

Welcome, stranger

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Immigration is again a hot potato. Foreigners who came in five different decades tell how they integrated here

China-born Andy Liu's best friend is not a fellow mainlander, as some Singaporeans who fret about foreigners here not integrating would expect. Instead, it is a Chinese Singaporean who has made him feel at home.

Mr Liu, 31, has kind-hearted Mr C.K. Chen to thank for helping him settle in when he arrived here nine years ago from Jilin province.

He found work as an engineering assistant at an electronics factory, and Mr Chen, his supervisor then, went the extra mile for the migrant.

Despite knowing Mr Liu for just a few months, he readily agreed to be his guarantor for a part-time electronics diploma course he had signed up for at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

It was no small sum to guarantee either: \$20,000.

Mr Liu, now the owner of two Chinese restaurants in Geylang Road and a Singapore citizen since March, says: 'Other Singaporeans whom I had approached to be guarantors turned me down. They said, 'If you don't pay the school fees, I'll have to take the rap!'

He rewarded his boss' faith by successfully completing the course, even though it was in English.

The two are still close to this day, with Mr Liu describing their relationship as 'the best of best friends'.

Obviously still grateful, he recalls that Mr Chen would take him to popular eating places to make him feel welcome.

Mr Liu's happy story of integration comes as a bright spot amid a hot issue - complaints by Singaporeans about the increasing number of new immigrants. Their concerns include newcomers who cannot speak or understand English and that they might take jobs away from locals.

The annual number of new immigrants, foreigners granted citizenship and permanent residence has soared from 44,500 in 2004 to 99,600 last year.

The issue came under the spotlight again at a speech made by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew at the Tanjong Pagar National Day celebration dinner.

In his speech, MM Lee said that Singaporeans have to embrace new immigrants because these foreigners help make up for the low fertility rates here and keep both the economy and labour force from shrinking.

But he assured Singaporeans that the Government will protect their interests and that the number of immigrants will be carefully controlled to preserve the character and values of the society here.

Singaporeans' discomfort about the wave of foreigners comes despite the country's multi-ethnic society and longstanding immigrant tradition.

A trigger may have been the increase in the proportion of foreigners - permanent residents and non-residents - here to the total population, which climbed to 35 per cent in 2008, 'well above the level five to 10 years ago' says Professor Gavin Jones, 68, a National University of Singapore sociologist and research leader at the Asia Research Institute.

He adds: 'Is social cohesion threatened? It's very hard to say. But this is not to say that social stability will automatically be maintained.'

Taking a historical perspective, Dr Leong Chan Hoong, 37, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, says: 'In the 1960s, our sense of nationhood was young, the majority were poor and immigrants then did not enjoy any privilege or special attention from the Government.'

'So, everyone, both native and foreign-born residents, rode out challenges together with no one having a distinctive advantage over the other.'

In the 1990s, however, initiatives to attract foreign talent fanned feelings of resentment towards new immigrants, because the public chose to disregard the fact that citizens still enjoy more privileges, says Dr Leong.

Associate Professor Paulin Straughan, 46, a National University of Singapore sociologist, adds that insufficient social integration is the root cause for such feelings of resentment.

Dr Straughan, who is also a Nominated Member of Parliament, says: 'As long as the new immigrants remain a separate social entity that is socially isolated, there will always be possible misconceptions between both groups.'

She adds that the current economic downturn, where there is perceived competition for well-paying jobs, might also trigger resentment towards newcomers.

To bridge the gap between locals and new immigrants, the Government has taken steps such as setting up the National Integration Council in April this year to promote social integration among Singaporeans and new immigrants.

Integration and Naturalisation Champions - who are grassroots leaders appointed by the People's Association - have also been reaching out to foreign residents in the community through house visits and invitations to community-based leisure activities such as cooking demonstrations and neighbourhood tours.

There are about 640 such champions and they made contact with more than 13,000 new immigrants last year.

And as much as Singaporeans have a part to play in reaching out to new immigrants, all would agree that foreign-born residents should also make an effort to adapt.

Indonesian-born Sumitro Joyo Taslim, 31, a senior process engineer at a semiconductor company here who became a Singapore citizen last year, is an example of a new immigrant trying to engage with the community to better integrate here.

He says: 'As an Integration and Naturalisation Champion, I get to form closer relationships with residents in the neighbourhood and, at the same time, help other new immigrants form ties with the community.'