

# Singapore's national identity is in the skyline

As we mark International Migrants Day, pause to consider those who literally built the national icons

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For The Straits Times

When we tell foreign friends we live in Singapore, the most common response by far goes like this: "I love Singapore, it's so beautiful and clean!" They rave about our supertrees, our durian-inspired theatre and the sci-fi ship sitting on top of the towers.

These responses tell us of the world's recognition of Singapore and its achievements. They make us feel proud of Singapore's identity and place in the world.

At the official opening of Jewel Changi Airport, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the complex "resonates with Singaporeans, because it reminds us that when we dream big and apply ourselves, nothing is impossible".

A big part of Singapore's national identity is in the skyline, attached to our architectural icons, buildings and infrastructure. They are visual testaments of how Singaporeans have created a First World nation out of sheer grit and determination.

But who actually built them?

## MISSING STORIES

Identity is a complex and evolving thing, built on the stories we tell ourselves. Dominant narratives of the Singapore story have often left out a key group of people: nearly one million low-wage migrants who build, clean, maintain and renovate the icons of our national pride.

As Singapore entered into partial lockdown earlier this year, we



Foreign workers at Jewel Changi Airport when it was under construction in 2017. A big part of Singapore's national identity is in the skyline, attached to our architectural icons, buildings and infrastructure, say the writers, who point out that dominant narratives of the Singapore story have often left out the low-wage migrant workers who build, clean, maintain and renovate the icons of our national pride. ST FILE PHOTO

tried to find some of these missing pieces for a Lien Centre for Social Innovation research project.

We got to know Xin, a construction worker from China who has been in Singapore for 12 years – more than a decade of separation from his wife and children who had grown up without him. Chatting over WhatsApp, we asked him about work. Knowing nothing of construction, we hoped he would tell us something we could put a handle on, like bricklayer, welder or electrician. He was none of them.

Xin is a formwork carpenter. He builds the moulds into which concrete is poured and formed. In his words, he was the most basic worker at the bottom of the hierarchy. For others, there may be high-, middle- and low-level workers, but for them, migrant workers on the worksite, "we're all the same, just workers doing work", he said. We were struck by his humility, and moved by what

sounded like equality in the trenches of construction.

His story tells us of a Singapore where people are valued differently based on the work they do and how much they earn. This may be a fact of life, but a sad fact that need not define our beliefs. We know there is dignity in all work. More importantly, we know there is value in every person. Regardless of the work a person does, he or she is a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, who loves and is deeply loved by someone else.

At a personal level, Xin's story reminded us of two different people we knew whose paths had never crossed except in the universality of their migration journeys.

In the early years of the 20th century, Christy's great-grandmother sailed as a teenager from war-torn Europe to America; in the 1930s, Qiuyi's grandfather escaped the Chinese civil war and made it to Singapore. Like Xin, they went in search of a

better life and worked hard to raise their families. Christy's great-grandmother was a domestic helper, Qiuyi's grandfather was a labourer. Separately, they were eventually given the opportunity to call America and Singapore home, foreign lands where their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren thrived. This is an opportunity Xin and others like him today do not have, no matter how long they have worked here, how many homes they have kept, or how many buildings they have built.

## CONNECTED IN CRISIS

Our encounter with Xin and others like him highlight the longstanding disconnect between us and them; and yet, Covid-19 has made a compelling personal connection. Resident or migrant, the health and well-being of everyone are linked in a pandemic. The problems confronting

low-wage migrants are many and complex, and well documented in research. But their visibility is limited to academics and advocates. The Lien Centre report, *Crisis And Connection: Unpacking Singapore's Migrant Worker Issues*, is an attempt to bridge this information gap. We reviewed the research out there and produced a primer on what you need to know about Singapore's migrant workers and why it matters.

We do this work because we believe transformative social change starts with knowledge and understanding, that evidence-based insight can help us pause and challenge status quo thinking about how we manage economic growth. It's an idea often credited to American poet Maya Angelou: When we know better, we can do better.

## BUILD BACK BETTER

As Covid-19 upends communities

and economies around the world, we've heard calls to build back better.

It's a concept that first emerged after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, that the period immediately after a crisis is a unique opportunity for change that improves on pre-disaster conditions.

The Singapore Government has signalled its commitment to the welfare of migrant workers, providing free medical care for infected workers and pledging to overhaul dormitory standards. Both are signs that the Government is taking the lead and making structural changes to improve workers' pre-Covid conditions.

But a comprehensive and sustained reconstruction is beyond the Government's remit. It requires a fundamental change in the way we see and understand low-wage migrants – indeed, everyone – and the crucial work they do: domestic work, construction, services, manufacturing, shipyards.

Building back better demands that we change the way our buildings are constructed so that we do a better job of protecting workers at the bottom of the labour supply chain. It demands that we question the dominant narratives about the buildings and infrastructure that define our country and identity.

On International Migrants Day tomorrow, we invite you to think about the "foreign" worker as a person you might know. Consider our shared humanity; say hello, smile, or nod, whatever you're comfortable with. We invite you to be curious and wonder, what's his or her story?

Some of the architectural marvels they have worked on may survive us and become monuments studied by future historians and anthropologists – perhaps our children and grandchildren – intent on telling the full story. What would that story say about Singapore, its defining values as a people, and what it stands for as a nation?

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