

The Chinese immigration challenge

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The time is ripe to relook their interaction opportunities with local-born citizens

With her fair complexion, poise and fashion-forward dressing, my friend S. has the well-brought-up yet indefinable air of one who could have grown up anywhere from Serangoon Gardens to Seoul.

When we were first introduced by a mutual friend seven years ago, she spoke fluent English with no distinct accent. I was surprised she was from China, the younger of two siblings in a Hangzhou family that had made its money in textiles.

The winds of life had blown her to university in the United States, a job in Hong Kong and now, handling China investments for a Singapore property firm. We became friends because she was passionate about the arts and whip smart - her one frivolous weakness being online and catalogue shopping.

Now a Singapore citizen, S. represents the kind of well-educated, upwardly mobile Chinese professional the Singapore Government wants to attract. The problem is that the large number of new Chinese immigrants like her has also become a tinder box for Singaporeans' simmering anti-foreigner sentiment, as recent incidents show.

The list of insensitive or errant China-born residents whose actions have sparked public outcry has grown in recent months. They include a Chinese family who complained about their Indian Singaporean neighbours cooking curry because of the smell from it, two Chinese students whose derogatory remarks about Singaporeans went viral, and a Chinese national who hijacked a taxi and hit and killed an airport cleaner.

Then came the fatal accident last month in which a man from Sichuan province - a resident here since 2008 - crashed his Ferrari into a taxi, killing himself, the Singaporean cabby and the latter's Japanese passenger.

These incidents have provoked two contrasting responses among commentators. One group has lobbed criticism at new immigrants from China for not being sensitive to the norms of Singapore's law-abiding, predominantly English-speaking, multiracial society. Another group has, in turn, read the outcry as an unbecoming display of xenophobia and racism.

What has been missing in the debate is a hard and detailed look at how effective efforts to integrate new immigrants have been, particularly those from China and India who in recent years have come in droves and may have less incentive to get out of their comfort zone and make friends with local-born Singaporeans.

There are now about 175,000 new immigrants from China, Hong Kong and Macau who are either citizens here or permanent residents.

They make up 4.6 per cent of the resident population, according to the latest census in 2010, and constitute the second-largest source of new immigrants after Malaysia. While the greatest

spike in new immigrants has come from the Indian subcontinent, in absolute numbers, this group is still smaller than that from greater China.

From my observations and previous interviews with China-born residents, there are two distinct groups. The first wave came here in the 1990s when China's economy was still struggling, mostly with their families and the intention of sinking roots in Singapore.

But the majority of new Chinese immigrants came in the 21st century, are better-educated and go where the jobs and opportunities are. Settling here is only one of several options, including returning to a resurgent motherland or heading on to the West.

A huge plank of Singapore's integration efforts is in the heartland. The People's Association has spared no effort in organising block parties and community centre activities to reach out to new immigrants.

But this misses the significant number of new immigrant professionals who live in private housing. I recall once interviewing a finance professional from China in his mid-20s who lived in a condominium. He told me that because he had met as many as 100 China nationals around his age in the financial sector, he had never made any local friends.

To target those like him, it makes sense to create more integration opportunities in the workplace. The National Integration Council has a fund that organisations can tap for projects to help new immigrants and locals get to know one another, and more should be done to promote this fund to companies.

In fact, a recent study by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) sociologist Mathew Mathews suggests that HDB estates may not be the best place to forge meaningful friendships between new immigrants and locals, despite a high incidence of casual neighbourhood interaction.

Through in-depth interviews with foreign- and local-born citizens living in the heartland, he found that the neighbourhood space was primarily seen not as a social space but as a place to switch off and 'recuperate from the stressors of public life'. For new immigrants, the home neighbourhood is also a 'backstage' where they could live their lives the way they were accustomed to, growing up in their countries of origin'.

The relatively low incidence of interracial friendships among new immigrants from China is another significant finding from Dr Mathews' study, presented at an IPS conference on integration last month. His survey of about 900 foreign-born citizens found that 31.6 per cent of new immigrants from China have Singaporean friends of another race, against 87.8 per cent for new immigrants from India.

There are a few clan associations representing new Chinese immigrants which have done a lot to integrate with the local Chinese clan groups. But they and Chinese student associations should also look into organising activities with non-Chinese groups.

Such interracial exchanges would go a long way towards easing cultural misunderstanding. A third area that should be looked into is the number of foreign students on Ministry of Education scholarships, particularly those from increasingly affluent countries like China. Earlier this year, the ministry said a total of 1,700 pre-tertiary and undergraduate students from non-Asean countries are awarded scholarships to study here each year.

Over time, it said, international students will form a smaller proportion of the student body. But the issue is not just reducing the numbers to give more opportunities to locals, but also ensuring an even distribution of foreign students in the schools and universities so that they do not form large cliques.

Singapore's immigration policy needs to find the sweet spot that balances the diversity and talent brought to our shores with giving Singaporeans the fair shake they deserve as citizens.

But the policy will also come to nought on the ground if local Singaporeans retreat into their shells and new immigrants, into their enclaves. Opportunities for interaction between the two groups should be relooked so that people can truly benefit from the multiculturalism in their midst.