

In 1979, the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) was established in order to preserve the heritage of top Chinese schools, nurture traditional Chinese values in students and promote bilingualism. Today, critics question the relevance of SAP schools, as they claim that these schools no longer fulfil their original goals. Instead, they cite these schools as an example of “Chinese privilege” in Singapore, which is defined as a scenario where “Chinese-Singaporeans, unlike minority Malays, Indians, or Eurasians, enjoy exclusive racial advantages that position them as Singapore’s cultural, economic, political, and social core”. In my opinion, SAP has reinforced “Chinese privilege” in Singapore as it has been perceived by Singaporeans to promote racial segregation and social inequality instead.

For starters, the admission criteria required to enrol in these schools heavily favour the top Chinese students, which may encourage “Chinese elitism”, where they deem themselves to be superior compared to their non-Chinese peers due to their enrolment in SAP schools. SAP students are not only required to take Chinese as a subject in the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE), but also at the secondary level. Furthermore, SAP schools are only open to the top 30% of students in each PSLE cohort. In fact, some SAP schools are more stringent with their admission requirements, including Hwa Chong Institution, which admits only the top 3% of PSLE graduates annually. While this is partly due to historical prestige, government policies were also introduced to boost the elite status of the SAP schools. When educational streaming was first introduced in Singapore, only the nine SAP schools at the time were banded as “Special”, which formally branded them as the cream of the crop amongst all Singapore schools. Subsequently, the Integrated Programme (IP) was later introduced, allowing top secondary school students to skip the GCE ‘O’ Level examination and proceed to take a national pre-university examination after six years of secondary education. As SAP schools were among the first to pilot the programme, about 35% of the IP schools also benefit from SAP today. Enrolling in such prestigious institutions would indeed be a “Chinese privilege”, particularly due to the compulsory prerequisite of studying Mandarin, which would disadvantage the students from minority races who are mostly unable to do so.

In addition, the lack of daily interaction with people of other races may discourage multiracialism amongst SAP students, which arises from the inadequate ethnic sensitivities of other racial groups. While SAP schools are open to all eligible students regardless of race, they are required to be highly proficient in Mandarin as it is the only mother tongue offered. This, along with the strong Chinese tradition of SAP schools, have greatly discouraged students of

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minority races from enrolling. As such, the minimal inter-ethnic interaction experienced by SAP students results in them having “less ethnically diverse social networks than their non-SAP peers.” To support this, a 2012 Straits Times survey conducted amongst the top 5 schools (of which 2 are in SAP) revealed that 82% of SAP students reported a lack of close friends from other races, compared to 12% for the non-SAP schools. In a RICE Media interview, a Malay SAP alumnus elaborated that certain SAP students lack cultural knowledge of other races, citing quotes such as “I can’t differentiate between Malay and Indian” and being asked “if water was halal”. This shows that minorities who enrol in SAP schools would find it nearly impossible to avoid racist jokes and insensitive comments from their Chinese peers in SAP schools, suggesting the latter’s inability to interact meaningfully with other races. In fact, students from minority races would find it challenging to represent their own races and cultures to face the predominantly Chinese cohort of SAP students. This would ultimately lead to an increased racial segregation between the Chinese and the minority races, as xenophobic sentiments may arise especially from the former, believing that their status as the majority race is indeed a social privilege in Singapore. Despite the government’s attempts to alleviate this through Racial Harmony Day celebrations and weekly conversational Malay lessons, this may be insufficient to encourage inter-racial understanding between students of different races. A possible suggestion to rectify this would be to abolish the SAP system. By eliminating the prerequisite of studying Mandarin in these Chinese schools, this would allow the minority races to be better represented in each school. Also, this provides more opportunities for daily interactions between the different races to better promote multiracialism in all schools.

Furthermore, students in SAP schools are provided an “unequal access to educational resources” compared to their peers in other public schools, which reinforces the idea of “Chinese privilege” in Singapore. As a reward for performing well under Singapore’s meritocratic system, students in SAP schools experience multiple advantages over their counterparts in other schools. For instance, SAP schools enjoyed additional funding in the form of annual grants and interest-free loans, including a per capita government funding for SAP school students that was up to over 50% higher than other secondary school students during the programme’s initial years. In 2019, then Education Minister Ong Ye Kung updated that each SAP student receives an additional S\$300 “to develop their proficiency and interest in Chinese language-related studies.” SAP schools often receive donations from alumni working in top organisations and firms to repay their alma mater for contributing to their educational success. These schools also have a lower student-teacher ratio, as attributed in their additional

**Commented [SGQ1]:** But you can remove the prerequisite without abolishing the opportunity for students so inclined to pursue their interest in their own culture/heritage at a higher level.

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funding used to improve both the quality and quantity of their teaching staff. In particular, selected SAP schools offer the Bicultural Studies Programme (BSP), which provides its top students with unrivalled opportunities to visit China and learn more about Chinese culture and values through daily interactions with the mainland Chinese. As BSP is not offered to non-SAP schools, this signifies the increased government funding that is invested in nurturing the SAP elites. Again, these privileges are only offered to students that take Chinese as an examinable subject, which mostly excludes the minority races. As such, the advantages that are offered to SAP schools reinforces the idea that “Chinese privilege” exists, given that the SAP students are mostly Chinese. To alleviate this, a “donation cap” can be imposed by the government on SAP schools to prevent them from receiving excessive financial support for additional facilities and exclusive programmes. Under this framework, donations should be declared and checked annually by the government. SAP schools which exceed this “donation cap” would then incur a decrease in additional funding per student, down from S\$300 to S\$150 for example.

Moreover, SAP “perpetuates social inequality by instilling cultural capital in its students that enables them to thrive in a world where China is an emerging economy of opportunities”. To justify the relevance of SAP, Ong Ye Kung explained in 2019 that the rapid development of China, as Singapore’s largest trading partner, raises the importance of helping students to amass Chinese cultural capital. Doing so could reap economic benefits when doing business with China, especially when one possesses Chinese cultural knowledge that is essential in facilitating access and building strong professional ties with China’s market, which serves as a key motivation behind SAP. As mentioned earlier, the introduction of BSP to selected SAP schools exemplifies this belief, as top students are offered the opportunity to visit China and learn the Chinese culture, language and values directly from daily interactions with the mainland Chinese. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of capital suggests that by having a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and values, SAP students could be well-versed with the “knowledge, skills and abilities to pursue further opportunities professionally and maintain or advance their social positions,” provided that they seize the opportunities to make these connections. These include either working or studying in China, as well as building professional ties with Chinese firms and individuals. By restricting such opportunities to a handful of students from a particular racial group, this widens the inequality gap between the SAP and non-SAP students since the latter do not have access to such overseas immersion programmes. To resolve this, the government can consider expanding BSP to Malay and Tamil-

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speaking students, especially in the form of overseas immersion programmes for non-SAP public schools.

Given that Singapore boasts a population that is nearly 75% Chinese, the SAP is a prime example of how “Chinese privilege” is deemed prevalent in the country today. The government should explore solutions to minimise the unfair advantages enjoyed by the SAP schools. As previously mentioned, it can reduce the additional funding to resolve the unfair allocation of resources that favours the SAP schools. Alternatively, SAP can be expanded by creating similar programmes that cater to Malay and Tamil-speaking students and offered to all schools in Singapore to close the inequality gap between the Chinese and the minority races. Better still, SAP should be abolished to ensure a more equal representation of all races in every school and encourage multiracialism amongst students through inter-racial interactions. These suggestions would align with the Ministry of Education’s vision that “every school is a good school”.

(1500 words)

Harry Chang: A-

This is a comprehensive critique of the SAP school system. You have proposed a series of tough solutions to tackle its exclusiveness and elitism. I think this view can be balanced by also offering a softer alternative to achieve the same goals: by delinking cultural competency with overall academic performance and economic opportunity (ie China opportunities). In other words, “Higher Mother Tongue” can be made available in all schools, and for all ethnic groups, without having to be top of your cohort.

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**Question:**

In recent years, some observers have pointed out that policies/institutions meant for fostering nation building have unwittingly led to the consolidation of the majority ethnic group's "Chinese Privilege". These examples include:

- 1) The Group Representation Constituency,
- 2) **The Special Assisted Plan schools,** and
- 3) The meritocratic system of recruiting civil servants through scholarships.

Select one out of the three cases. Explain whether you agree or disagree with the criticism that the policy/institution has reinforced "Chinese Privilege" in Singapore, and suggest, accordingly, ways to amend or abolish it.

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