

# Bridging gaps, improving relations

The Overseas Development Programme (China) helps to prepare public officers to work more effectively in China

MS FOO Teow Lee, a foreign service officer with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs got her first taste of China in 1998 when she was posted to the Singapore embassy there as First Secretary (Political).

Today, with over a decade of China experience under her belt, the Singapore Deputy Chief of Mission and Counsellor in Beijing still finds herself learning new things about the country every day. China is as big as it is complicated, she says, and it is changing at a fascinating pace.

As deputy chief of mission, one of Ms Foo's main responsibilities is to assist the Singapore ambassador in mapping out a strategy to push Singapore's interests in China.

"As officers on the ground, we are the 'ears and eyes' of our agencies back in Singapore, and a large part of my job is to engage the Chinese officials and experts on a myriad of relevant issues," she says.

"This could be a mind-boggling list as we find our cooperation with China broadening and deepening and as China's influence on international affairs increases."

One of the greatest challenges she faces is the "amorphous and nebulous" nature of the environment in which she has to operate.

"Most things are grey rather than cast in distinct black and white. This means that I must constantly think on my feet and explore all options available."

It could be a very tedious process but, according to Ms Foo, the bright side is that the lack of clear rules and guidelines mean that "while everything is difficult, nothing is impossible" provided that one has the resourcefulness to get things done.

Singapore currently enjoys a good bilateral relationship and extensive

economic cooperation with China — the result of many years of constructive engagement with the Chinese.

Ms Foo's advice to those who are interested in China-related work is to be open-minded about China and be prepared to press the "refresh" button when necessary to update pre-conceived notions about the country.

More importantly, one must be "plugged into the Chinese way of thinking" to meaningfully engage them. "Frankly, apart from our ethnic linkages, our brains are 'wired' rather differently from the Chinese. Singaporeans have been trained in a Western context and are steeped in the West's modus operandi. Speaking *Putonghua* and writing and reading Chinese is necessary but definitely insufficient," says Ms Foo.

Be prepared to invest time and effort in networking, she says.

"The Chinese think long-term and are not stingy in investing time to build their network and relationships. And having built a network of friends, one must work to maintain it."

While this can be a time-consuming and laborious process, Ms Foo knows from personal experience that the effort will pay off.

"The Chinese whom I knew 12 years ago since my first posting in China, are among my close friends whom I can call for help at the first instance. They are also the ones who educated me about China," she says.

Today, public officers have an additional source of help — the Overseas Development Programme (China) which helps to prepare public officers to work better in and with China.

As Ms Foo points out, the most effective training is "immersion" training and the programme is useful in this regard. Officers on the programme are given the opportunity to experience working and living in China as well as working with Singaporeans who have extensive working experience in China.

"Nothing shortens your learning curve like having good mentors," she says.

Article by the Public Service Division.

## OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The Overseas Development Programme (China) gives you the opportunity to pursue a career in the public sector and gain exposure to China. Open to fresh graduates and mid-career professionals, the programme will last for about one to two years:

**Phase 1:** You start with a three- to six-month stint in your parent agency. An induction programme will prepare you for your future career in the Singapore Public Service and for your work immersion stint in China.

**Phase 2:** You will work in China for about three to nine months, doing project work with opportunities to experience the Chinese work environment and culture.

**Phase 3:** You will return to your parent agency to apply your knowledge and experience in a China-related portfolio.

At the end of the programme, those who perform well will be offered an opportunity to continue their career in the public service. To find out more or to apply for the programme, visit [www.psd.gov.sg/odp](http://www.psd.gov.sg/odp)



When working in China, Ms Foo says that one has to be prepared to invest time and effort in networking as the Chinese believe in building relationships.