

## **The Young Chinese Next Door**

### **A new breed of Chinese nationals are making their way to Singapore**

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Now that she has made it to the promised land, Hunan native Gong Yan is determined that her new life in Singapore is going to work out even if it did not start out quite as planned.

Her mission when she arrived last year was to land a decent job but she ended up with a Singaporean husband instead.

Ms Gong, 22, is aware of the bad reputation surrounding Chinese women who marry Singaporean men, but she is not bothered, finding strength in the survival-of-the-fittest mentality that marks immigrants like her.

'Bu shi meng long bu guo jiang,' says the former bar singer. The Chinese saying, loosely translated, means only the brave are willing to face challenges.

Her sentiments are shared by many young Chinese nationals who leave the familiarity of home to seek better opportunities for education and work here.

Increasing numbers in their 20s have been flocking here in recent years, with many choosing to stay on.

Take hairstylist Roy Chen, 25, for example. Four years ago, he won a hairstyling competition in China that gave him a ticket to work here.

He is now a manager at local hairstyling chain Kimage and hopes to apply for permanent residency.

'In China, I'm just a small fish in a big pond. It is much more competitive there than in Singapore,' says the Wuhan native. 'Back home, I have to work till midnight every day, but in Singapore, I knock off at about 9pm, so why would I want to go back?'

Real estate agent Kevin Feng shares the same sentiments. Mr Feng has been in Singapore since 2003 and became a citizen just last year. He specialises in selling high-end properties.

'In Singapore, I get to rub shoulders with the rich and powerful directly and learn from them. But in China, it is not so easy because there are so many layers you have to go through before getting to the top bosses,' he says.

The Hubei native's plan is to build up his career here before expanding to China in the future.

Official figures on the number of Chinese nationals in Singapore are not available but recruitment agents have noted that the demographics are changing.

Recruitment agency Forte Employment brings about five Chinese workers in to do jobs in the service and construction industry monthly.

Manager Richard Heng, 35, notes that the workers are getting younger and more savvy.

'They do their own research and have much more information about Singapore before they come here.'

They are also choosier about the kind of jobs they would do and their pay, he adds.

Mr Mike Hor, 41, director of Z2 Recruitment Consultancy, says: 'There are still some of them coming here purely to earn money. But more are coming here for the learning experience.'

Despite the fast-growing Chinese economy and the global focus on China, Singapore is still a top destination among many youngsters looking for an overseas experience.

Mr Xu Yue, 23, has been in Singapore for about six months now. The executive in a human resource company does not think he is missing out on opportunities in China.

'China is advancing rapidly but it is still a developing country. Singapore is a developed nation and there are many things China can learn from Singapore,' he says.

'Furthermore, Singapore is more cosmopolitan, and I can learn about working with people from all nationalities here. And that experience will help me when I get back to China.'

The arrivals today are more affluent and have a greater degree of social mobility, notes Professor Liu Hong, chair of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Nanyang Technological University.

He says: 'As China becomes more prosperous, there are more middle-class and well-to-do Chinese who can send their children abroad for higher education.'

Many of these young Chinese still believe it is easier to integrate into Singapore's society because of its dominant Chinese culture, he adds.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow from the Institute of Policy Studies, agrees: 'Singapore is attractive to the Chinese because of the geographical and cultural proximity.'

'They are still going to experience culture shock but on a more manageable magnitude compared to, say, the United States or Canada.'

That less daunting cultural change drew Ms Rita Qu Yuan, 23, here.

The diploma holder says she learnt about Singapore through local drama serials broadcast on TV in China and liked what she saw. Three months ago, the sales assistant came to work at Tangs department store.

'I like the environment in Singapore. Things are orderly and clean,' she says.

She had given up a relatively comfortable office job in Xian for an experience in Singapore.

'I'm not here to make lots of money. I'm here to work and tour at the same time,' she adds.

The growing Chinese presence has prompted Singaporeans to complain about the seemingly huge influx.

Netizens gripe about how the young Chinese are competing with locals for jobs and housing and crowding the public transport system.

In 2008, young Chinese working in Singapore were thrown into the spotlight.

Then Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Boon Heng mentioned how he received a complaint from a local woman working at a coffee shop in Jurong West.

She was worried that the pretty and younger beer promoter from China, who works at the same place, might undercut her wages.

An online incident involving another young Chinese had Singaporeans up in arms just this year.

Student Wang Pengfei, 24, who was in his final year studying hospitality full-time at the East Asia Institute of Management, uploaded a video of himself mocking Singaporeans and local culture.

His blunt remarks riled Singaporeans and a police report was made for alleged racist comments. Mr Wang fled the country, was expelled by his school and later had his student visa revoked.

Mr Xu, a Sichuan native, believes that because young Chinese are more Internet-savvy, any grievances they have can now be put online and viewed by many.

'Young Chinese are more frank and passionate. And sometimes they will say things that may offend others.'

However, Mr Xu points out that Chinese youths like Mr Wang are a minority.

But Dr Leong thinks that it is much more than just the Internet. He points out that the large influx of Chinese nationals is the main cause of many anxieties.

He also believes the cause of resentment against migrants has gone beyond economics.

'It is now a contestation of space and identity,' he says.

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, from the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, is quick to point out that while it takes two willing parties for integration to work well, the ideal scenario may prove elusive.

'Singaporeans probably expect immigrants to make the necessary adjustments, since as a general rule, one does not consider it right for guests to come into your house and demand changes,' he says.

Prof Liu believes Singapore will see more Chinese immigrants coming in years to come but at a slower pace. He says Singapore's low birth rate and continuous advancement in the knowledge economy are compelling reasons why more migrants, especially those with good education, will need to be brought in.

'The bottom line is that China is still the most populous nation in the world and it has a longstanding tradition of emigration,' he adds.

Ms Catherine Ge, 28, is a forerunner of the wave of young Chinese coming to Singapore.

The manager in a travel agency has been here since 2000. She took her O-level exams here and went on to graduate with a diploma from Nanyang Polytechnic.

But Ms Ge, who is returning to China at the end of this year, wonders if the gap between Singaporeans and Chinese nationals can be completely bridged. When the Shanghainese native, who is now a Singapore permanent resident, brings back snacks from her visits to China for her Singaporean colleagues, some joke and ask if they are melamine-tainted. 'It does not seem to matter how long I have been here. I feel Singaporeans still do not accept people like me as one of them.'

Ms Ge does not plan to apply for Singapore citizenship after being rejected two years ago. And she does not plan to extend her PR beyond its 2016 expiry but she hopes to come back for holidays and to visit her Singaporean friends.

'I've been here for so long. There's bound to be feelings for Singapore,' she says.

Meanwhile, newly-wed Gong Yan is happy to live in Singapore for the long haul and hopes to get permanent residency soon.

'I will teach my children about Singapore and China, and tell them about the story of why I came to Singapore.'