

Finding their feet, then fitting in here

Loh Chee Kong

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WHILE its efforts to attract foreigners here are bearing fruit, the Government needs to apply the same acumen to making sure they fit in once they land on our shores.

To do so, it needs to stop viewing them in terms of purely dollars and cents — that is, offering them only economic opportunities.

"We need to look at integration policies, which are as complex as our immigration policies ... What we have not invented are the integration policies after they have entered the door and come in," said Professor Brenda Yeoh, a geography expert at the National University of Singapore, citing her interviews with several skilled emigrants who said gaining Singapore permanent residency or citizenship was just a stepping stone to emigration elsewhere.

Speaking yesterday at an Institute of Policy Studies forum on migration and social issues, Prof Yeoh said Singapore needs to focus on integrating not only the expat "talents".

"The integration and support mechanisms should go beyond ... to also the students, the unskilled workers and the spouses. Each category deserves careful consideration. For example, the foreign spouses who come in are not getting support groups."

She added, to *Today*: "There are policies largely aimed at the economic sphere, in terms of managing possible tensions as a result of the competition between local and foreign.

"But what is still very much lacking are policies to do with the other spheres of life. Education of the young is a very important starting point in cultivating a cosmopolitan, tolerant outlook as they interact with foreigners."

Civil society can also play a role in organising activities for foreigners and locals to interact away from the workplace, added Prof Yeoh, who has published books and journals on migration issues.

Sociologist Kwok Kian Woon of the Nanyang Technological University too felt that Singapore "needs to think beyond

economics" to create an emotional bond among the foreigners it wants to attract.

"What is so unique about Singapore and what makes it attractive and compelling enough for people to say, 'This is the place that I can give a good part of my life to'?" he said.

Embracing them within a Singapore identity or culture could be one way. But the role of government must be carefully managed. For example, he felt that the early years of the 21st century, when society was undergoing changes and everything was being questioned, had been an opportune time for Singapore to develop its own culture.

But, Associate Professor Kwok, said: "In Singapore, the tension between conservative forces and a newer set of values is almost always managed in a neat and plain way."

When yesterday's session was opened to the floor, a member of the audience said that the Speak Mandarin Campaign was stunting the development of Singaporean culture — by killing off the dialects — "just like the way the Stop At Two policy stunted our birth rates".

Another participant noted that the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others model of categorising Singaporeans — and which the Government has indicated it would be relooking — was another example of a policy that needs to be changed.

Weighing in, one Permanent Resident said he did not like being labelled a "foreign talent".

He called for Singapore to rethink its stance against dual citizenship — which was outlawed here in 1960 — if it wished to attract foreigners as well as retain its own talents.

Agreeing, Prof Yeoh told Today: "The world has changed. While some of these issues (of nation building) are still very much part of what nations have to cope with, people's working lives are not going to be tied to one place."