

The Last Stewardess

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OUT THERE: SINGAPORE

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Singapore Girls are a wildly successful, if unabashedly sexist, marketing tool.

SINGAPORE —

The world's most profitable airline does not employ anyone called a flight attendant. Feminism has been slow in coming to Singapore Airlines, and the exotic, ever-smiling young women gliding through its planes' aisles in figure-hugging batik sarongs are still called stewardesses.

More to the point, the airline does not refer to these hard-working women as women, at least not for public consumption. These, dear passengers, are Singapore Girls.

"Gentle hostess in your sarong," goes one of the airline's advertising slogans, "you care for me as only you know how. Singapore Girl, you're a great way to fly."

The romantic, soft-focus image of this "gentle hostess" dominates the airline's advertisements in destinations in 40 countries across five continents. It has been a wildly successful, if unabashedly sexist, marketing tool, responsible in no small part for the airline's profits of \$580 million in the fiscal year that ended last March, its 20th consecutive money-making year. On average, the airline fills 70 percent of its seats.

"The Singapore Girl is the image that makes or breaks us," said Suan Seng Tan, a steward who began his career with the airline 25 years ago and now leads in-flight training courses for the next generation of Singapore Girls. "The passengers love it."

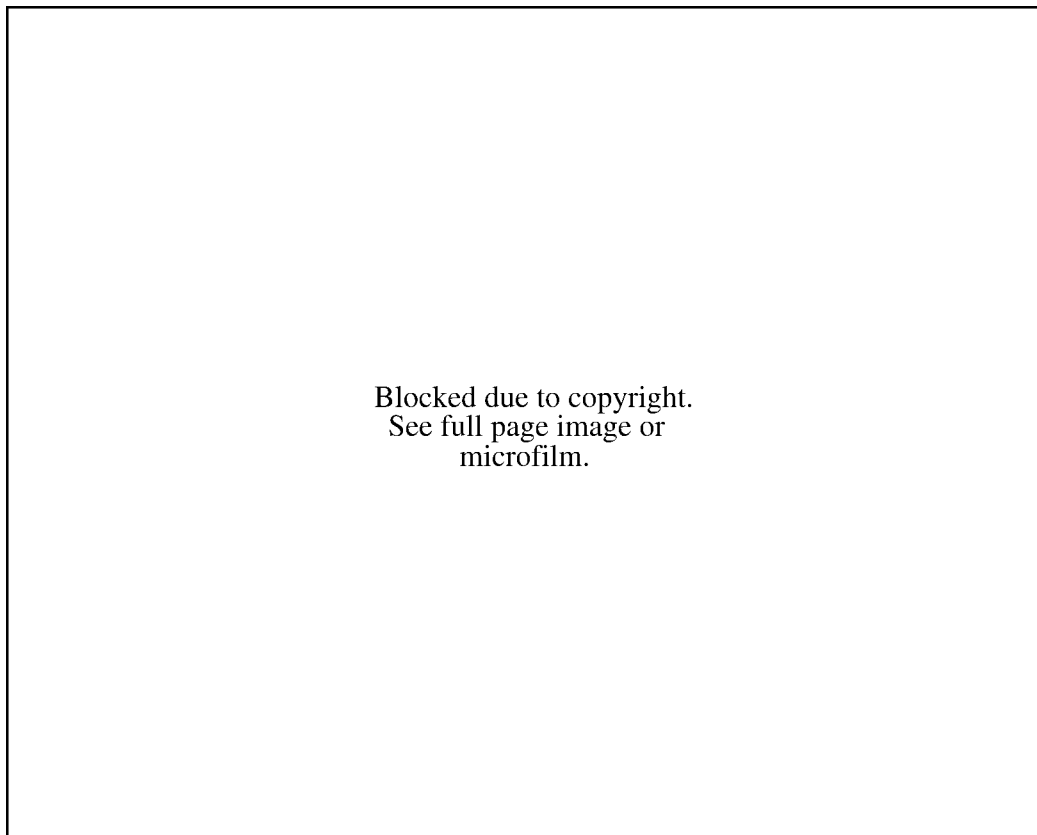
Some feminists in this tiny, prosperous city-state do not. What is odd about the Singapore Girl is that she is the product of a nation that is perhaps the least sexist, most forward-looking in Southeast Asia.

Singapore is one of Asia's economic tigers, with a per-capita income of about \$13,000 a year, second in Asia only to Japan and oil-rich Brunei. The women of Singapore are encouraged to seek higher education and careers.

Of the island's 2,000 lawyers, 800, or nearly 40 percent, are women. Nearly one-third of Singapore's doctors are women.

"The Singapore Girl does disturb me," said Meena Shivdas of Singapore's Association of Women for Action and Research, known by the acronym Aware. "It perpetuates this image of Asian women that we all have almond-shaped eyes and are svelte and never answer back."

Yet, Ms. Shivdas admitted that her criticism probably puts her in a minority among Singaporean women. "This is a society that is conditioned not to complain," she said, adding that besides, "Singaporeans are proud of



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A future Singapore Girl at the Singapore Airlines training center. Patrick Lim for The New York Times

the airline. It really is good."

The Singapore Girl was born in the early 1970's. She was the creation of Batey Ads, a Singapore agency that decided that the best way to lure passengers, especially male business passengers, to the airline was by promoting attentive, luxurious in-flight service from pretty, young women.

Although stewards make up nearly half of the cabin crews and are known within the company as Singapore Guys, they are rarely seen in the airline's advertising.

Wong Mun Mun, the director of cabin-crew training, insists that the airline does not intentionally hire only "beauty queens."

"We believe that even with a plain girl coming to us, we will be able to groom her to offer the standard of service that our passengers expect," said Miss Wong, who seems every bit the successful Singapore Woman, complete with a degree in applied chemistry.

Miss Wong said she had never thought of the Singapore Girl image as a sexist one. To

her it is a reflection of traditional "Asian hospitality."

It appears that few of the airline's flight attendants are average looking, however. The ads for Singapore Airlines sometimes feature its modern fleet and its "gourmet" cuisine. But more often they show a stunning, curvaceous young stewardess.

A recent magazine ad featured a batik-clad Singapore Girl in the French wine country inspecting bottles of Dom Perignon, which is served to first-class passengers on even the shortest flights. When the airline began service to New York last summer, its advertisements showed Singapore Girls perched atop the Chrysler Building and the Statue of Liberty.

Part of the mystique has to do with that trademark uniform, a variation on a traditional Malay garment known as a sarong kebaya. The style used by the airline was designed in 1974 by the French couturier Balmain.

The uniform is custom-tailored for each stewardess and is, quite simply, tight — so tight, especially around the armpits, that the blouses have been known to split open in flight when a stewardess has become too aggressive in closing an overhead bin.

"It happened to a girlfriend of mine, and she was so embarrassed," said a flight attendant on a recent flight from Singapore, who asked that her name not be used, for fear that she might lose her job.

"Some of the girls say this uniform is the airline's way of making sure we stay slim, but I don't know," she said. "It's much more comfortable than it looks. I think it is very flattering. Certainly the male passengers enjoy it very much."

As at most Asian airlines, there is an emphasis at Singapore Airlines on young stewardesses. Under the hiring rules, women applicants must be younger than 26 years old and speak fluent English. According to the airline's recruitment ads, they must also be "slim and attractive with a good complexion and a warm personality." A stewardess can be married, but if she becomes pregnant, her career is over.

Women usually leave the airline sooner than their male colleagues, and not necessarily by choice. While it is not unusual for stewards to stay with the airline until they are 45, stewardesses work under five-year contracts and must retire after 15 years (unless they take a job on the ground), even if they reach the rank of in-flight supervisor, the most senior position within the cabin crew.

The retirement policy is better than it used to be. An earlier rule, requiring virtually all stewardesses to retire at 35, was changed after a dispute in 1986 in which a group of more than 1,000 employees signed a letter to the company challenging the rule. In a union newsletter, they said that stewardesses were being "sexploited."

Still, such is the legend of the Singapore Girl across Asia that, according to the airline, trainees have been known to burst into tears of excitement when given their first sarongs. Mr. Suan, the longtime steward, recalled that when uniforms were distributed last year to a group of Korean stewardesses — the airline employs Korean and Japanese women for their language skills — some of them wept because they were so happy to get the uniforms.

"In Asia," he said, "becoming a Singapore Girl is every young girl's dream."