



TNP PICTURE: GAVIN FOQ

Online video further stirs **HOT 'CURRY'** **ISSUE**

Woman's YouTube rant blasts not just Chinese family in neighbour dispute, but other Chinese immigrants too

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ALL it is a storm in a curry pot, but a newspaper report of a dispute that happened six years ago between neighbours seems to have brought out the worst in some Singaporeans. A Chinese national family wanted their Indian Singaporean neighbours to stop cooking curry because the smell bothered them. When they went for mediation, the Indian family agreed to cook curry only when their neighbours were not home. When this incident was reported in fresheet Today on Aug 8, it sparked a flurry of reactions from netizens.

Most expressed their love for curry, some degenerated into personal attacks on foreign residents here. So much so that yesterday, Law Minister K. Shanmugam held a press conference to clarify that the resolution had been agreed to by the families involved in the controversy and not by the mediator. (See report on facing page.) One of the more extreme online responses came from Miss Michelle Teo, who uploaded a YouTube video rant on Sunday against the Chinese family as well as against Chinese nationals. Telling the family to "Please Respect Curry", she lambasted them for being intolerant towards their Singaporean neighbours. Ironically, Miss Teo, 27, showed her xenophobia by

making remarks about mainland Chinese that bordered on being derogatory and racist. The three-minute clip had more than 9,000 views, with 375 likes, 34 dislikes, at press time. While many netizens lauded Miss Teo for airing her frustrations, several also criticised her and described her video as racist. Some highlighted her accent, which they described as "fake" and questioned if she was Singaporean. In an interview with The New Paper, Miss Teo said that she was just responding to the family from China. "Most Singaporeans put up with it. We think about what irritates us, but we don't act on them. We tolerate. This family from China did the exact opposite," she said. When told that some netizens had called her racist, she said: "I am not a racist, but I admit that I may have exaggerated a little in my video." Nevertheless, she stands by her video, saying: "If I didn't put my video in this manner, it wouldn't have got this much attention. I wanted it to be an epidemic. "Stirring up a little ruckus is a good thing." As for her "American accent", Miss Teo said she was born and raised in Singapore, and her accent may have been inherited from her Filipino mother, a housewife. Her Chinese Singaporean father is a regional manager in a multi-national company. Miss Teo said she helps out in a family-run cafe in the Philippines and travels there often. She showed the video to her parents, who liked it but advised her not to use offensive language. Assistant professor Eugene Tan said Miss Teo could possibly get into trouble for her remarks on the video. He noted that it was a grey area in that the video "purports to express the views of one person" in response to a report she came across in the papers. "If the comments were designed to incite ill will or mischief, the authorities will have the full arsenal of the law ranging from the Penal Code to the Seditious Act. But there would have to be criminal intent as well," said

Racism 'expresses resentment': NUS don

RACISM is hard to avoid in a multi-racial society, said assistant professor Daniel Goh. Everyday racism exists in societies where there is any form of immigration, he said. "Everyday racism and resentment towards foreigners always have social origins such as competition in the job market," said the assistant professor of sociology, who teaches race and ethnic relations at the National University of Singapore. "If Singaporeans feel they have to compete against foreigners and they feel that there is a certain unfairness to it, that's when the resentment escalates." He noted that this is apparent in many parts of the world where there is strong labour market competition among different ethnic or racial groups. Racism emerges as an expression of resentment. Prof Goh likened it to "foraging"

in the global community. He said: "When you start to dislike your neighbour because he is competing with you for scarce resources, you start to emphasise the differences of others to burnish dislike." Differences are a fixture in Singapore because of multi-culturalism, but people start playing on the differences as a result of pent-up resentment, he added. **Online venting 'good'** Prof Goh said that venting one's frustration online, as Michelle Teo did in the YouTube video attack on foreigners, is unlikely to increase resentment towards immigrants. "All the resentment is already out there. As the competition in the labour market is going to be harsh, the racism will be harsh," he noted.

Instead, Prof Goh welcomes the expression of resentment as a "good thing" and a "working-out-the-problem mechanism". He said that Singaporeans will eventually "come out better" from debating and reasoning out the stickier issues. He noted that this does not just apply to educated people, but also the lower income groups. Said Prof Goh: "If you really listen to their discussions on politics, for example, the reasoning is there, if not just in a different language." But MP for Jalan Besar GRC Denise Phua cautioned that there was a risk of Singapore evolving into a haughty society. "We must build awareness and equip ourselves with a mindset and tools to resolve conflicts amicably," she noted. She said that many of the neighbour squabbles between locals and foreigners that she handles stem from a lack of awareness of cultures and practices of the other side. She added that quarrels between Singaporean neighbours could turn out to be just as fiery, if not more.



CREATING A RUCKUS: Screen grabs of Miss Teo in the video she uploaded to YouTube.

"I am not a racist, but I admit that I may have exaggerated a little in my video."

— Ms Michelle Teo (left), who slammed Chinese nationals in a video she uploaded to YouTube

Prof Tan, who lectures on criminal law at the Singapore Management University. "However, it should be recognised that while prosecution may have a deterrent effect, it may not be the best way to deal with such forms of expression." The curry saga has become a hot-button issue among Singaporeans, some of whom took to the Internet, creating multiple Facebook groups such as "National Cook Curry Day", which has 45,734 respondents and is scheduled for Aug 21, and "Cooking and Eating Curry is My God-Given Right as a Singaporean". Singaporeans based overseas also rallied behind the curry cookout, such as Gera Lim, who commented on "sharing the love for curry in Shanghai".

Double-edged sword

Dr Nelson Lee, 40, a psychiatrist, said that making a rant video is now a common avenue to vent one's frustration but that it was a double-edged sword. "It's relatively better than developing violent tendencies, but it is not prudent to be this forthcoming with your inner thoughts," he said. "When your thoughts are so publicly accessible, they can be taken out of context. You need to toe the line carefully to avoid long-term repercussions." Mr Seah Kian Peng, MP for Marine Parade GRC, said that addressing Singaporeans' frustrations with the immigrant influx is a work in progress. He said that Singaporeans should be proud of their multi-racial and multi-religious society and do their part to help new citizens integrate. He added: "It's about striking a balance, just as new citizens must make efforts to integrate themselves into our society. "As a community, we should do all we can to bring people together instead of venting our frustrations against other groups."

'S'porean identity developing'

MINISTER for Law K. Shanmugam yesterday spoke to reporters about the online furor caused by the curry incident, pointing out that the incident had happened six to seven years ago. He also said that the reaction stemmed from inaccuracies in the original news report that highlighted this case study. Mr Shanmugam on:

ONLINE REACTION TO THE CASE

"It is heartening to see so many people come together...to affirm a key aspect of the way Indians lead their lives in Singapore...the cooking of curry. And people of all races, across cultures, come out and say 'We support this' because they are reacting to what they see as an attempted derogation from the way an Indian family lives in Singapore.

"So I think that's very good and to be welcomed. It shows Singaporean identity evolving, developing, and people are prepared to come forward and support it."

INACCURACY OF ORIGINAL NEWS REPORT

"The facts are inaccurate in a number of ways because the original report that appeared was unfortunately inaccurate. And sentiment here has been formed without a clear articulation of the mediation process and what actually happened in this case...In this case, the solution, or recommendation, was not made by the mediator."

THE MEDIATION PROCESS

"So here, the two families shook hands on a solution they arrived at. Once they arrive at the solution, if the two of them are happy with it, then the rest of us, including the rest of society, should look at it as something that allowed the neighbours to continue living with a certain understanding of each other.

"But I think the sentiment that this is somehow unfair has arisen because people seem to have proceeded on the basis that the mediation is somehow legally imposed, either by the mediator or by law. That is completely inaccurate."

XENOPHOBIA

"While we must affirm our Singapore identity, and must protect it...it's good to see so many people coming forward to protect it...at the same time, let's not turn this into a xenophobic attack on foreigners in general."