Since the establishment of Singapore as a British trading port by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, “the history and fortunes of Singapore have been closely intertwined with migrants and migration” (Yeoh, 2007a). Singapore, a former British Colony, gained its independence in 1965. We can broadly identify two waves of migration into Singapore: pre-independence migration, which was principally for permanent settlement, and post-independence migration, which is largely for temporary work with non-resident status. Since political independence in 1965, Singapore’s economic growth has attracted this new wave of non-resident foreign manpower from high-end to low-end positions. The non-resident population increased from 2.9% in 1970 to 5.5% in 1980 (Yeoh, 2004: 19). This group made up 10.2% of Singapore’s total population of then 3.05 million in 1990, but swelled to make up 18.8% of the population of 4.02 million in 2000 (Business Times, Singapore, 1 September 2000). The recent data shows that the non-resident population makes up around 26% of the population in Singapore (Straits Times, 12 January 2007). The contribution of foreign manpower to the Singapore economy is well-documented (see Low, 2002; Pang & Lim, 1982; Hui, 1997). According to one study in 2001, foreign workers contributed a hefty 36.9% of Singapore’s economic growth over the past 10 years.

1 The non-resident population holds passes for short-term stay in Singapore and includes the employment pass, work permits, dependent pass, student pass, long-term social visit pass etc. In 2006, there were 875,000 non-resident foreigners in Singapore (Straits Times (2007) “A Great Place to Live” 10 March or Li Xueying, “Non-resident population on the up and up” in Straits Times, 7 December 2006).

2 The number of permanent residents (PR) more than doubled in the last 10 years, to 290,118 from 112,132. PRs make up 7.2% of Singapore’s population, compared to 3.7% a decade ago. The number of Singapore citizens grew by just around 350,000 in 10 years, to 2.97 million (Business Times, Singapore (2000) “Singapore Population Crosses 4 Million Mark” 1 September).


4 Foreign workers contributed 36.9% of the total GDP growth from 1991 to 2000. In contrast, local labour accounted for only 14.1% of the total growth. For details, see
Managing migration, as Doomernik et al. (2005) suggest, is “metaphorically akin to walking a tightrope,” because the government has to try to keep the domestic population’s aspirations and economic needs in balance. Singapore’s government makes every effort to increase public awareness about the growing importance of immigration for Singapore’s economy and society. For instance, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew recently commented that foreigners add dynamism to Singapore, which cannot afford to remain static in a changing and globalised world (Straits Times, 23 April 2007).5 The Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, in his National Day Rally speech in August 2006 made it clear, that Singapore needs foreign manpower for economic growth and prosperity. The Deputy Prime Minister, Wong Kan Seng, in a recent speech stated: “Singapore’s 4.5 million population faces two troubling trends that spell demographic doom without immigration: it is aging and there are not enough babies” (Straits Times, 3 March 2007).6

The reason for hiring foreign manpower should be principally seen from an economic point of view, i.e. the gap between a limited pool of local labour and a high rate of employment creation. Hui (2002) reported that Singapore’s economic growth between 1990 and 1998 averaged 7.9% p.a. Over this period, more than 604,000 new jobs were created against an increase of about 300,000 in the domestic labour force (Hui, 2002: 33). Based on this data, Hui (2002) maintains that, without the inflow of foreign manpower to supplement the domestic labour force, the phenomenal growth in employment and gross domestic product (GDP) over that period would not have been possible. In addition, there are some other studies that have discussed the raison d’être for hiring foreign manpower in greater detail (see Chew & Chew, 1995; Wong, 1997; Low, 2002; Pang & Lim, 1982; Hui, 1992, 1997). In this context, Singapore has devised a sophisticated migration policy, based on a ‘demand-driven system’ to allow regular circulation of foreign labour.

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6 “Country faces demographic doom if door is shut to them….This is because Singapore’s 4.5 million population faces two troubling trends that spell demographic doom without immigration: it is ageing and there are not enough babies” Straits Times (2007) “S’pore needs immigrants to avert population decline” 3 March.