

Feeling the Drain in Singapore

■ Despite prosperity, many professionals are fleeing. They blame the 'rat race' of education and rigid controls on everyday life.

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SINGAPORE—Is success spoiling Singapore?

In 25 years since independence, this island nation has grown from a swampy backwater getting much of its income as a base for Britain's imperial fleet to one of the economic powerhouses of Asia. Per capita income is more than \$8,000 a year, ahead of Spain and on a par with New Zealand.

Singapore's 2.6 million people also enjoy some of the best amenities in Asia, including a \$2.5-billion subway system that whisks them to work in air-conditioned silence; fine schools, and manicured parks along city streets where potholes are scrupulously repaired within 24 hours. Politeness is a national motto in Singapore, and the crime rate is tiny—just 36 murders last year in a city the size of Miami.

So even jaded Singaporeans were floored recently when Lee Kuan Yew, the country's only prime minister since independence, appeared on television with tears in his eyes to warn that the number of people leaving the country is growing at an alarming rate.

Lee said more than 4,700 families—about 14,000 people—applied to emigrate last year. That compared with 2,000 families in the early 1980s and 1,000 annually in the 1970s.

"Singaporeans are going to get creamed off unless we face this problem in a rational, cool intelligent way, make adjustments, educate our people so that they can weigh the pros and cons and not go by rumor or hearsay," Lee told the nation.

Although the numbers are still relatively small, a recent analysis by the U.S. stock brokerage firm Merrill Lynch compared the brain drain in Singapore to that of Hong Kong, which is facing massive emigration because China is scheduled to take over control from the British in 1997.

"Singapore's 4,000-families-per-year emigration rate is not significantly less than Hong Kong's annual talent drain of 45,000 persons, especially if one considers the differing population sizes," the report said. Hong Kong has roughly 5.6 million people, more than twice Singapore's population.

But Singapore lacks an obvious threat, such as faces Hong Kong, where fear of becoming part of China in 1997 has soared since the massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing last June. The Merrill Lynch study noted, for example, that more Singaporeans now work in Hong Kong than Hong Kong citizens work in Singapore.

Opinion is divided about why Singaporeans want to leave. But as one politician noted, most just want to escape the island's "rat race." Although based on the altruistic

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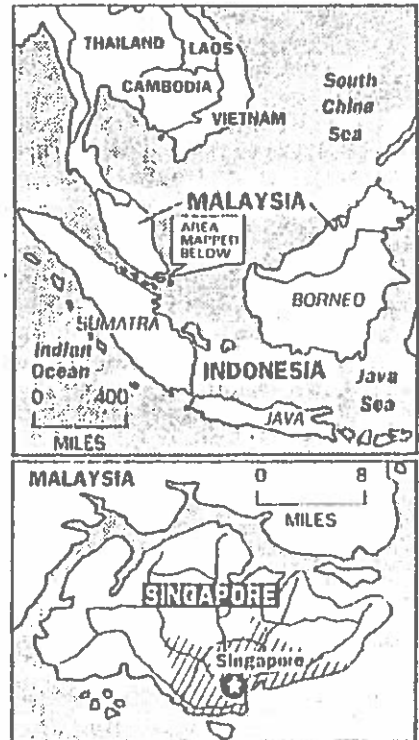
notion of creating a true meritocracy, the country has instituted an intensely competitive system that begins in nursery school and ratchets up the pressure well past university into the job market.

Lee noted that most of the emigrants come from the "top 25%" of Singapore society, suggesting that professionals such as doctors and engineers are the main ones leaving. Most of them are heading to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States.

A kind of yardstick of the emigration problem is the widely publicized case of the staff of Singapore Airlines, which is consistently ranked in passenger surveys as one of the world's top two airlines. But 52 of the airline's staff, including 13 flight engineers, emigrated last year.

The government sent a member of Parliament to interview the departing flight engineers. The two reasons most often given were "too many restrictions and regulations" and children's education.

Unlike Hong Kong, which has a freewheeling society where virtually anything goes, life in Singapore is stringently controlled by the government.



Los Angeles Times

"Here the government is everything," one diplomat said. "It runs Singapore like a corporation, with a clear set of objectives."

Books, magazines and films are censored with a heavy, often puritanical hand. In daily life, Singaporeans face a barrage of warnings

about forbidden activities, from eating or drinking in the new subway (subject to a \$250 fine) to failing to flush a toilet (\$125). There are daily exhortations to produce more efficiently and work harder. One campaign even urged the drudgery-prone working population to have some "spontaneous fun."

"When you look at any given campaign, it's hard to quibble with having clean streets or no graffiti in the subway," said one professional. "But the total result is the feeling that you are forever living in the third grade, with teacher telling you when to blow your nose."

Drivers Take Heed

Singaporeans have become so compliant, in fact, that on the day after the government announced a "Don't be a road hog" campaign—aimed at getting drivers to leave the passing lane unblocked on highways—a Western resident said she was amazed to see not a single car in the fast lane anywhere in the island.

Similarly, during last year's National Day festivities, the government threw a street party to celebrate. Expecting 20,000 people to attend, the police were horrified when 500,000 showed up. A policeman announced over a megaphone that the party was canceled, and all 500,000 people quietly departed without a murmur of complaint.

The government has established an office called the Psychological Defense Unit, which is designed, in the words of director David Ma, to develop a "sense of belonging."

"Our worry is that in times of crisis, our people won't stay, they'll just quit," said Ma, himself an immigrant from Hong Kong. "This is a means of trying to win over the hearts and minds of the people so when this comes, they will stay on and fight."

Currently, Ma is directing two public campaigns, one a courtesy campaign aimed "at creating a gracious society" and the other to get Singapore's ethnic Chinese, who make up 70% of the population, to speak Mandarin. More than 20 years ago, the former British colony adopted English as its main language as a means of integrating with the world economy and to fight Chinese dialects, which were considered a breeding ground for outside infiltration.

The courtesy campaign has been successful—taxi drivers are required by law to be polite. A visitor from New York was amazed recently when the administration of the subway system apologized profusely to passengers because a train was two minutes late.

But all this is a mixed blessing. One woman who works in a government department said she was emigrating because she and her husband are concerned about the effects of "regimentation" on her children.

Normally civil servants in Singapore enjoy benefits far ahead of their counterparts in the region. Ministers earn more than \$100,000 a year and senior officials make more than \$50,000, under a policy designed to attract the best people to government work and avoid the temptations of corruption.

But the female civil servant, who spoke in an interview on the condition that her name not be used, said the education system has become so competitive that it is no longer worth the monetary rewards.

"Our daughter has to fight tooth and nail to keep up," she said.

"Everything is so geared to success, to financial gain. Why should we put her through that?"

Children of nursery-school age regularly have tutors hired by their parents. A child's future career prospects are often determined by an examination given in the third grade, including a written test in Mandarin Chinese, which most students do not speak at home.

Other government intrusions that are frequently complained about include military service (most men are required to report every other weekend); difficulties with home ownership (80% of Singapore's population lives in government housing), and the expense of owning a private car (the import duty is 175% of the sticker price to discourage driving).

Another factor, which is harder to gauge, is the extent to which people resent a political system in which a single group, Lee's People's Action Party, controls 80 of the 81 seats in Parliament.

"People have many different reasons for emigration, but the main reason is the unhealthy political climate," said Lee Siew Choh, an opposition politician who was appointed to Parliament. "Emigration is the crudest form of political opposition."

Prime Minister Lee announced last weekend that he will step down before the end of 1990. In his New Year's message, Lee, 66, said that First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong will be his successor, ending speculation that he would pass the position to his son, Lee Hsien Loong. But many expect Lee to retain a voice on key decisions while handpicked successors run the country.

Lee Siew Choh complained in an interview that recent elections have been tainted because ballot papers were numbered, implying that a voter's preferences could be traced by the authorities. He also voiced opposition to the use of the Internal Security Act, which provides for detention without trial.

Asked in a recent newspaper interview why the government retained the security law, Prime Minister Lee responded by arguing that the country's ethnic mix of Chinese, Malays and Indians makes a volatile cocktail.

"Disparate groups of people came to make a living under British rule. They remained themselves in separate, distinct compartments," Lee said. "It's like an aquarium, with different glass partitions and different salinity of water. We're trying to form one nation out of them by removing the glass partitions and gradually equalizing the salinity."

But the nervousness this policy has generated was illustrated recently when the government banned smoking in all restaurants. Although such a move elsewhere might be expected to produce a range of feelings, a Western television crew that tried to interview people about their views could find

no one willing to talk.

The government has also drawn fire for attempts at social and genetic engineering. One plan to offer a \$5,000 bonus to unschooled people who volunteered for sterilization was withdrawn after an outcry.

But the children of educated parents still have easier access to the best high schools, and a government department with the innocuous name of the Social Development Unit tries to arrange marital matches between civil servants of promising intellectual prowess.

The government has reversed its efforts to curb population growth and now openly encourages families to have babies to help offset the number of people who are emigrating.

Another solution to the problem of declining population was to offer a place of refuge to Hong Kong's worried populace. The government says it has offered permanent residence to 25,000 educated Chinese from Hong Kong, but the actual results depend to a large extent on the uncertainty in the British colony.

Meanwhile, Lee's government has set up committees of experts to study the emigration situation and seek ways of giving the younger generation the kind of attachment to the country that older people feel.

Speaking of emigrants recently, a member of Parliament commented: "They want less regulation, more freedom. They complain ours is a 'one mistake' society, with no tolerance for failure, no second chance. . . . In short, they want to opt out of the rat race."