together with the Speak Mandarin Campaign which was simultaneously introduced this language policy aimed at the Chinese Singaporeans and strengthened their social position.

The gender aspect in the education sector becomes evident by means of national population policies. In the 1980s, the PAP developed biopolitics, which made women the target of national economic interests. The starting point was then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s idea that intelligence is inheritable. Thus, he wanted all graduate women to give birth to more children. In the meantime, women with lower academic qualification were supposed to limit their number of children. Women were granted education in order to transfer it to their children. The nation should remain competitive in a globalized market economy by means of expanding intelligence and education. Furthermore, Singapore is following a “modern” democratization ideology, which includes female social mobility. As a result of these overlapping education and gender policies, primarily women study at the elite university NUS until they obtain their first degree.13 Moreover, Singapore is the state with highest proportion of female academics and professionals in Southeast Asia, and together with Hong Kong even throughout Asia (Stivens 2006, p. ix).


13 In 2011/2012, 13,066 women were enrolled in undergraduate courses in contrast to 12,447 men (https://share.nus.edu.sg/registrar/info/statistics/ug-enrol-20112012.pdf).
5. Interim conclusion

To sum up, gender has become a changing category of education policies in Malaysia and Singapore within the last 150-200 years. During colonial times, education in the sense of gaining knowledge and developing physical and intellectual abilities was only applicable for boys. Due to the specific educational curricula, girls and women were excluded from the “classical” education system. In the meantime, the education systems in Malaysia and Singapore are an expression of feminized modernization policies. The agendas of economic growth in both countries were not possible without participation of women in the urban, neoliberal learning and working environment. In this process, the Malaysian government focused on Malay women and the Singaporean government on Chinese women – and both simultaneously excluded the other ethnic group. Migration of young urban, Chinese Malaysian middle-class women to Singapore on grounds of education is the result.

6. Doreen’s story: educational migration as a route to modernity

After having outlined conditions for educational migration of female Malaysians to Singapore on a macro-level, I will now shed light at the level of the social actors. I will sketch some personal narratives of my respondent Doreen Hemmy and her family, as an example. I will look at how the education, migration, gender and ethnicity policies described so far had an impact on her family constellations. Furthermore, I will focus on the following questions: How and in which ways were Doreen’s migration strategies connected with concepts of gender relationships? And: What was her allocation of meaning to educational migration to Singapore? I will be interested in linkages between constructions of modernity/tradition and male-female roles, leaving aside many other aspects in this paper.

In 2003, Doreen Hemmy migrated as a 15-year-old girl from the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur (“KL”) to Singapore. In the city state, she completed her secondary school education as a foreign talent at Methodist Girls School (MGS) with an ASEAN-scholarship from the Singaporean government. After secondary school, she got a scholarship for the elitist Raffles-College, and after that, for the National University of Singapore (NUS). She studied English Literature from 2007 until May 2011 and graduated with Bachelor Honours. During her university education, Doreen got the chance to visit Europe for an exchange semester in 2009. Her parents and her only, five years older, brother Andrew still live in Kuala Lumpur.

6.1 Parental home: basis for education, migration and modernity

Doreen’s parents’ house, inhabited by her parents and her brother Andrew, is located in a very Chinese residential area in Kuala Lumpur. Her parents rent a classical 2-storey-house for 800 RM per month. For local conditions, this refers to relative prosperity. In the entrance area of this house, Christian symbols and pictures like of the ‘Last Supper’ were noticeable. In the dining area was a medal which marked the father’s former engagement in a teacher’s association. At first glance, the Hemmy
family was oriented towards Christianity and education. With their material prosperity they were furthermore part of the long-standing local middle-class.

In the local context, Christianity and (higher) education refer to a special kind of identification. Both factors are regarded as “modern” by large sections of the Chinese Malaysian population. Christianity is associated with modernity because of its global and “acultural” occurrence in contrast to ethnically based Buddhism/Taoism and ancestor worship by other sections of the Chinese population (Göransson 2010, p. 64). Education is of relevance in local modernity aspirations because of a focus on reading and writing in Christianity, expressed in Bible studies (DeBernardi 2001, p. 126). Consequently, Christians form the largest group of all graduates in Singapore, which, in turn, are mostly Chinese (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010, pp. 14ff.). Doreen therefore was one of these “modern” Chinese-oriented Christian students.

In her parent´s house, Doreen still had her own room. Next to hers was her brother´s room. An eye-catching photo of his graduation hung opposite the front-door. Six months later, this photo was no longer there. It had been replaced by the slogan “Jesus is Lord”. His priorities seemed to shift from education to religion since his sister represented the educational trajectory through her route to the prestigious NUS. In order to understand the significance of this female education path it is necessary to look at it in relation to the brother´s.

6.2 Andrew: “traditional“ caring brother

At the time of our meetings, Andrew was 27 years old and worked at a Christian private school as a teacher for accounting in KL. During his tertiary education, he stayed on campus approximately 40 kilometers away from his parental home. He studied accounting at a private Malaysian university. As a Non-Malay, he had had only a small chance to get a place at a national university. Given their relatively affluent situation, his education was financed by his parents.

After graduation, he consciously decided to come back to his parents´ house. Doreen was of the opinion that he should move out. She wanted him to become independent. But his parents supported him in his decision to return home.

V.T.: Why did you come back here?

Andrew: It’s home! [laughing loudly]

Andrew’s Mother: The Asian families will find that the children...

Andrew: The children always move back.

Andrew’s Mother: Until they get married. (...) Because we always say it’s a free laundry service here. When he was already in university, he will always bring in his laundry.

Andrew: Ya, I will always come back with my laundry to wash it [laughing again]. But it’s always an Asian thing to move back with your parents. You hardly find an Asian, a Malaysian, living on their own. Once they graduated. Unless you are working out of the town-ah. (14th June 2009)
On a concrete level, staying at his parents’ place was an expression of Andrew’s education trajectory which placed him in Malaysia or rather in KL. He had also tried to study abroad – in Australia – but he failed because although he had an offer from a university, he didn’t have a scholarship.

Thus, Andrew had also wanted to pursue an educational career like his sister. This aspect of education and the relationship between brother and sister raises questions concerning transformations of gender roles. That Andrew remained in the parental home was not only advantageous in the sense of "free laundry service", it was simultaneously also a loss for him. Since Doreen went the way of excellent education, that way wasn’t an option anymore for her brother.

Indirectly Andrew and his mother talked about further reasons why Andrew stayed at his parents’ place. Between the lines they referred to a fundamental concept of a Chinese Confucian family ideal, in which the family members stay together in one multigenerational household. In this context, the family is seen as an appropriate place for elderly care (cf. Miller 2004).

Parental care (filial piety) ideally by the eldest son is an expression of a specific Chinese Confucian status position. In the past, the (eldest) sons enjoyed high prestige in social relationships between parents and children. Until today, this basic pattern is still valid (Ong 2005, pp. 175-178). This status position was not only expressed by means of parental care but also by increasing the family’s prestige through educational and professional achievements (Ong 2005, p. 167). Thus, Andrew followed the tradition of caring for the elderly, but not of achieving high status through education or workplace. Contrary to previous assumptions (cf. Nonini 1997), in a “modern” Malaysian family like in the Hemmys, it is the daughter who superimposes the brother’s status position by means of education. Until the 1970s, women in Malaysia were ideally “guardian of the household” and “keeper of tradition” (Ong 2005, pp. 33,220). Meanwhile, the only son of this nuclear family plays these roles. Due to his taking on the care of his parents and his living with his parents in his parental home Andrew was associated with the area of conservative, “traditional” Confucian elements.

Andrew’s “traditional” role must be understood in the context of his sister’s educational trajectory to Singapore and Europe. Because of local meanings concerning “western education”, “Singapore” and “the West”, Doreen is the one in the family, who actively oriented herself to “modern” identifications.

6.3 Becoming a modern women

In the sense of a “geography of imagination” (Trouillot 2002), many of my respondents presented in our conversations different levels of geographical modernity (cf. Klenke 2011, pp. 219-228). They regarded Singapore as a “modern” country. The reasons given for this was the infrastructure, the shopping malls and restaurants and the neoliberal education system. Singapore would be followed by the Malaysian cities as less modern, i.e. as more traditional locations. My respondent Annapoorna from Johor Bahru (“JB”) told me very angrily that Malaysian cities like KL and JB lack modern commonplaces like a good transport infrastructure. In JB everything is loud, dirty and smelly. In Singapore, everything works perfectly. The geographical modernity decreases from Singapore over Malaysian cities to the Malaysian rural
areas. Talking about Bangi, a town located 25 km away from KL, Doreen’s and Andrew’s father said that Bangi is a very „Malay“ area and therefore not as a good place to be as KL. Because in Bangi food would be spicy and no Chinese or Western food would be available. These comments make clear that rural, “traditional” areas are imagined as Malay areas. The Malaysian cities, in turn, offer more variations and possibilities than the Malay, ethnically based areas. These routes of modernity continue to “the West“ like USA, UK, Australia or Europe in general. Especially western education, which my respondents associated with more creativity, was reason for them to classify “the West” as very modern.

According to this logic, people like Doreen, who come from a “modern” background owing to Christianity and education, also migrate to places which are constructed as “modern”. Doreen as the daughter turned out to be an agent of modernity by means of her educational path first to Singapore and later on to Europe.

In this sense, educational migration marks fundamental allocations of meaning to reversal of gender relations in a “modern” Chinese Malaysian middle-class family. For this special group of people, the structural factors certainly make it easier to migrate to Singapore for further education, e.g. due to generous scholarships for foreign talents. But for the social actors this migration strategy is furthermore connected with a special meaning: they become modern women and hence enlarge their scope of action.

7. Conclusion

Ethnic categorizations form an important basis for Malaysian society, in which the Malay Malaysians benefit most from governmental politics. The ethnic segregation has its roots in British colonial education policies. The emphasis on ethnic inclusion and exclusion in Malaysia has so far hindered an expression and practical implementation of women’s and gender issues beyond the ethnic categorizations.

Gendered and ethnic processes have been intensified through the implementation of the New Economic Policy NEP in 1971. The political agenda of the NEP was to improve the economic condition of the Malay Malaysian population through a widening of access to education and employment. Primarily, Malay Malaysian women benefit from these policies. Thus, social mobility of Chinese Malaysian women has been hindered by multicultural politics, which control gender and education related themes.

Chinese Malaysian middle-class women, who have access to necessary resources, have developed their own ways in order to achieve social agency: through migration to Singapore for further education.

On the practical level, it is negotiated in gendered family constellations who should go on the road to success. In the Hemmy family, the only daughter realizes this duty in contrast to the only son. In this manifold arena of power, status, in- and exclusion, the Chinese Malaysian males are supposed to preserve the more “traditional” and conservative elements of Confucianism like parental care.

In terms of democratization, female social agency is conceived as part of a local modern ideology. This ideology is followed by Chinese Malaysian women who regard
themselves as “modern”. Singapore and its multiethnic meritocratic society is the destination of the female Chinese Malaysian educational migrants, who seek more equal opportunities. Its “modern” neoliberal and elitist education system opens a variety of access for the female migrants. The women of my study consider this Singaporean modernity in contrast to the Malaysian cities and these in turn are modern relative to rural areas. These imaginations of modernity are related to ethnic categories since my respondents associate rural, “traditional” areas with the Malay Malaysian population.

Through educational migration to Singapore social actors like Doreen Hemmy extend their social agency in general with recourse to social processes of transformation within the heterogeneous arena of ethnicity, gender, and education, while simultaneously being social actors themselves of the transformation processes.

References


