Foreign talent debate:
Foreigners bring the world to our doorstep

While many feel foreign talents come at expense of locals, they do benefit us

BY CHRISTOPHER CHOO

I HAVE an uneasy feeling that Singaporeans are sometimes treated as second-class citizens in our own country.

Reading complaints about preferential treatment for expatriates in restaurants or hearing how stewardesses on our own national airline serve Westerners before Asians doesn’t help to ease that feeling. At times, I even suspect the foreign-talent policy, widely adopted in local sports, forges the development of local talent in favour of overseas imports.

I believe my concerns point to a deep-seated fear that Singaporeans genuinely fear the days of local talent are numbered. In fact, the joke today is that a local should study in a foreign university and return as foreign talent.

But how does one become foreign talent? From the 1970s to the mid-1990s, it came in the form of the educated expatriate businessman, who set up subsidiaries here for multinational corporations.

In the past decade, with the liberalisation of the Chinese and Indian economies, foreign talent has come to mean more Singaporean.

Today, from school to the workplace, Singaporeans compete head-on with these foreigners daily. And the trend is here to stay. The number of non-citizens has more than doubled from 311,264 in 1990 to about 753,400 last year, while the population has increased by only about 40 per cent from 3.04 million to 4.24 million.

Not surprisingly, the influx has caused alarm. Last year, Singaporeans were shocked when academics said three of four new jobs went to foreigners. Their fears subsided when the Manpower Ministry said nine out of 10 new jobs created went to locals.

This year, parents complained their children now rank lower in class because of outstanding international students.

The truth is foreigners have been part and parcel of Singapore ever since Raffles arrived here in 1819. Many of our own ancestors arrived barely a century ago.

While there is valid reason to fear being overshadowed by brilliant foreigners, many of them have brought something special with them. Take, for instance, how we were dazzled by Li Huaizhi and Ronald Susilo at the Olympics and how we kept a close watch on football stars Itimidi Dickson and Agu Casimir in the recent Tiger Cup victory. All were foreigners who have made Singapore home.

Being in a course where one-third of the cohort consists of foreigners has taught me many things about the countries around us.

In conversations with my foreign peers, I’ve learnt how Chinese was banned in Indonesian schools for a time and the diplomatic significance of India-Pakistan cricket matches. In class, topics on ambitious projects such as the Three Gorges Dam in China were made livelier because of input from China students.

These insights would not have been possible if Singapore was isolated from the rest of the world. We cannot deny we gain valuable insights about the world by interacting with people from cultures outside our country.

Till this day, I feel uncomfortable when I hear that Singaporeans are discriminated against in favour of foreigners. Still, I believe it will be a pity for our discomfort to deter us from accepting them, because it is through them that our world views are broadened and Singapore is integrated into the global community.

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