

PUBLIC LIVES

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The things that matter

I have always been fascinated by the special role that taxi drivers play as observers of their own society. Their interaction with a wide variety of people, including foreigners, in the course of a day's work gives them a unique vantage point from which to view their lives. They also tend to be amazing communicators, performing a function that door-to-door salesmen of an earlier era used to perform – that of news bearers and cultural interpreters. This is the same role that the “jueteng cobrador” or bet collector in our society still plays.

It is not surprising that foreign journalists with little time to spend in the country they are visiting turn to them for insights on what is going on in that society. The information that taxi drivers freely share is usually indicative of the public pulse. But glibness can also mislead, and social scientists like me are explicitly warned not to assign explanatory value to such information.

And so it was with an air of scientific detachment that I found myself the other day half-listening to the conversation that my wife Karina was having with the taxi driver all the way from the hotel where we were staying to Singapore's Changi airport. As soon as the jovial “Jaydan” (not his real name) learns that we are from the Philippines, he starts to spice his sentences with some well-chosen Tagalog expressions. He says he regularly spends his holidays in our country; it is what he looks forward to every year. He loves Cebu in particular – the sea, the open space, and the easy pace of life. Karina asks if he brings his family with him on these trips. He says “no,” and there is a brief pause.

“I live alone now,” he continues. “My taxi is my wife, my friend, and companion,” he said feigning a smile, although he did not sound like he intended it as a joke. “My wife just left our home one morning and never came back. We divorced later and I never saw her again. She has her own job, you see. She works from 5-to-5, and I drive my taxi from 7-to-7.” “Don’t you have children?” Karina presses. With a hint of indifference, he says they have one child, a son. “He has his own life too now, probably married. The last time I saw him was ten years ago.”

Jaydan, our taxi driver, must be in his late forties. He says he has been driving a taxi for more than twenty years. “Haven’t you thought of re-marrying,” I ask. He looks at me from the rearview mirror, and says in a self-mocking tone: “Who wants to get married to a carabao like me?” He says that the young women in his country nowadays measure a man’s worth by how well he meets the 4 “Cs” – condo, car, credit card, and cash. Very few bother to get married, he adds. “Everyone is working all the time; there is no time to raise a family. This a big problem for the government now.”

His remaining aspiration in life, he says, is to be able to retire in the Philippines where he hopes to do some farming. “Singapore is a pressure cooker,” he says, drawing the inevitable contrast. “It is so small that you can reach any point within two hours.” “But you have so much land in your country,” he gushes. “You can grow your own food, breathe freely, and not feel you don’t own your life. There is no reason for your people to go hungry.”

Hearing all this makes you wonder if people can ever feel completely happy in their own country. They will always see what is lacking in their own, while romanticizing what is present in other societies. Filipinos who visit Singapore cannot help but notice how clean and orderly everything seems to be, how safe the streets are, how efficient public transportation is, and how well the government takes care of its citizens.

You would hardly find a policeman or a uniformed security guard in the streets or shopping malls of Singapore. No one peeks into your bags or frisks you when you enter a mall. There are no gated communities patrolled by platoons of security personnel. Yet it doesn't mean no one is looking. There are small cameras discreetly positioned in almost all public places and buildings. If you're conscious about it, you will not fail to notice individuals in plain clothes whose business it is to watch the people around them. But perhaps more than that, the culture of surveillance is so internalized that the government can actually dispense with the more visible modes of monitoring people.

Even the most critical of Singapore's intelligentsia speak in a discreet and subtle way. They may often grumble in the vaguest terms about the general state of things, but their observations are never explicitly directed against those who wield power. In any case, whatever residual discontent they may have about their country, it is difficult for Singaporeans not to see that their government is doing much better than other governments to secure the future of its citizens. No better proof of that can there be than the fact that droves of people from everywhere, including tens of thousands of our own, are flocking into this small city state to find work and to live here.

Life in the Philippines can often seem contradictory: so much deprivation amid plenty, so much corruption amid piety, so much violence in a culture noted for its hospitality. There's a lot we can do to make things better. But, it is worth remembering, when we despair over our country, that that is only half the story. The things we take for granted as ordinary are the same ones that are highly prized by others – close family ties, deep friendships, an unhurried life, an exuberant civil society, even a rambunctious press. Nations will always have differing notions of what truly matters.

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