

PUBLIC LIVES

April 14, 2011

Randy David

Every picture tells a story

That picture of a maid, possibly a Filipina, walking behind a tall Singaporean young man in military camouflage and carrying his big rucksack while he fiddles with his cell phone, has sparked a lively Internet debate. The comments it has generated are fascinating in themselves, reflecting a wide range of concerns and standpoints. Hardly anyone spoke for the maid.

The picture, taken from behind by an unnamed source, took a life of its own after it was first posted on Facebook with the heading “Why we need foreign talents in Singapore.” It then found its way into the STOMP portal of the Straits Times, and from there it went viral. Newspapers all over the world picked it up. In one, the photo bore a caption in bold capital letters “MY MAID OUR ARMY,” followed by “Behind every Singaporean Son, there is a maid.”

This picture hit a raw nerve in Singapore, where the sight of young men in fatigues taking a break from or returning to their training camps is pretty common. Everyone recognizes them as recruits into the National Service or “NSmen” -- Singaporean nationals and permanent residents undergoing the compulsory two-year military training. They are the poster boys of a nation that likes to ascribe its phenomenal economic success to the spartan discipline and self-sacrifice it instills in its people.

The photo has punctured that carefully cultivated image. What it communicates, as far as many locals are concerned, is the rise of a generation of “softies” pampered by affluence. “What’s next,” muses one tweet. “Might as well bring our maids to war next time.” Indeed, if that maid could carry this soldier’s knapsack, chances are she also does his

laundry, packs his bag, shines his boots, and cleans his room. If she were allowed to do so, she might also have proxied for him at military service.

It's funny how Singaporeans feel about the foreign workers in their midst. Some are resentful about jobs being taken away from them, not quite realizing what would happen to Singapore's globalized economy without its foreign population. They must be thinking of the highly-paid expats who work in offices and live in detached houses, rather than the menial workers who take on the dirty and difficult jobs and sleep in cramped quarters. One post, unabashedly sympathetic to the maid-assisted trainee in question, wondered what was wrong with a domestic helper carrying her employer's bag for him.

But the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) did not find the photograph amusing. The ministry of defense (Mindef) felt compelled to issue this statement: "The serviceman concerned has identified himself to his Commander. The recruit is remorseful for his actions and realizes that it was wrong for him to have allowed this. He has been counseled and continues his training. The SAF has reminded all servicemen to be mindful of their conduct in public."

This statement is remarkable for its vagueness. It doesn't define exactly what was wrong with the serviceman's conduct. Was it the fact that he made a maid carry his rucksack for him? Or was it his carelessness about his "conduct in public"? These are two different things. One has to do with what a soldier is supposed to be – a self-reliant person, if not always a gentleman. The other is a concern with sheer form – how a soldier is supposed to conduct himself in public. The government seems more worried about the image its soldiers are projecting, than about the feudal culture that appears to have taken root in a society that still prides itself in its sturdy egalitarianism.

Many years from now, that iconic photograph may land on the front cover of a book that documents the re-feudalization of the world economy. Or it could re-appear as the lead picture for an essay that looks at the way in

which affluent societies like Singapore lost their competitive edge after they copied the cultures of servitude of their less-developed neighbors.

That is what happened to a photo that appeared on the front page of the July 10, 1937 issue of the “News Chronicle,” a London daily. It was the picture of two young boys dressed in formal outfit -- top hats, silk shirts, and coattails, and wielding slender canes – haughtily scanning the distant horizon. On that same street corner where they stood, there were three other boys in shabby clothes, staring at them curiously and somewhat in awe. Above the photo was the harmless heading “Every Picture Tells a Story.” Underneath was the caption “Outside Lord’s, where the Eton-Harrow match opened yesterday.” The boys in fancy clothing were pupils from Harrow, an upper-class “public school” that is Eton’s bitter rival.

“For 70 years, this picture,” writes Ian Jack in a recent article for the magazine “Intelligent Life,” has been used to tell the same story – of inequality, class division, ‘toffs and toughs’.” It was first picked up by “Life,” a magazine known for its photojournalism. From there it landed, four years later, in “Picture Post” as an accompaniment to an essay on the disparities of the English education system. Then, in 1998, the same picture, notes Jack, served as the cover for a book by David Cannadine titled “Class in Britain.” That same year, a journalist undertook some extraordinary sleuthing and identified for the first time all the five boys in the photograph. Writing for the British paper “Daily Mail,” Geoffrey Levy asked them what went through their minds as the camera caught that moment and preserved it for posterity.

Their account was devoid of class resentment. But, having taken a life of its own, the picture continues to tell a different story.

public.lives@gmail.com