

Singaporeans in Batam¹: living with discourses of danger and corruption

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SINGAPOREANS RESIDING IN BATAM have received little attention from scholars. This is surprising given the nature of their sojourning, the economic importance given to the Singapore-Johor-Riau cross-border region, and the cross-border nature of these experiences. The academic literature has tended to focus on the economic aspects of this configuration – the differentials and arbitrage opportunities in relation to industry and tourism – and the sociological impact on the lives of Indonesians on the island.² While there has been some research on Singaporeans in Batam, it has mostly considered Singaporean men's masculinity and sexuality in relation to intimate relations with islanders.³

In 2013 we began a study attempting to address the gap in knowledge by examining Singaporeans living in Batam and their connections to Singapore, and to obtain as much information as possible about the lifestyles of Singaporeans residing in these two localities. Individuals were asked about reasons for moving to Batam; mobility patterns: frequency and mode of moving between Singapore and place of residence; consumption patterns; work arrangements; family arrangements; children's schooling; etc.

'Singaporeans' in this essay include both citizens and permanent residents of the country. For this essay, we draw upon the interviews conducted with five respondents living in Batam. As this is a small number of respondents, we make no claims about the generalisability of our findings. However, the interviews have provided us with insights into the experiences of Singaporeans living in Batam, particularly their encounters with discursive borders relating to danger and corruption.

Singaporeans in Batam: who are they?

It appears that the majority of Singaporeans live on Batam because they have been posted as agents and managers of Singapore-based firms or transnational corporations to set up and/or to manage subsidiaries on Batam. They tend to live in small flats close to work; their lives have a temporary and 'expat-like' nature. This group tends to be male. Those who are married travel back to Singapore over the weekends to spend time with their families, while those who are single do so less frequently. They may have to visit their company headquarters regularly. Another group of Singaporeans moved to Batam to set up their own companies and factories. From interviews it became clear that most respondents return to Singapore on a weekly basis.

Danger and corruption in Batam

In Singaporean media reports and the popular collective imaginings of Singaporeans, Batam is seen as a lawless frontier, where crime is rife, danger lurks around every corner and moral (sex tourism) and political corruption reign. "...the mentality of many Singaporeans to, say, go to Batam, retire there, maybe they think about the corruption, and then maybe some of them think that the law, what you call, maybe a lot of crimes there. They are thinking of crimes, the corruption of police there, maybe very dangerous living out of Singapore" (interview with Mr Toh, December 2013).

These Singapore-centric narratives surrounding Batam serve as discursive borders to sustain the 'imagined community' of the Singapore nation.⁴ They have a two-fold purpose: to define 'Singaporeanness' in contradistinction to its neighbours and to keep Singaporeans from venturing next door where life is cheaper and less regulated. One of our respondents called this a 'psychological barrier':

"... a lot of Singaporean place a psychological barrier *lah* about going over to [live in] Batam ..." (Mr Toh, December 2013).

It is within this discursive framework that Singaporeans living in Batam situate their understanding and impressions of their adopted hometown, and which they have to reconsider when challenged by their actual experience of life there. Singaporeans in Batam constantly have to confront national narratives and discourses – through friends, colleagues, family members, newspapers, TV, radio – about Batam. The narratives that Singaporeans in Batam have to deal with the most are related to danger and corruption.

"I find overall, you know, Batam quite ok for Singaporean, say you want to retire there, buy a house there is much much cheaper you know and it's not very far from Singapore. Strategically speaking, for people who want to retire there you know, to buy a house there. In my opinion, quite good ... the mindset of Singapore ... is that Batam is not safe. That's the feeling that some Singaporeans feel" (Mr Toh, December 2013).

For the majority of our respondents, their experiences of Batam are initially mediated through Singaporean characterisations – dangerous and corrupt. However, after some time, some aspects of these essentialised notions of Batam islanders and Indonesia begin to blur around the edges. In response, some Singaporeans manage to pull themselves out of Singapore-mediated notions of life in Batam, others remain in a limbo of contradictory narratives, while others find that these Singapore-based constructs are reinforced.

Conclusion

This essay has provided a summary of the discursive borders that Singaporeans encounter and engage with while living on Batam. The regularity and frequency of return to Singapore places them in fixed circuits of mobility that shape their experience of borders in ways that are different from that of Singaporeans who remain in Singapore or those who live

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in more distant countries. First, unlike Singaporeans living in Singapore, they are regularly confronted with the border and its attendant routines, bureaucracy, laws and symbols. Second, unlike their counterparts in more distant parts of the world, they are au courant with events in Singapore through Singaporean media that is available in Batam, regular and frequent visits to Singapore and constant contact with friends and family based in Singapore. Consequently, they become caught up in material and discursive borders, which challenge their own notions of identity, Singapore and Batam.

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Notes

- 1 We would like to thank our respondents for their time; names used in the text are pseudonyms. Our gratitude goes also to Francis Hutchinson and Terence Chong for their insightful comments and support.
- 2 Lindquist, J. 2009. *The Anxieties of Mobility: Migration and Tourism in Indonesia's Borderlands*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; Lyons, L. & M. Ford. 2007. 'Where Internal and International Migration Intersect: Mobility and the Formation of Multi-Ethnic Communities in the Riau Islands Transit Zone', *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 9(2):236-263 (<http://tinyurl.com/lyons-ford-2007>).
- 3 Williams, S., L. Lyons & M. Ford. 2008. 'It's about Bang for Your Buck, Bro: Singaporean Men's Online Conversations about Sex in Batam, Indonesia', *Asian Studies Review* 32(1):77-97 (<http://tinyurl.com/WLM-2008>); Chong, this issue of *The Newsletter*.
- 4 Anderson, B. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso Books.

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