A Brief History of ‘Chinese Privilege’ in Singapore

By Hydar Saharudin

Since 2008, prominent Singaporeans, like playwright Alfian Sa’at, activist Sangeetha Thanapal, and journalist Surekha Yadav, 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. 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. 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. 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

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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...

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

\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{19} Lily Zubaidah Rahim, The Singapore Dilemma, 128-131, 169-171.
countercultures. Interestingly, available evidence indicates that racial minorities tend to be more accepting of alternative political options at the ballots.

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. 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. 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.

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. 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. Concurrently, government population measures were increasingly influenced by pseudo-scientific eugenic theories that suggested Chinese genetic superiority.

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. These assets

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28 Lily Zubaidah Rahim, The Singapore Dilemma, 72-73.
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. 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, Malaysia, Brazil, South Africa, Israel, or the United States, ‘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, 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.

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