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‘Shortcut’ or a Necessary Path? Analysing ‘Chinese Privilege’ in Singaporean politics

In this paper, I will analyse the three assigned texts (Zainal & Abdullah 2019, Goh & Chong 2020, and Tang 2021). I will work with the lens of ‘Chinese privilege’ (as defined by Zainal & Abdullah) in analysing Singaporean politics and critique the articles based on two underlying themes (and ideologies) that circumscribe lived experiences in Singapore: meritocracy and multi-racialism¹. Since these twin themes permeate Singaporean politics, public policy, public opinion, and evidently, public debate too, it is prudent to use them to gauge whether, and how, racial privilege permeates Singapore’s body politic in turn. Prior to the thematic analysis, it behooves us to establish the provenance and crux of the texts.

Zainal & Abdullah’s 2019 article is expansive; it aims to define racial privilege and ‘Chinese privilege’, justify its interlinking with political hegemony by establishing a theoretical framework, and then empirically situate ‘Chinese privilege’ within Singaporean politics. The authors posit that the PAP’s political hegemony (and ironically, its commitment to multiracialism) inadvertently creates and perpetuates a ‘Chinese Privilege’ that provides ‘invisible ... unearned assets’ to ethnic Chinese in general, and Chinese politicians in particular.

Writing a year, a general election, and a pandemic later, Goh & Chong engage in a direct rebuttal of Zainal & Abdullah’s thesis, claiming that ‘Chinese privilege’ is ‘under-specified and decontextualized [and] used uncritically as a shortcut’ to analyse the PAP’s political

¹ We work with Zainal & Abdullah’s definition of the terms: “multiracialism is the idea that all races will be treated equally under the law and in politics; while meritocracy refers to the ideology that everyone’s access to opportunities will be determined by his or her own merit, not ethnicity or familial connections.”

hegemony. The rejoinder is premised on the posit that ‘Chinese privilege’ is misconstrued by Zainal & Abdullah: the term ‘Chinese’ is reductive, the ‘privilege’ applies only to the PAP, and that the very concept of ‘Chinese privilege’ is trivial (‘the bar ... seems to be set rather low’) and unhelpful.

Tang’s 2021 article summarizes Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Rally speech in Mandarin, where he sets out the claim that ‘Chinese privilege’ is ‘utterly baseless.’ Lee’s Mandarin speech is different from his English rendition, and instead directly addresses the Chinese community, peculiarly on a day of national importance. He praises Chinese Singaporeans for their ‘concessions for the greater good’ in adopting English, and then exhorts them to accommodate concerns of ethnic minorities.

Multi-racialism and ‘Chinese Privilege’

Zainal & Abdullah implicate the PAP’s engineered diffusion of both multiracialism and meritocracy as enabling the PAP to “define the contours of what is acceptable in society.” However, the two ideologies are not accorded equal footing. implicit in Zainal & Abdullah and Lee’s arguments is the position that Singapore’s erstwhile racial tensions and the PAP’s multi-racialism approach *necessitates* (and sometimes distorts) meritocracy; the latter is one of the ways of implementing the former through state intervention. Zainal & Abdullah point to Singapore’s erstwhile trauma of ‘ethnic clashes’ and its contemporary ‘race-based politics’. Lee repeatedly stresses the importance and vulnerability of ‘racial harmony’, clearly outlining that ‘we treat races equally, *with no special privileges*’ (emphasis mine), with meritocracy being the guarantor of equal privilege.

Zainal & Abdullah show that it is precisely PAP’s desire to ‘treat all races equally’ that leads to Chinese privilege, pointing to the GRC system and its ‘paradox of minority representation’. They claim that the mandate to include a minority MP from each GRC team leads not to racial equality or even tokenism (as one would expect) but rather to essentialism, since minority MPs become ‘*de facto* leads of their communities’ and are ‘paradoxically ... expected to transcend those ethnic identifications.’ Compared to their minority counterpart, Chinese MPs are claimed to have a wider latitude in conducting their politics, since they do not ‘suffer from the same [ethical versus trans-ethnic] dilemma’. Where minority MPs are linked to ‘community self-help groups’ such as Mendaki, further entrenching their roles as ‘stewards of the community’, they are also ‘attacked’ in Parliament for voicing grievances

from their community, espoused in the case of Faisal Manap bringing up the state's refusal to allow the wearing of *tudung* in frontline roles or providing *halal* food in the Navy.

While Zainal & Abdullah's claims of a Chinese privilege are correct insofar as society is concerned (there exist pernicious instances of discrimination, as outlined by Manap and the authors), its applicability to politics and the GRC is more muddled. Goh & Chong point out that the PAP's hegemonic 'attacks' on minority MPs were limited to only the opposition; the 'privilege' of Chinese MPs is thus simply the 'advantage of political incumbency.' Goh & Chong also correctly point out the lack of agency accorded to PAP minority MPs by Zainal & Abdullah, since the latter hold that PAP minority MPs are stuck in a dilemma not between ethnicity and nation, but between the party and their ethnicity. Goh & Chong cite the 'back-channels' to community stakeholders enjoyed by minority MPs, which prevent the need to advocate for minority issues in Parliament, which is the 'only platform' for opposition MPs like Manap. Worryingly, Zainal & Abdullah themselves note that the leaders of organisations such as Mendaki are PAP ministers.

Goh & Chong move on to question the existence of 'Chinese privilege' altogether, for they posit that a hegemonic PAP driven by 'Chinese privilege' would not undertake measures for racial equity 'at their political cost'. They claim that the PAP is driven by 'PAP privilege' instead. Zainal & Abdullah's argument is rendered weaker by their omission of minority MPs who have defeated Chinese candidates in elections (such as Murali Pillai in Bukit Batok SMC²), as well as their lack of interviews with the MPs they profess are 'caught in a dilemma.'

However, Zainal & Abdullah do offer qualifications that blunt Goh & Chong's rebuttals. They explicitly acknowledge the PAP has a 'special commitment' to multiracialism mixed with political advantage and hegemony. It is this cocktail that unintentionally perpetuates Chinese privilege. Further, they caveat that Chinese privilege is not racism, which they define to be an 'active discrimination'; Chinese privilege instead is 'invisible' and intended to be 'oblivious', to which Goh & Chong might be victim. While Goh & Chong object to the use of '*Chinese* privilege' as a 'homogenisation' or 'reduction' of a 'diverse diasporic group', they cite the differences between the English-educated and Chinese-educated as evidence.

² *The Straits Times*, July 11, 2020.

However, this is a *class-based* distinction, not a *racial* distinction. Zainal & Abdullah explicitly acknowledge intersectionality of class and race. Race is cited as only one of the possible sources of privilege along with class, gender and sex, and crucially, in citing Thanapal, they clarify that Chinese privilege confers “unearned power on Chinese Singaporeans *regardless of any other intersectional identity they carry*” (emphasis mine).

Moreover, Goh & Chong claim that ‘privilege’ is an irrelevant ‘shortcut’ in analysing hegemony and tackling anti-racism. However, Zainal & Abdullah imply that privilege is not a shortcut, but an intermediate stage that accords ethnic Chinese political and social power. In fact, Lee’s appeal for ethnic Chinese to ‘accommodate’ the feelings of minorities betrays the assumption that the Chinese are relatively more empowered. It is telling that instead of condemning discrimination meted out by Chinese landowners, Lee chooses to soften the import of his appeal by appealing to the largesse of the ethnic Chinese in ‘understanding the [hurt] feelings of minorities.’ Further, Lee frames the ‘concession’ of the Chinese to adopt English as a conscious choice to ‘put the minorities at ease’, when in fact the government imposed English-education on the Chinese forcefully and appealed to the Chinese to adopt English due to its economic value, not its socio-cultural import.

Goh & Chong’s discussion of Low Thia Kiang further reveals this societal and political ‘asset’ granted to the Chinese. In rebutting Zainal & Abdullah, Goh & Chong use their opponent’s first principles and first names to show that even majority Chinese MPs have to ‘toggle the interests of one’s ethnic community and those of the nation’, and thus the bar for demonstrating Chinese privilege is ‘rather low.’ They illustrate that Low was deemed a ‘parochial MP representing ethnic Chinese interests’ since he stitched ‘close personal relationships’ in a constituency of Teochew-speaking communities, and assiduously attended Chinese religious celebrations. However, Goh & Chong fail to acknowledge that only an ethnic Chinese could have won a constituency at least partly through appeals to his co-ethnics.

Meritocracy; or *Hao Ren Te Quan*

Critical to defining, perpetuating and masking Chinese privilege is the ‘blindspot’ of meritocracy. In light of Lee’s casting of Chinese privilege in Mandarin as *hua ren te quan*³ (literally, ‘Chinese special privilege / rights’), we can interpret Lee’s conception of meritocracy to be *hao ren te quan* (literally, “special privilege /rights accorded to ‘good’ people”). In other words, there is equal opportunity for all races, but special rights or rewards for those adjudged to be ‘good’ by the state’s metrics of meritocracy. In the context of Singaporean meritocracy, the phrase ‘Chinese special rights’ then becomes a self-defeating oxymoron that can be easily dismissed as ‘utterly baseless.’

Zainal & Abdullah outline the PAP’s rejection of the suitability of non-Chinese Prime Ministers, and the state sponsorship of SAP schools, as instances where Chinese Privilege drives government policies that ‘contradict the principles of meritocracy.’ In both cases, the government masks the privilege accorded to ethnic Chinese (by virtue of exclusive support) with claims of racial conservatism and cultural preservation respectively. The case of SAP schools, which exclude minority groups on a racial (not ethnic) basis, is illuminating here. Lee maintains that SAP schools were set up due to ‘preserve the traditions and values of former Chinese schools.’ Zainal & Abdullah agree, stating that SAP schools were intended to halt a ‘perceived decline’ in Chinese values; of course, one could counter that the ‘perceived decline’ was due to the PAP’s systematic eradication of Chinese dialects and their associated cultural artifacts.

Lee makes two problematic claims. He first affirms that the ‘Government will support all races in promoting and preserving their own rich cultural heritage.’ As pointed out by Zainal & Abdullah, this affirmation not only conflates race and ethnicity, but also hides the reality that the government does not support all races equally. As argued earlier, the need for cultural preservation arose from the PAP’s push to forge a common Chinese identity. Coupled with the fact that minority groups are not allowed to set up government-funded schools to further their culture, this hints at a government mindset that ‘cultural preservation’ is essentially cultural homogenization and essentialization.

³ For example, see Min, “Why there is Chinese privilege in Singapore, but it is not analogous to White privilege.” *AcademiaSG*, 17 June 2021. <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/why-there-is-chinese-privilege-in-singapore-but-its-not-analogous-to-white-privilege/>

Finally, Lee calls for SAP schools ‘to ‘let their students interact more frequently with members of others races.’ While integration is a laudable goal, Lee’s statement shows that SAP schools currently (and in the future) exclude minorities. SAP schools are compartmentalized by race, without any government plans for change in the future. The exclusive resources granted to elite SAP schools, such as the ‘Political Leaders Attachment Programme’ turn problematic here, since only Chinese students are provided access to these. Zainal & Abdullah suggest that a more fluid view of cultural awareness, such as elective programmes for the Malay language foster an inclusive environment in schools with a ‘healthy mix of ethnicities.’

Conclusion

In sum, Chinese privilege emerges as a pertinent tool to analyse the intersection between race, and political hegemony, despite its complexity in relation to electoral politics. Since both the Chinese identity and its associated privilege are constructed by the state (intentionally or otherwise), the state bears a responsibility reduce its influence to foster its goals of multi-racialism and meritocracy, one which the ruling elite has eschewed so far. The lens of Chinese privilege further provides insights into the conception of race, class, culture and ethnicity as well.

References

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Declaration

I acknowledge that this research essay is the product of my own work.

All materials consulted have been duly cited and credited.