Loving the Foreigner as the Native-Born: Singapore Civil Society & the Community Integration of Migrant Workers

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‘Loving the Foreigner as the Native-Born’: Singapore Civil Society & the Community Integration of Migrant Workers

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Following complaints by residents, Cai Yinzhou – founder of Geylang Adventures – and a group of Bangladeshi migrant workers were forced to cease their biweekly badminton sessions at an empty Geylang back alley road earlier this year. The police had threatened the workers with arrest if they disobeyed. With accounts like this, one wonders if civil society fights a losing battle against the myriad State policies and practices resisting efforts advancing the community integration of migrant workers in Singapore.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that Singapore civil society’s humanitarian approach in advancing the community integration of migrant workers is viable in the face of the State’s regulatory framework.

In Part II, I adapt John W. Berry’s acculturation orientations theory model and propose a framework to evaluate Singapore civil society’s humanitarian approach. In Part III, I briefly examine the features of Singapore’s political context, which encourage the social exclusion of migrant workers. In Part IV, I reference real-life narratives in exploring the merits and drawbacks of this humanitarian approach. Finally, Part V concludes by highlighting how certain limitations that plague this humanitarian approach may be overcome, and specifically discusses the oft-overlooked role of the media as a complementary necessary complement to civil society’s efforts.

In this paper, when I use the term ‘migrant workers’, I refer to low-skilled foreign immigrants such as foreign domestic workers (hereinafter FDWs), and laborers in the construction and maritime industries. The term ‘humanitarian approach’ refers to civil society’s nuanced focus on “non-contentious activities such as cultural advocacy, research and services” amongst other integration-oriented efforts.¹

¹ Cheah Wui Ling, ‘Migrant Workers as Citizens within the ASEAN Landscape’ (2009) 8 Chinese Journal of International Law 205 [Cheah] at 225
I will also reference interviews conducted with various actors who may be considered a part of Singapore’s civil society’s humanitarian efforts towards the community integration of migrant workers. The first was with Cai Yinzhou, the founder of Geylang Adventures – an organization that facilitates community integration between Singaporeans and migrant workers through strategic activities. Secondly, I interviewed Siew Kim Siang and Rosalind Ng, leaders of a Mount Carmel Bible-Presbyterian Church (hereinafter MCBPC) program that has helped approximately 3000 migrant workers from the People’s Republic of China (hereinafter PRC) over the last 8 years.

II. ACCULTURATION ORIENTATIONS: INTERROGATING COMMUNITY INTEGRATION EFFORTS

“We asked for workers but human beings came.”
– Helga Leitner

All too often, it is tempting to forget that migrant workers are also persons who belong to a certain cultural and people group from a specific geographical location. Accordingly, it is natural that relational associations (or dissociations) are forged between the migrant workers and the citizens of the host society they enter.

By adapting Berry’s dual-dimension acculturation framework, I consider how the various responses of civil society fare in terms of improving (or impeding) the community integration of migrant workers:

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2 Full audio recordings and transcripts are available upon request.
3 Interview with Cai Yinzhou, (2 Nov 2015) [Interview with Yinzhou]; see http://www.geylangadventures.com/about/
4 Interview with Siew Kim Siang and Rosalind Ng (27 Oct 2015) [Interview with Siew & Ng]
While Berry’s model evaluates integration depending on *the immigrants’ choices* (e.g. to integrate or separate), my adaptation places the focus on the *choices of the recipient society*. Drawing from Berry’s conception of the four different cultural acculturation orientations, I propose an adapted framework as follows:

1. **Integration**: the host society is open to integration and also makes efforts for constructive engagement with migrant workers to form relationships with them.

2. **Assimilation**: the host society helps migrant workers embrace the norms and culture of Singapore society.

3. **Separation**: the host society is nonchalant and unwilling to relate to migrant workers.

4. **Marginalization**: lack of any engagement between the host society and migrant workers coupled with negative sentiments and tangible social discrimination by locals.

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III. “OUT OF PLACE:” MIGRANT WORKERS WITHIN SINGAPORE’S REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

“If we let in too many foreign workers, our society will come undone. Singaporeans will be crowded out, workplaces will feel foreign, our identity will be diluted...”

– Lee Hsien Loong, National Day Rally 2015 Speech

As PM Lee’s statement above illustrates, the Singapore government’s survivalist discourse has “nur[t]ed a ‘siege mentality’ and a materialist anxiety in state-sponsored constructions of national identity” against migrant workers. His statement is also characteristic of Singapore’s communitarian and citizen-centered political principles, which heavily influence the relationship between Singapore civil society and the State. Together, these undercurrents of Singapore’s policies mold Singapore’s regulatory framework around a utilitarian immigration policy that determines the worth of a foreigner purely on his transactional value, ultimately frustrating genuine integration.

In turn, the features of Singapore’s regulatory framework – the work permit regime, the insecurity in respect of both employment and residence for migrant workers – “construct” the MW as being undesirable for inclusion in the broader society. Furthermore, Singapore’s regulatory framework also hampers the ability of migrant workers to form meaningful relationships with locals by restricting social integration.

In its totality, Singapore’s regulatory framework reflects Michael Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’: a composite network of discursive and material practices aimed at normalizing and influencing the behavior of migrant workers in all aspects of life. In the words of Michael Walzer, migrant workers perceive this State governmentality

[8] Cheah at 221-2
[9] Neo at 141-9
[10] Neo at 145-6
“as a pervasive and frightening power” reigning over their unalterable political status, which very purpose is to prevent them from improving their condition.\textsuperscript{12}

In other words, the government consciously refrains from actively facilitating the community integration of migrant workers because having high MW traffic \textit{already risks} reshaping “the character of [the local] community”, even possibly destroying “old ways of life.”\textsuperscript{13} Community integration is thus unenthusiastically perceived mostly as an undesirable step towards the “identity dilution” of the Singapore population.

This legal exclusion consequently translates into an irrational fear of foreigners within the social realm. Thus, migrant workers are deemed ‘out of place’\textsuperscript{14} and segregated according to the Singapore population’s ‘moral geographies of exclusion’; which simply means certain persons and practices fit only in specific spaces and not in others.\textsuperscript{15}

For instance, in the aspect of ‘neighborhood integration’, anti-foreigner sentiments result in residential rejection – the refusal of locals to have migrant workers live among them.\textsuperscript{16} These anti-foreigner sentiments sometimes even verge on comical desperation – for example, during the Serangoon Gardens brouhaha over the proposed situating of a MW dormitory near the private residence of Singaporeans, an ‘SOS’ sign (standing for “Save Our Serangoon”) was pasted outside the to-be dormitory premises.\textsuperscript{17} Such sentiments are also consonant with the belief that migrant workers’ exhibit a propensity towards criminal behaviour, which is far from true in reality.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{12} Michael Walzer, ‘\textit{Spheres Of Justice}’ (New York: Basic Books, 2008) at 30
\textsuperscript{13} Joseph Carens, ‘\textit{Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders}’ (1987) 49 The Review of Politics 251 at 271
\textsuperscript{14} David Sibley, ‘\textit{The Problematic Nature of Exclusion}’ (1998) 29(2) Geoforum at 119-121
\textsuperscript{15} Tim Cresswell, ‘\textit{In Place/Out of Place}’ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) at 128
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Neo} at 149
\textsuperscript{17} See http://singaporeseen.stomp.com.sg/in-the-heartlands/save-our-serangoon-residents-plead)
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Neo} at 149-152
Be that as it may, the sentiments of the local population arguably take after the State’s “ghettoizing” of migrant workers with “isolationist” policies, and effectively mirror the exclusionary posture of our political leaders. State-endorsed legal exclusion of migrant workers gives the Singaporean population the green light to justify their residential repugnance towards migrant workers and more generally, their xenophobic assumptions about them. Unsurprisingly, the ultimate consequence is the social marginalization of migrant workers.

In light of the above, Singapore civil society ends up having to strive towards integrating migrant workers by “advocat[ing] for cultural rather than legal or political change.”

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19 TWC2 newsletter 2007
20 Neo at 149-153
21 Cheah at 223
III. THE ROAR OF SINGA THE LION: 22 HUMANITARIAN KINDNESS & COMMUNITY INTEGRATION BY THE COMMUNITY

“The presence of a large group of people, with different habits and customs, and unfamiliar with our social norms, can create suspicion and anxiety.”²³

Singa the Lion, the former mascot for Singapore’s National Courtesy Campaign and the Singapore Kindness Movement, ‘resigned’ in 2013, bemoaning that he was “just too tired to continue facing an increasingly angry and disagreeable society.”²⁴

Professor Cheah Wui Ling describes the discrimination of migrant workers in Singapore to be indicative of a systemic problem deeply rooted in “class elitism” and “meritocratic privileges”.²⁵ Coupled with this class superiority complex, the irrational fear of migrant workers ultimately amounts to deeply entrenched discrimination against migrant workers. Admittedly, these are social sentiments the law may not in itself be able to rehabilitate. In fact, legal changes are likely to be met with resistance by a Singaporean population accustomed to laws that restrict the rights of migrant workers which Singaporeans otherwise enjoy.

Notwithstanding, I suggest the response of civil society can stand in this gap. Even if migrant workers are – as a matter of fact – transient by virtue of the nature of their jobs, citizenship is not the only way to engage them in Singapore society. Rather, community integration efforts by the community can be doubly effective – on one hand, this creates a platform to dispel Singaporeans’ suspicion and anxiety directed against migrant workers; on the other hand, this also helps migrant workers see they too are stakeholders in our society.

In holding up the community integration of migrant workers as the objective, we also avoid mischaracterizing the mistreatment of migrant workers in Singapore as merely a problem of “unkindness”;²⁶ instead, our interrogation of civil society’s humanitarian

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²²See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singa_the_Lion
²⁴See http://kindness.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/singaletter2.jpg
²⁵Cheah at 227
²⁶Cheah at 227
efforts below is done in full acknowledgment that the discrimination of migrant workers is a systemic cancer in a Singaporean society built on meritocratic class elitism.

A. Facilitating Mutual Understanding

“I think people fear what they don’t understand so I want to help them understand.”

– Yinzhou

Singaporeans realize the indispensability of low-wage MW yet simultaneously bear the contradictory worry that they may overrun their city-nation. From this bittersweet cauldron of mixed emotions arises the irrational fear of migrant workers. This underlying senselessness must be addressed.

Reforming social sentiments social sentiments is therefore a key ingredient that will render the soil of society more fertile for community integration. Also, if the Singaporean population better understands migrant workers as fellow human beings, shifts in the law that benefit migrant workers are more likely to be accepted with less friction from the local population. In fact, this is why Geylang Adventures explicitly states that its “intended outcome is not to change the lives of the disadvantaged in big ways, but to alter public perception.”

An additional precursor to community integration is the need for Singaporeans to also appreciate that migrant workers do contribute to the well being of Singaporeans and our economy. Migrant workers take up jobs that locals shun, and the reality is that they serve as low cost labour enabling companies to reduce operating expenses. As Rosalind Ng accurately explains:

“Without them (migrant workers) I don’t think we can survive. Who in Singapore wants to build (work as construction workers)? [...] They always

27 Interview with Yinzhou
28 Kenneth Tan, ‘Images of the Migrant Worker in Singapore’s Mainstream News Media’ in Migration & Integration in Singapore [Tan] at 162
29 Supra note 3
30 Neo at 147
31 Interview with Siew & Ng
challenge me, “You Singaporeans, if I pay you $5000, can you do the job that I do?”

Accordingly, interaction with migrant workers at a personal level and on a regular basis, such as MCBPC’s weekly program allows Singaporean to understand better the lives and perspectives of these migrant workers. One Member of Parliament’s efforts to involve migrant workers from dormitories in her ward in community projects such as Citizens-on-Patrol helped foster a sense of mutual respect between them and her residents.32 This stands in stark contrast to blatantly discriminatory projects of local groups such as the ‘Jalan Kayu Rangers’ – a group of volunteers who patrolled the Jalan Kayu residential area around 2006 when MW dormitories were set up in the neighbourhood, claiming to “keep residents safe” and “help the foreigners to fit in.”33 On the other hand, even though official government initiatives such as the ‘Knowing Singapore Programme’ are non-discriminatory in nature, they lack the organic element and relational touch to succeed in facilitating integration. The perception of organizers that a one-day course offering a marvelous opportunity to sample local culinary

33 Ang Yiying, ‘All-round effort to help them fit in’ (18 September 2008)
delights will help migrant workers “ease into local society quickly, making them feel welcomed and accepted” is arguably naïve and divorced from reality.  

In this regard, Yinzhou remarked that such programs are “tokenistic”, and instead, more ‘on-the-ground’ community initiatives are needed so that migrant workers can actually interact in a far more natural social setting with Singaporeans. The migrant workers themselves understand too that, “When it comes to getting along with your colleagues, it's more about building relationships.” Yinzhou said of these platforms for organic interaction with migrant workers:

“My experience with migrant workers was that, being in their house, and sharing food with them, and talking about their love life, their ambitions, you realize how human they are...”

This is why Geylang Adventures plans events such as ‘#migrantmail’, which gave Singaporeans the chance to sponsor a MW’s letter home to the latter’s families. This gave locals a deeper appreciation of the unending emotional challenges migrant workers face being in a foreign land such as the heartache of homesickness.

B. ‘Family’ & Community

“When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt...”

“You know how it feels to be foreigners.”

Faith-based organizations and civil society groups/non-governmental organizations (hereinafter NGOs) also play an integral role in gradually dispelling irrational fear and systemic discrimination. Beyond facilitating mutual understanding, close-knit

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34 AsiaOne News, ‘Helping foreign workers integrate’ (20 September 2010)
36 See https://medium.com/migrant-workers/migrant-mail-a-pop-up-post-office-near-aljunied-mrt-station-de5806738609#.s31tyqb19
community interaction allows locals and migrant workers to bond at a personal level and deconstruct stereotypes to overcome ethno-cultural differences.

At a deeper level, Singaporeans must realize that migrant workers are capable of forming meaningful relationships with them: potential friendships rather than “relationships of antagonism.”\(^{38}\) It is only with genuine relationships at the level of individuals that true community integration at a communal level occurs. These civil society groups, by virtue of the influence they have – whether spiritually or organizationally – over their members, are therefore critical in reshaping citizen perceptions and highlighting the relational-capacity of migrant workers. This may take a few forms e.g. changing employers’ mindsets.\(^{39}\)

In fact, that was the exact intention of a church that published a comprehensive handbook explaining how Christian principles from the Bible resonate with Singapore’s laws relating to FDWs. For example, the church exhorts its members to be gracious in situations of conflicts with FDWs and, where necessary, pursue reconciliatory mediation. The clear goal in all interactions with their FDWs is for members to nurture and maintain a harmonious employer-employee relationship.

\(^{38}\) Neo at 147  
\(^{39}\) Neo at 161
Therefore, appealing to religious principles like “loving your neighbor” encourages Singaporeans in these faith-based organizations to look past superficial differences to care for migrant workers as if they too were locals.

As part of MCBPC’s weekly program with the PRC migrant workers, the church aims to create a family-like culture by encouraging church members to annually celebrate the Lunar New Year season (and other Chinese cultural festivals) with the PRC “brothers” who are unable to afford trips home to China for Reunion Dinners with their families. The members forged such deep friendships with the migrant workers that they even made trips to China, visiting the “brothers” (and their families) who no longer worked in Singapore.

Civil society groups can achieve the same. Through Geylang Adventures, Yinzhou champions what he calls the creation of ‘social spaces’ for migrant workers. These are avenues akin to Transient Workers Count Too’s (hereinafter TWC2) ‘Day Space’, where a platform is provided for Singaporeans to journey alongside unemployed or injured migrant workers awaiting resolution in their predicaments.40

Having said that, it has also been suggested that such a humanitarian approach negatives the agency of migrant workers and paints them as vulnerable persons dependent on the Singapore public. 41 Yet, is it wrong to acknowledge the imperativeness of civil society’s humanitarian assistance towards vulnerable migrant workers?

The reality is that the State and Singapore society themselves are the very engineers of the legal and social exclusion of migrant workers. In any case, if community integration is the higher goal, then these humanitarian efforts that avoid mere arms-length, touch-and-go interactions with migrant workers play an edifying role in in advocating that Singaporeans do not open only their wallets but also their hearts to migrant workers.

40 TWC2, ‘TWC2 Opens Day Space – To Rest, Learn, Serve and Grow’ (1 August 2015)
41 Cheah at 227
More importantly, such a response by civil society actively fights against the status quo of exclusion. This is because an intentional initiative to relate to migrant workers at a deeply personal level is a conscious combating against the very undercurrents of exclusion: “anxieties about the abject” i.e. “what disturbs identity, system, order [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules.”

In Singapore’s case, the migrant workers are considered the subjects of anxiety and the abject disturbing the Singapore’s population social order. David Sibley explains that such anxieties are predominantly concerned with the sanctity of geographical territories (e.g. residential segregation) and also this notion of a fear of ‘transgression’ (meaning “crossing the boundary”).

When migrant workers enter the ‘sanctuary’ of host societies, these transgressions reveal the power relations that determine what it means to belong within a territorial community. Instances of transgression typically incite uneasiness and panic among existing inhabitants of a territory, thereby triggering these locals to “(re)create landscape in order to revitalize a sense of community and belonging.”

For instance, a recreation response that leans more towards paranoid segregation rather than integration is that of the abovementioned Jalan Kayu Rangers: apart from security patrols, fences were erected (to divert migrant workers away from the residence) and recreational amenities were also set up within the dormitory compound (to prevent migrant workers from invading precious public space).

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43 David Sibley, ‘Geographies of Exclusion’ (London: Routledge, 1995) [Sibley] at 43-4
44 Sibley at 43
46 Supra note 33
The Jalan Kayu landscape was thus recreated to strengthen exclusivity and weaken MW accessibility in order to protect a local sense of belonging (see Figure 1).
On the contrary, the humanitarian approach of faith-based organizations and civil society groups have shown that this “recreating” can consider the presence of migrant workers when Singaporeans appreciate the relational-capacity of migrant workers. Hence, revitalizing a sense of community can be done in resonance with the inclusion of migrant workers, and not to their exclusion (see Figure 2).

C. Communication Empowerment

Language barriers hinder the ability of immigrants to find true friendship or acceptance, and also restrict “effective access of support resources for their integration into the host society.”47 Eliminating language barriers can therefore ensure that migrant workers are not relationally separated from the host society or socially marginalized. In this regard, local voluntary initiatives such as Sazzad Hossain’s Social Development Initiative (hereinafter SDI) Academy are vital – specifically, equipping migrant workers with basic English that they are better positioned to assert their rights in instances of workplace injuries.48

Hossain’s initiative has since motivated institutions like Yale-NUS to partner him, both by providing logistical help and encouraging its students to support the program.49 Herein also lies the value of education to shape future generations by helping them appreciate that Singaporeans can actually serve migrant workers and should endeavor to improve the lives of migrant workers.50 By breaking down communication obstacles, migrant workers are at the very least assimilated – if not integrated – into the Singaporean population.

48 See http://www.sdi.academy/about-us.html
49 Yale NUS College, ‘Helping Migrant Workers Learn English’ (26 August 2015)
50 HOME, ‘Dunman High Students Teaches Hokkien To Foreign Domestic Workers’ (8 December 2014)
Moreover, the ‘teachers’ are not the only beneficiaries. The migrant workers learning basic English in a similar language class initiative at Pasir Panjang Hill Brethren Church (that I am involved in) personally testify that apart from enhancing their daily communicative convenience, greater proficiency in English also improves their job prospects on the whole.

V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Singapore civil society’s humanitarian approach is essential in advancing the community integration of migrant workers in the face of the governmentality of Singapore’s regulatory framework. However, its greatest limitation is this: only a strategic restructuring of Singapore’s regulatory framework can engineer holistic and large-scale change. This means that beyond a humanitarian approach centered on cultural advocacy, civil society should also focus on legal and political advocacy.

Therefore, Singapore civil society groups must not shy from framing the segregationist sentiments of the Singapore population towards migrant workers as a systemic problem precipitated by the politics of our regulatory framework. In China,
the heavily draconian State regulation of NGOs severely silences the political voice of Chinese NGOs, causing most groups to completely avoid political advocacy.\textsuperscript{51} While Singaporean NGOs also face stringent State regulations\textsuperscript{52}, groups such as TWC2 and HOME have proven that this is possible for \textit{strategic political advocacy to accompany efforts advancing community integration}.

Another drawback in the humanitarian approach is its pervasiveness: \textit{what if it is merely a minority of civil society that strives to advance the community integration of migrant workers?} Clearly, the challenging task of mobilizing civil society for this purpose is a massive burden civil society cannot bear alone. In this regard, I suggest the media is indispensable in rallying civil society and promoting the community integration between Singaporeans and migrant workers too.

Kenneth Paul Tan’s argues that the media has huge function in promoting the community integration of migrant workers by making the “struggles [of migrant workers] more widely known and celebrated”, “amplify[ing] the voice of Singapore’s social conscience”, and “also channeling the obvious generosity of sympathetic ordinary Singaporeans.”\textsuperscript{53} Tan explains that certain media stereotypes encourage the integration of migrant workers while others discourage interaction with them.\textsuperscript{54} In his 2011 study, Tan highlights frequently occurring themes about migrant workers in the media\textsuperscript{55} from which he lists social stereotypes of migrant workers:\textsuperscript{56}

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<tr>
<th>Discourage Integration</th>
<th>Encourage Integration</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Strangeness</td>
<td>7. Common humanity</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Cultural and racial inferiority</td>
<td>8. Hardship</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Low quality of work</td>
<td>9. Valuable contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Low integrity</td>
<td>10. Victimhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Danger</td>
<td>11. Vulnerability</td>
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<td>6. Competition</td>
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With the potential of inciting diverse societal perceptions of migrant workers, the media must necessarily be “editorially sensitive […] encouraging the kind of self-

\textsuperscript{51} Michael Peter Smith & Michael McQuarrie, \textit{‘Remaking Urban Citizenship’} (London: Transaction Publishers, 2012) at 105
\textsuperscript{52} Cheah at 223
\textsuperscript{53} Tan at 183
\textsuperscript{54} Tan
\textsuperscript{55} Tan at 162
\textsuperscript{56} Tan at 171
reflection and critical thinking appropriate in an enriched public sphere.” In this sense, the media possesses the potential to do what civil society is inherently less able to: rally the wider body of civil society to partake in the mission of the community integration of migrant workers.

In the final analysis, the humanitarian approach of civil society implores Singaporeans to “love foreigners as they love the native-born.” It appeals both to history and to morals; it argues, “Singaporeans knew how it felt to be a foreigner”, and calls to mind our migrant roots and our immigrant forefathers who also left their communities for a better life. However, as evident from the politicization of the legal and social exclusion of migrant workers, this moral-historical exhortation is insufficient justification alone for all of civil society to enthusiastically advance the community integration of migrant workers.

Nonetheless, this paper has shown there is value in ensuring civil society first recognizes the systemic, entrenched discrimination of migrant workers and their vulnerability. There is also true promise in a humanitarian approach because cultural transformation can inform various spheres of social life such as being the persuasive voice arguing that the law should reflect justice or social values. Therefore, civil society’s constant battle against established State policies and social sentiments that marginalize migrant workers is not necessarily a losing one.

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57 Cheah at 231