

## **Foreigner-local relations: It takes two to tango**

### **Is xenophobia a growing problem? The debate continued in the post-show segment of Thursday's VoicesTODAY. Here are excerpts:**

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#### ***On Perceptions and Reaching Out***

Huang He: We should not perceive people as only being "in this profession or from this country, so they're in that category". Instead, have people reached out personally? Maybe after one interaction, opinions would change. People may not be so willing to take that first step, although I see some good things happening. I am from China and I know that some volunteer organisations here teach English to Chinese who cannot speak it, so they could have some basic communication with locals.

Joyce Too: A group of us started this (teaching English) about two years ago. We wanted a more long-term commitment and to get to know the foreign workers, rather than a touch-and-go event. A few of us are inviting some of them to our homes this Chinese New Year, so they can understand what it is like. This group is being ignored and marginalised; many negative comments are made about them. So we curbed our fears and went into their dormitories because it is hard for them to make time for classes outside.

Leong Chan-Hoong: It is great that ordinary citizens are reaching out to foreigners. For the longest time, a lot of the effort was made by the Government, such as taking the lead in getting the grassroots organised and integrating foreign students. Singaporeans complain that the Government prefers foreigners to locals and it could do more by doing less. For example, let foreigners find accommodation in public housing estates, rather than allocate them to the hostels. Then they would get to interact with the real Singaporeans.

#### ***Xenophobia or Less Tolerance?***

Gowtum Seetloo: I have been here since 2005 (from Mauritius) and have had a few bad experiences. The first was my first Deepavali in Singapore. We were celebrating at the ground floor, the children had sparklers and then the police came because of complaints about too much smoke. I was astonished by this type of complaint. The neighbours were waiting, seeing what we were doing and we felt uncomfortable. It is not possible to cause breathing difficulties with one packet of sparklers. I had always heard good things about Singapore as a multicultural society, so this was unexpected.

Chan-Hoong: Common touch points will be important for promoting interaction between foreigners and locals. The other point is that Singaporeans are probably getting a little less tolerant of one another, regardless of race or nationality. The infrastructure issues are real and must be addressed. I am optimistic that if we solve some of those problems — housing and transport — the climate will improve.

## ***Online Vitriol***

Carol Soon: Unfortunately, bad news tends to stick. Just as Joyce and Huang. He have shared experiences of Singaporeans reaching out, I have also seen, in the course of our study, foreigners reaching out to Singaporeans. For example, Filipinos here have set up a portal that, other than disseminating information to their countrymen about places to go and things o do, talks about what Singapore is about, which norms are acceptable and which are not. Assimilation is important, which is their message to their countrymen. Different sites have their own moderation policies. Sites that attract more eyeballs moderate and censor comments that are too vitriolic or derogatory, for example. That is probably the more sustainable way: Teach people what to do when they encounter negative experiences online. For one, research has shown that trolls go away if you ignore them. There are also sites that give you the option to report a user or bad comment. Finally, you can choose to leave the site. People often think the offline world is very different from the online world. But they are linked. If there are resolutions in the real world, we would probably see fewer of these comments, less corrosive speech online.

Joyce: We must not forget the software: Our hearts. If we do not change the way we look at lower-income groups, the ones I have had experience with, that are getting these negative comments and feelings, then it would be hard for them to feel that Singapore welcomes them.

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