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Chip Tsao's Cheap Shot: A Wake-up Call

SACRAMENTO, CALIF., April 08 (PinoyGlobal) - Chip Tsao, a Hong Kong-based author and columnist, stirred a hornet's nest in his recent article, "The War at Home." Tsao said, "Manila has just claimed sovereignty over the scattered rocks in the South China Sea called the Spratly Islands, complete with a blatant threat from its congress to send gunboats to the South China Sea to defend the islands from China if necessary. This is beyond reproach. The reason: there are more than 130,000 Filipina maids working as \$3,580-a-month cheap labor in Hong Kong. As a nation of servants, you don't flex your muscles at your master, from whom you earn most of your bread and butter."

Tsao further said, "I summoned Louisa, my domestic assistant who holds a degree in international politics from the University of Manila, hung a map on the wall, and gave her a harsh lecture. I sternly warned her that if she wants her wages increased next year, she had better tell every one of her compatriots in Statue Square on Sunday that the entirety of the Spratly Islands belongs to China."

Adding insult to an injury, Tsao said, "Grimly, I told her that if war breaks out between the Philippines and China, I would have to end her employment and send her straight home, because I would not risk the crime of treason for sponsoring an enemy of the state by paying her to wash my toilet and clean my windows 16 hours a day. With that money, she would pay taxes to her government, and they would fund a navy to invade our motherland and deeply hurt my feelings."

And rubbing salt to the injury, Tsao said, "Oh yes. The government of the Philippines would certainly be wrong if they think we Chinese are prepared to swallow their insult and sit back and lose a Falkland Islands War in the Far East. They may have Barack Obama and the hawkish American military behind them, but we have a hostage in each of our homes in the Mid-Levels or higher. Some of my friends told me they have already declared a state of emergency at home. Their maids have been made to shout 'China, Madam/Sir' loudly whenever they hear the word 'Spratly.' They say the indoctrination is working as wonderfully as when we used to shout, 'Long live Chairman Mao!' at the sight of a portrait of our Great Leader during the Cultural Revolution. I'm not sure if that's going a bit too far, at least for the time being."

Tsao's acerbic commentary spread like a virus in cyberspace. Bloggers hit him back with unprintable insults. After a couple of days of incessant attacks against Tsao, Tsao went to the Philippine Consulate General in Hong Kong and met face to face with representatives from the Filipino community. He conveyed his "most sincere" apologies to the Filipino people. He said that he realized that he had "crossed the line" and was "terribly sorry." After making his statement, he stood up and bowed deferentially before the audience.

As we say, "all's well that ends well," but is it really the end? For Tsao, it was. But as I see it, it's just the beginning. It's a wake-up call for Filipinos. Although Tsao's act was a cheap shot at Filipinos, he didn't realize that he had

unwittingly raised an issue which Filipinos have conveniently ignored in the past; that is, there is an increasing number of Filipinos who are going abroad to work as domestic workers or as Tsao said, “servants.”

In August 2006, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo proclaimed, “We will be sending ‘super maids’,” when she announced the launching of a new training program for Filipino domestic workers. Today, out of approximately 3,500 Filipinos leaving each day for overseas jobs, about 70% are domestic workers. A few years ago, there were only 40,000 Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. Today, there are 130,000. And it’s probably in this context that Tsao used the pejorative term, “nation of servants.”

In Europe, particularly England, a servant is called “Filipina.” Is it more acceptable for an Englishman to call his maid, a “Filipina,” than a Chinese man to call his maid, a “servant”?

But let’s not even deal with that because the real issue here is that the Philippine government is in the business of exporting domestic workers. Today, out of the 8.7 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), a large number is employed as domestic workers.

With the government’s main thrust of exporting OFWs, the need to create jobs at home has diminished in the overall scheme of things. The more OFWs were to be deployed overseas, the better the economy would be for the simple reason that OFW remittances — \$16 billion in 2008 — has been fueling the economy. With 75% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) generated from personal consumption spending, the economy is virtually dependent on OFW remittances.

As long as OFW deployment remains on an upward trajectory, consumer spending would continue to increase, thus keeping the economy on the “growth path.” However, if OFW deployment declined, the remittances would decrease and the economy would revulse.

According to a “worse case” scenario analysis by Citibank, OFW remittances could drop to \$11.4 billion this year which would cause the GDP to drop to 2.5% from last year’s 4.5%. However, the International Monetary Fund was more pessimistic in its GDP prediction: 2.25% in 2009. Either way, the economic outlook for 2009 looks bad.

The question is: How will the Arroyo administration cope with a potentially disastrous economic forecast? Chip Tsao’s cheap shot may have insulted Filipinos but it also sent a warning to President Arroyo that her approach to economic growth is not only risky, it is dehumanizing to the Filipino people who are systematically being trafficked to foreign land as commodities.

The Philippines has a good educational system — one of the best in Asia — which produces professionals in the fields of medicine, health care, engineering, education, business, science and technology. But due to lack of job opportunities at home, a lot of the country’s new college graduates are forced to leave — out of necessity — to seek a better life abroad. And the sad part is that they’re taking jobs which are not what they were educated or trained for.

As a result, families are breaking apart with their young children left behind so the parents could take jobs abroad in order to feed them. And if President Arroyo doesn’t take action to reverse this trend, the Philippines will indeed become a “nation of servants.”