

A Brief History of 'Chinese Privilege' in Singapore

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Since 2008, prominent Singaporeans, like playwright Alfian Sa'at,¹ activist Sangeetha Thanapal,² and journalist Surekha Yadav,³ have claimed that 'Chinese privilege' exists in Singapore. They argue that Chinese-Singaporeans, unlike minority Malays, Indians, or Eurasians, enjoy exclusive racial advantages that position them as Singapore's cultural, economic, political, and social core. Such claims have renewed public interest on race in the city-state, where the Chinese have constituted roughly three-quarters of the population since colonial times.

As public discourse on 'Chinese privilege' expands in Singapore, certain patterns have appeared. For instance, descriptions of 'Chinese privilege' by Singaporeans tend to detail their daily encounters with its effects, and hence, are understandably anecdotal.⁴ Additionally, popular commentaries on 'Chinese privilege' typically invoke North American 'White privilege'. But this results in an over-reliance on Western racial dynamics to examine local race-relations.⁵ Unsurprisingly, such anti-racist endeavours have prompted vitriolic retorts from their detractors, who often indulge in obfuscating intellectual gymnastics.

As a result of these trends, public conceptions of 'Chinese privilege' risk lacking historical context and specificity. Fortunately, however alien 'Chinese privilege' may seem to some Singaporeans, Singapore has, in fact, a well-documented history of racial privilege. Understanding this past could be key in resolving Singapore's existing racial grievances, and fine-tuning its 'multiracial-meritocratic' practices.

Primarily developed in 18th and 19th century Europe, the notion of race was exploited by European colonisers to dominate or displace those they judged socially and biologically inferior.⁶ Under the British, the very construction of modern Singapore was premised on Anglo-Saxon supremacy and privilege. Hence, the 'European Town' (today's downtown Singapore) was geographically and functionally prioritised over

¹ Alfian Sa'at's Facebook Page, accessed August 23, 2015.

<https://www.facebook.com/alfiansaat/posts/10151723221647371>.

² Sangeetha Thanapal, "This is Singaporean Chinese Privilege," *Tumblr* (blog), <http://thisissgchineseprivilege.tumblr.com>.

³ Surekha A. Yadav, "Is Singapore A Racist Country?" *The Malay Mail Online*, August 31, 2014, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/opinion/surekha-a-yadav/article/is-singapore-a-racist-country>.

⁴ Faz Abdul Gaffa, "I'm A Brown Person And I Live In A Racist Country," *XOJane*, April 26, 2013, <http://www.xojane.com/issues/racism-in-singapore>; Nur Dianah Suhaimi, "Feeling Like The Least Favourite Child," *The Straits Times*, August 10, 2008.

⁵ Adeline Koh and Sangeetha Thanapal, "Chinese Privilege, Gender and Intersectionality in Singapore: A Conversation between Adeline Koh and Sangeetha Thanapal," *boundary2*, March 4, 2015, <http://boundary2.org/2015/03/04/chinese-privilege-gender-and-intersectionality-in-singapore-a-conversation-between-adeline-koh-and-sangeetha-thanapal/>.

⁶ Charles Hirschman, "The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race," *Population and Development Review* 30, no. 3 (2004): 393-396; Charles Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology." *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (1986): 330-361; Collin E.R. Abraham, "Racial and Ethnic Manipulation in Colonial Malaya." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 6, no. 1 (1983): 21-22.

other communal zones. In turn, Singapore's Arabs, Bugis, Malays, and South Indians were allotted lands on the settlement's outskirts, lest they tarnish British prestige.⁷

British rule was reinforced by discriminatory schemes. The 'Colour Bar', for example, permitted only White-Europeans into government employment.⁸ By the late 19th century, the British established formal racial categories, and popularised racial stereotypes — which portrayed Indians as servile and depraved, Malays as lazy and backward, and Chinese as crafty and deceitful.⁹ These imaginative colonial projects have profoundly shaped independent Singapore's racial landscape, influencing its 'Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other' racial classification model and contemporary racial stereotypes.¹⁰

Like race or racism, racial privilege is forged by specific and shifting historical forces.¹¹ Therefore, 'Chinese privilege' must be defined within Singaporean settings, an environment of extensive government regulation. Singapore's long-ruling (and predominantly Chinese) People's Action Party (PAP) government plays a central role in producing 'Chinese privilege'. This substantially transforms 'Chinese privilege' into an institutional, structural, and systemic phenomenon.

'Chinese privilege', however, has not always existed, as demonstrated by the PAP's battles against the Chinese-educated in the pre-1970s.¹² Its inception can be located from the late 1970s onwards, when the party sought to 're-Asianise' Singapore.¹³ This agenda shift has been attributed to several issues: the PAP's fear of

⁷ Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1-3; Ellen C. Cangi, "Civilizing the People of Southeast Asia: Sir Stamford Raffles' Town Plan for Singapore, 1819-23," *Planning Perspectives* 8, no. 2 (1993): 173-174; Nicole Tarulevicz, "Hidden in Plain View: Singapore's Race and Ethnicity Policies," in *The State, Development and Identity in Multi-Ethnic Societies: Ethnicity, Equity and the Nation*, ed. Nicholas Tarling and Edmund Terence Gomez (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 136-137.

⁸ John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880-1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 96, 107-109; Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 30.

⁹ Charles Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987): 566-570; Kwen Fee Lian, "Race and Racialization in Malaysia and Singapore," in *Race, Ethnicity, and the State in Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. Kwen Fee Lian (Boston: Brill, 2006), 220-222.

¹⁰ Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study on the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1977), 77-80; Daniel P.S. Goh, "Between Assimilation and Multiculturalism: Social Resilience and the Governance of Diversity in Singapore," in *Nations, National Narratives and Communities in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Norman Vasu, Yolanda Chin, and Kam-Yee Law (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 59-60.

¹¹ David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos, "General Introduction," in *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, ed. David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos (Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 2-4.

¹² Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2008), 25-26.

¹³ David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 1994), 54-57; Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP's Management of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995), 65-68.

'Westernisation',¹⁴ its then 'poor' electoral performances,¹⁵ and Lee Kuan Yew's newfound appreciation for Confucianism and the Mandarin language.¹⁶ Other factors include the political demise of left-wing Chinese-educated groups and the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping's China.¹⁷

This period of 'Asianisation' saw the PAP-government promote a self-fashioned form of 'Chineseness' via policies that, intentionally or not, favoured, privileged, and valorised Chinese-Singaporeans. According to distinguished scholars like Lily Zubaidah Rahim, Michael Barr, and Terence Chong, state-sanctioned 'Chineseness' emphasised paternalism, elitism, apoliticism, fluency in Mandarin, a deference to authority, and the Confucian *Junzi* ideal (one whose 'humane', 'benevolent', and 'righteous' conduct makes them exemplary).¹⁸

To cultivate such values, the PAP-government launched the Special Assistance Plan in 1979, turning Chinese-medium schools into well-funded, elite monocultural institutions. Yet, special aid did not extend to Malay- and Tamil-stream schools.¹⁹ Moreover, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, numerous Confucianist-oriented campaigns were championed nation-wide, including 'Speak Mandarin', 'Confucian Ethics', 'Asian Values', and 'Shared Values'.²⁰ This left little space for non-Chinese voices and narratives.

Cultural advocacy aside, government electoral and housing policies have bestowed significant political advantages to the Chinese-majority. In 1988, amidst declining electoral support, the PAP implemented the Group Representative Constituency (GRC) system, supposedly to prevent minority parliamentary underrepresentation.²¹ However, the GRC's purpose is brought in to question by the fact that minority representation in pre-GRC assemblies was as high, if not higher, than their post-GRC

¹⁴ Michael Hill and Kwen Fee Lian, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 195.

¹⁵ Hussin Mutalib, "Singapore's Quest for a National Identity: The Triumphs and Trials of Government Policies," in *Imagining Singapore*, ed. Ban Kah Choon, Anne Parker, and Tong Chee Kiong. 2nd ed. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2004), 67-68.

¹⁶ Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People's Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002), 57-58; Michael D. Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind The Man* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 157-161; Lee Kuan Yew, *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues Volume 11: 1990-1994* (Singapore: Cengage Learning Asia Pte Ltd, 2013), 288.

¹⁷ Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore*, 101; Michael D. Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture, and Genes," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 2 (1999): 149.

¹⁸ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1998), 162-163; Michael D. Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore: Networks of Power and Influence* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 16-17; Terence Chong, "Asian Values and Confucian Ethics: Malay Singaporeans' Dilemma," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 32, no. 3 (2002): 394, 398, 401.

¹⁹ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma*, 128-131, 169-171.

²⁰ Neil A. Englehart, "Rights and Culture in the Asian Values Argument: The Rise and Fall of Confucian Ethics in Singapore," *Human Rights Quarterly* 22 (2000): 560-561; Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma*, 168-169.

²¹ Eugene K. B. Tan, "Multiracialism Engineered: The Limits of Electoral and Spatial Integration in Singapore," *Ethnopolitics* 4, no. 4 (2005): 417.

counterparts.²² Interestingly, available evidence indicates that racial minorities tend to be more accepting of alternative political options at the ballots.²³

In 1989, the PAP-government introduced residential racial quotas to encourage racial integration and dismantle non-Chinese 'enclaves'. For racial minorities, this reduced their housing options, while ensuring they remained numerical minorities in most constituencies.²⁴ Ironically, if racial mixing was the objective, multiple nation-wide surveys by the Institute of Policy Studies have since revealed that Chinese-Singaporeans are the least receptive to interracial relations.²⁵ Despite their official multiracial rationale, the GRC system and racial quotas operationally guarantee Chinese political dominance. As the quotas maintain Chinese numerical superiority, they also bolster the community's voting clout. This incentivises GRC candidates to appeal largely to the Chinese electorate, or overlook 'sensitive' minority interests.²⁶

On the demographic front, the PAP-government has sought to safeguard the Chinese's majority status, perceiving their cultures and work ethic as pivotal to Singapore's survival.²⁷ As minority birth-rates overtook the Chinese in the post-1980s, immigration policies were liberalised for East Asian immigrants to preserve Singapore's 'racial balance', or noticeably, the Chinese population.²⁸ Concurrently, government population measures were increasingly influenced by pseudo-scientific eugenic theories that suggested Chinese genetic superiority.²⁹

As seen, considerable resources and power have been invested into the Chinese-majority. Indeed, as Barr admits, Chinese ethnicity alone provides a distinct upper-hand in education, politics, socio-economic mobility, and life-chances.³⁰ These assets

²² Eugene K. B. Tan, "Multiracialism Engineered," 422-423.

²³ Leong Wee Keat and Tan Weizhen, "More Swing Voters at this Year's GE," *Today*, July 9, 2011; Joel S. Fetzer, "Election Strategy and Ethnic Politics in Singapore," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 4, no. 1 (2008): 149-153; Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays: Being Ethnic Minority and Muslim in a Global City-State* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 79-80.

²⁴ Chih Hoong Sin. "The Quest for a Balanced Ethnic Mix: Singapore's Ethnic Quota Policy Examined." *Urban Studies* 39, no. 8 (2002): 1360-1365; Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (Hampshire, Great Britain: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994), 65-66.

²⁵ Mathew Matthews, "Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony: An IPS-OnePeople.sg Study," *The Institute of Policy Studies*, September 11, 2013. <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/08/Forum-Indicators-of-Racial-and-Religious-110913-slides.pdf>; Mathew Matthews, "Channel NewsAsia-Institute of Policy Studies (CAN-IPS) Survey on Race Relations," *The Institute of Policy Studies*, August 19, 2016. <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/04/CNA-IPS-survey-on-race-relations-190816.pdf>.

²⁶ Eugene K. B. Tan, "Multiracialism Engineered," 421-423; Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma*, 77-79; Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays*, 89-90.

²⁷ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma*, 56, 73; Michael D. Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, 15-16;

²⁸ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma*, 72-73.

²⁹ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History* (Ontario, Canada: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985), 320, 324-325; Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz. (California: University of California Press, 1995), 198-202; Chan Chee Khoon and Chee Heng Leng, "Singapore 1984: Breeding for Big Brother," in *Designer Genes: I.Q., Ideology, and Biology*, ed. Chan Chee Khoon and Chee Heng Leng. (Selangor, Malaysia: INSAN, 1984), 6-7.

³⁰ Michael D. Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, 17.

are not the inevitable by-products of nature or demographics. Instead, they stem from strategic policy-making and specific historical struggles.

Arguably, the Sinocentric quality of the examples cited challenges Singapore's 'multiracial-meritocratic' aspirations. There remain persistent claims of 'Chinese privilege' in the military, the civil service, the private corporate sector, the race-based communal welfare structure, and the education system. For instance, existing records show that from 1966 to 2015, 93.2 per cent of the President's Scholarship recipients were Chinese.³¹ Are non-Chinese students intrinsically incapable of obtaining "Singapore's most prestigious undergraduate scholarship"? The definitive answer is no.

Like other analyses of racial privilege, be it in Australia,³² Malaysia,³³ Brazil,³⁴ South Africa,³⁵ Israel,³⁶ or the United States,³⁷ 'Chinese privilege' requires constant theoretical refinement. Its deficit in localised definitions and processes must be resolved. Furthermore, how different would 'Chinese privilege' function at micro and macro levels, or when it intersects with class, gender, religion, language, and sexuality? More importantly, as observed in international cases,³⁸ how can Singaporeans meaningfully discuss 'Chinese privilege' without triggering denial and deflection from its architects and beneficiaries?

Nevertheless, the discourse of 'Chinese privilege' has already generated constructive outcomes. First, it has redirected attention to the centres of privilege and power, highlighting how Chinese pre-eminence is manufactured, maintained, and expressed. Second, it has further questioned the prevailing belief that the cultures and biologies of Singapore's racial minorities are principally responsible for their marginal societal standing. And last, it has empowered Singaporeans to confront racial inequities, particularly those obscured by doublespeak, 'colour-blind' ideologies, and political expediency.

In this sense, 'Chinese privilege' can be a potent concept to help realise the ideals proclaimed by many Singaporeans—of justice, equality, and genuine racial harmony for all.

³¹ Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore*, 214-216; Michael D. Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, 67-71.

³² Kevin M. Dunn, James Forrest, Ian Burnley, and Amy McDonald, "Constructing Racism in Australia," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 4 (2004): 409-430.

³³ Richard Mason and Ariffin Omar, "The 'Bumiputera Policy': Dynamics and Dilemmas." *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 21, no. 1-2 (2003): 1-12.

³⁴ Edward E. Telles, *Race In Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³⁵ Charles V. Hamilton, Lynn Huntley, Neville Alexander, Antonio Sergio Alfredo Guimaraes, and Wilmot James, eds, *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States*. Colorado (United States of America: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2001).

³⁶ As'ad Ghanem, *Ethnic Politics in Israel: The Margins and the Ashkenazi Center* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010).

³⁷ Jacob Bennett, "White Privilege: A History of the Concept," (Master's thesis, Georgia State University, 2012). http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/history_theses/54/.

³⁸ Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 63-66; Sharlene Swartz, Emma Arogundade, and Danya Davis, "Unpacking (White) Privilege in a South African University Classroom: A Neglected Element in Multicultural Educational Context," *Journal of Moral Education* 43, no. 3 (2014): 357-359.

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