

I'm dreaming of a white Santa . . .

In Singapore, Caucasian Santas command a premium of 1.5-2 times over Asian Santas

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SINGAPORE may be pushing for fairer employment of locals over foreign talent, but there is one niche segment where demand for Caucasians is booming: the Santa Claus market.

It is a segment that is growing despite the slowdown in the broader events industry, which comprises large-scale affairs such as meetings, conferences and exhibitions.

Events companies here that hire out that portly, jolly figure to parties, roadshows and other private events say that clients find Caucasian Santa Clauses more authentic.

"They really look good because of their size," says Edwin Goh, director of Ministry of Party (MOP), a party planner. "Our Caucasian Santas also tend to be more entertaining and better at interacting with children and telling stories than the Asian ones."

Andy Chia, owner of Eventgu, says that clients will usually request for Caucasian Santas first, getting Asian ones only if the former are not available. His events management company only has Asian Santas for now and hopes to hire a Caucasian Santa next year.

Robin Goh, founder of JNR Entertainment, another party and carnival planner, adds that Asian Santas tend to be hired by "those with budget constraints".

But supply is tight. Because Caucasian Santa Clauses are rare in this part of the hemisphere, they command a premium.

In MOP's case, clients would pay about S\$350 per half hour for them, versus S\$200 for Asian Santas.

JNR Entertainment charges S\$350 to S\$500 per hour for Caucasian Santas, depending on their job scope, versus about S\$250 for Asian Santas.

Asian Santas are paid around the same as Santa mascots – people walking around in cartoonish head-to-toe costumes – which cost S\$250 to S\$350 to hire.

Events companies here take about a 20-25 per cent cut when they matchmake Santas to events.

There are also "independent" Santas that advertise their experience, expertise, and ethnicity online.



It is not so much racism, as it is for realism and the sake of historical accuracy, says JNR's Mr Goh.

"Santa Claus is Caucasian, but because in Singapore we have a manpower issue, so many companies are getting locals to do it. But certain ang moh company (he means multinational companies) are very particular and only want Caucasian ones."

He is not wrong. After all, the man in the scarlet fur suit traces his origins back to Saint Nicholas, a fourth-century Greek Bishop and Father Christmas from English folklore. Santa Claus is essentially a merging of the two characters over centuries of evolution.

From as early as late November, Santa models and actors have emerged bearing gifts and chuckling the trademark laugh. On weekdays, these people span a range of occupations, with one even owning his own fitness gym, said MOP's Mr Goh. They do these Christmas stints to earn some extra income for the holiday season.

It definitely helps them appear more convincing if they are at least middle-aged and a bit on the plump side, but the lack of a pot belly is easily rectified with a belly stuffer.

Height requirements could be a hurdle that aspiring Asian Santa Clauses struggle to clear, however. One online listing seeking Santas put the minimum height at 1.73 metres – easily met by most Caucasian Santas, but which may call for tippy toes for some local men.

Santa Clauses can be hired for anywhere from 20 minutes to three hours. They can be active,



walking around malls distributing gifts, or sedentary, sitting in a chair posing for pictures. They can also be deployed anywhere – from a car showroom to mingle with customers, to a children's home as part of a company's corporate social responsibility project, or to an expatriate family's private Christmas party.

But Santa hiring remains very much a niche business here, with no clear market leader or even a specialised company wholly focused on it, unlike firms such as Santa For Hire in the US.

Santa For Hire this year said that it has placed Santas in 425 jobs worldwide, paying more than S\$150,000 to them altogether, with a premium paid to real-bearded ones.

Given that santa recruitment here remains a budding industry, most companies still find their Santa hiring business growing healthily.

MOP puts the rate at 10-20 per cent in 2015, kudos to its promotional efforts.

JNR too reports its business growing "quite substantially", partly because it has been enlarging its talent pool and inventory of mascot costumes.

Plus, Santa Clauses remain a clear forerunner when it comes to iconic Christmas characters, keeping a far lead in terms of demand compared to competitors such as gingerbread men, snowmen, elves and even their female counterpart, Santarinas – slender without Santa's heft and much prettier.

REAL OR NOT?

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PHOTOS: JNR ENTERTAINMENT AND MINISTRY OF PARTY

JNR's Mr Goh said that nine in 10 requests at Christmas time are still for Santa Clauses.

That should hopefully lend locally born-and-bred Santas some comfort. And if they're not satisfied with their Christmas income, there's always Chinese New Year to look forward to.

Some Asian Santas here do wear another red suit, that of the equally rotund *caishenye* (God of Fortune) a few months later. Surely now, this is a role that their Caucasian peers will struggle to pull off.

Besides, what constitutes an authentic Santa Claus might eventually evolve to reflect the Singaporean setting. Given time, who's to say that the jolly old man who goes "Ho, ho, ho" cannot be surnamed Ho?