

# Olympic medal stokes debate on Singapore immigration

## Ethnic tension

Divided reaction to China-born player highlights growing hostility towards foreign workers, finds **Jeremy Grant**

When Feng Tianwei scooped bronze in the women's table tennis in London last week, it was Singapore's first individual Olympic medal in 52 years.

Yet amid the outpouring of pride in the city-state of 5.2m, a jarring note of resentment has surfaced.

Comments on social media sites were quick to point out that Ms Feng was born in mainland China and did not get Singapore citizenship until 2008. Meanwhile, 77 per cent of respondents in an online poll by Yahoo Singapore said they were "not proud" of a "foreign import" winning an Olympic medal.

"Honestly, I cannot bring myself to feel proud for a foreigner to win a medal for us, although they carry our Singapore flag," one person wrote on Yahoo's Facebook page.

As Singapore yesterday marked 47 years since its founding - under the slogan "Loving Singapore, our home" - the reaction to Ms Feng has highlighted mounting friction over immigration. Much of it is focused on the wave of mainland Chinese immigrants that has landed in Singapore over the past two years.

Paradoxically, most of Singapore's Chinese population - its largest ethnic group - are descendants of immigrants from the Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong.

Immigration has led to overcrowding on public transport and competition for lower-paid jobs, escalating housing costs and widening income disparities. Of the 5.2m population, 1.5m people are immigrants.

Resentment at the arrival of wealthy mainland Chinese, too, flared recently after a young Chinese

businessman crashed his Ferrari at high speed into a taxi two months ago, killing himself, a local taxi driver and a Japanese passenger.

This is all causing a headache for the government, which is trying to balance a falling birth rate with the need to maintain a degree of population buoyancy to keep Singapore's economic miracle on track.

The government projects the economy will expand 1.5-2.5 per cent this year, compared with 1.7 per cent last year. But Singapore is increasingly dependent for growth on lower-income immigrant workers to help build infrastructure and foreigners working in areas, such as commodity trading.

"Immigration is the big thing now," says Eugene Tan, a law professor at Singapore Management University. "It impacts everything: property prices, rental, the cost of living and the sense of belonging and what it means to be a Singaporean."

In his national day speech, Lee Hsien Loong, prime minister, said a feeling of belonging and

1.5m

Number of immigrants in the city-state of 5.2m

identity for Singaporeans had become "harder to nurture when we have new immigrants and foreign workers".

Alarm bells were rung earlier this year by his father, the 88-year-old founder of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, who warned that increasing the birth rate was the country's "biggest challenge".

The government's response has been a mixture of tightening up on the inflow of foreign workers, information campaigning and, last week, the creation of a ministry of culture, community and youth which the prime minister said would focus on "deepening the sense of identity and belonging to the nation".

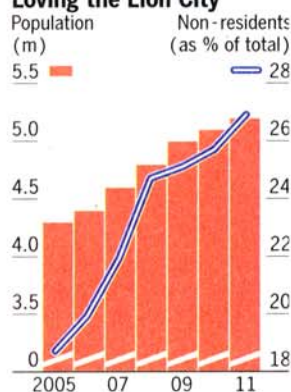
Mr Lee's office has also reminded would-be parents of their entitlement to a "baby bonus" of S\$4,000 (\$3,200) for each of their first, second and third child.

With Singapore's relatively open economy unlikely to escape the global slowdown, the ruling party knows the stakes are high.

Mr Lee has warned that while per capita gross domestic product is impressive, Singapore is "beyond the phase of effortless [economic] growth".

"Today Singapore is a success story, but the world is not standing still," said Mr Lee. "The next two decades will be very different."

## Loving the Lion City



Source: Singapore Statistics