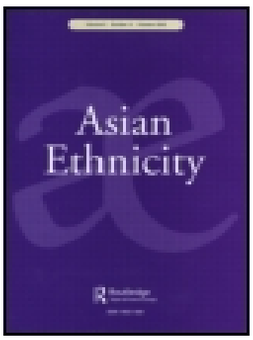

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ARTICLE

Chinese privilege in politics: a case study of Singapore's ruling elites

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of privilege as a conceptual category through the case study of Chinese privilege in Singapore politics. It does so through two main ways. First, at the theoretical level, we emphasise the importance of foregrounding the salience of political hegemony in the analysis of privilege. Second, at the empirical level, we interrogate the concept in an Asian context, with specific reference to Singapore. We argue that the existing focus on class privilege within the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) should go hand-in-hand with the study of Chinese privilege since PAP hegemony has significant implications on how race is constructed, understood and implicated in Singapore politics and society. Furthermore, PAP's race-based approach to politics inadvertently perpetuates Chinese privilege, as exemplified by contradictions in minority representation in parliament and the clash between Chinese privilege and the government's system of meritocracy.

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Introduction

Scholarly works often attribute the elitism of Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP) to the educational and professional backgrounds of its leaders. Made largely of English-speaking, overseas-educated technocrats with strong administrative, professional, academic, technical and commercial backgrounds, many PAP leaders are inducted into the party after completing their studies abroad on highly competitive and prestigious government scholarships.[1] As an illustration, in 1997, eight out of 24 of PAP's new Member of Parliaments (MPs) were government scholars. Out of the eight, three had received the president's scholarship, which is the most prestigious of the awards.[2] What is often overlooked in the literature on the PAP's elitism is the nuances on how leaders of different ethnicities were co-opted into the party. Hussin Mutalib has highlighted the disadvantages that Malay MPs face vis-à-vis their Chinese counterparts.[3] Mutalib contends that historically, the PAP Malay MPs lacked the educational and professional qualifications held by non-Malay MPs. The majority of Malay candidates fielded by the PAP in the early elections neither possessed a university education nor held

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occupations that Singaporeans perceived to be highly ranked; they were mostly Malay journalists and school teachers. It was only from the third generation of leaders onwards that one is able to witness high-calibre, education-wise, Malay candidates being recruited into the party. Mutalib's analysis brings the issue of ethnicity to the forefront in investigating the contours of Singapore politics.

This article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of privilege as a conceptual category through the case study of Chinese privilege in Singapore politics. It seeks to do so through two main ways. The first is by foregrounding the salience of political hegemony in the analysis of privilege. Theoretically, privilege is often understood in terms of gender, race and class, which are undeniably important. We too would embark on a similar course, with particular emphasis on race.[4] What we intend to contribute to existing discourse is the interrogation of privilege through comprehending political hegemony. Ethnic privilege can be sustained via political hegemony, which includes but is not limited to electoral dominance. Second, we contribute empirically to discussions on ethnic privilege by investigating the concept in an Asian context, with specific reference to Singapore. In this article, we hope to make these interventions by using the term 'Chinese political privilege' to refer to the political power, advantages and benefits that Chinese parliamentarians from the PAP enjoy that are closed off to those from ethnic minority groups. We argue that the focus of existing literature on class privilege within the PAP should go hand-in-hand with the study of Chinese privilege since the PAP hegemony has significant implications on the very nature race is constructed, understood and implicated in Singapore politics and society. Furthermore, PAP's race-based approach to politics inadvertently perpetuates Chinese privilege, which is tied to class privilege. Some of the manifestations of the continued salience of race and privilege in Singapore include the party's insistence that only Chinese candidates are suitable for the Prime Minister position, and the government's support for the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, which are designed to promote Chinese culture. The concept of Chinese privilege thus becomes instructive when one analyses not only the social structure of Singapore, but also its formal institutional arrangements. Our research aims to conceptualise privilege in a context where multiracialism and meritocracy form the ideological tools of the state. Hence, we will show how these tenets result in various contradictions that expose the flaws of the state's political rhetoric, as well as the privileges experienced by some parliamentarians but not others.

This article will first make a case for the inclusion of political hegemony in discussions of ethnic privilege. Following that, it will analyse the role of race in Singapore's political system before explaining how Chinese privilege manifests in politics. In so doing, it points out two main contradictions that have emerged as a result of the persistence of Chinese political privilege albeit the national narratives of multiracialism and meritocracy. These will be discussed in terms of the contradictions of minority representation in parliament, as well as the tensions between Chinese hegemony and the government's system of meritocracy.

Hegemony and privilege

At the theoretical level, this article aims to link racial privilege to political hegemony. At the empirical level, it demonstrates the prevalence of privilege in an Asian context, with

specific reference to Singapore. The concept of ethnic privilege is commonly traced back to Peggy McIntosh's concept of 'white privilege', which she coined in her article *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*.[5] In this article, McIntosh compares the advantages acquired by the whites with special provisions and resources found in an 'invisible, weightless knapsack'. This notion of white privilege has been a useful tool for raising consciousness about the systemic discrimination and oppression faced by ethnic minorities in the United States. Yet, at the same time, scholars working in the fields of critical race theory and whiteness study have highlighted certain shortcomings of 'white privilege' as an analytical concept. This article does not intend to reiterate these limitations, as they have been discussed elsewhere by other scholars.[6] Instead, it seeks to theorise privilege in an Asian context, where there is no history of slavery and state-sponsored racial segregation. This is because scholarly works on racism have largely drawn on the experiences of white and black people in the North American context. Such accounts are problematic, as they assume that people's ethnicities are easily reducible into the rigid and essentialised categories of whites and non-whites. They also neglect the multi-ethnic societies in Southeast Asia where much of the populations do not fall neatly on either side of the colour line. Nevertheless, McIntosh's groundbreaking work is still useful in helping us think about privilege. She defines privilege as 'an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious'.[7]

In Singapore, the term 'Chinese privilege' was popularised by Sangeetha Thanapal. Thanapal is a Singaporean activist of South Asian descent. According to her, by virtue of being Chinese bestows upon Chinese Singaporeans unearned power regardless of any other intersectional identity they carry.[8] While Thanapal's writings do seem to conflate privilege and racism, we adopt a different understanding. Privilege is not equivalent to racism. Racism is an attitude involving discriminating against others from different races, and may or may not be institutionalized. On the other hand, privilege merely means unearned assets, as explained earlier. It is not the claim of this paper that the PAP aims to be racially prejudiced; indeed, some of the institutions put in place by the PAP, which will be discussed later, were meant to actually strengthen the positions of the minorities. However, they had inadvertent effects of perpetuating Chinese privilege.

Past studies have highlighted the manifestations of ethnic privilege within political leadership.[9] Many of these studies show how the ethnic backgrounds of political leaders are intertwined with their gendered and classed subjectivities to influence their political legitimacy, career opportunities and career progression.[10] As insightful as these works are, they neither explicitly use the term privilege as a tool of analysis nor interrogate the ways in which ethnic privilege is maintained or negotiated through political hegemony. Therefore, this article goes a step further by demonstrating the role of political hegemony in maintaining the processes, practices and institutions that perpetuate the social conditions of privilege. We argue that political hegemony should be incorporated into discussions on ethnic privilege to show how macro forces of politics bear significant implications on the attitudes and everyday lives of the citizens.

Towards this end, Singapore represents an excellent case study due to the way in which Singapore society has been structured around PAP's hegemonic principles. As Chua Beng Huat argues through his concept of communitarian ideology, by governing all matters pertaining to race and religion, the PAP claims to be a guardian of racial and

religious harmony in Singapore.[11] The concept of ethnic privilege thus cannot be divorced from the notion of hegemony. In this paper, hegemony is defined as 'an order in which a certain way of life or thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional manifestation.'[12] The PAP has, through its electoral dominance and institutional controls, managed to shape Singapore society in its own image. PAP's ideologies are essentially Singapore's ideologies.[13] Since the party has been in power since independence, there have not been significant counter-narratives that have developed against the party's preponderance. Two PAP ideologies that are relevant for this paper are multiracialism and meritocracy.[14] 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. The ruling party has built its legitimacy and credibility around these two ideologies. Like any ideology, how they are manifested often consists of contradictions, which will be explained later. Nonetheless, it is true that by and large, Singaporeans have accepted these two ideologies as foundational concepts upon which the country is built.

It is worth mentioning that discussions on Chinese Privilege, though recently more common in online spaces, are often dismissed by some Singaporeans as inaccurate or unnecessary.[15] The evidence we have indicate that the majority of Singaporeans do indeed believe that the country largely operates on these ideologies.[16] For someone who believes in meritocracy, and that one's success is based on talent and hard work, the concept of privilege becomes less palatable to accept. More importantly, for the state, meritocracy justifies unequal outcomes and overlooks the existence of privilege, even when there are evidences that point in that direction. Chinese Privilege is thus, at least in part, sustained through PAP hegemony: the acceptance and internalization of the party's core ideologies render any discussion on Chinese Privilege susceptible to claims of upsetting the social fabric or causing disharmony in the nation. The state is the ultimate arbiter in the realm of race and religion, and it is unapologetic about the need for such a stance, as will be shown later.

The institutions that are in place to maintain stability are not unique to Singapore. Many non-democratic countries prioritize order over individual freedoms, and thus are willing to curb personal liberties to achieve this end.[17] In fact, democratic countries utilize such measures too when they deem there is a need to do so.[18] The literature on comparative politics is replete with authoritarian measures which both aim to maintain stability, and at the same time, perpetuate the ruling party's dominance.[19] This essay is situated within this body of literature. However, unlike much of the literature in comparative politics, which has been described as works on 'transitology', this paper does not focus on the *sources* of hegemony, which have been discussed elsewhere.[20] Instead, it aims to analyse the *effects* of hegemony of a regime. The argument made here is that when a ruling party possesses ideological hegemony, it is able to define the contours of what is acceptable in society, and is better-positioned to spread its version of the 'truth', even if there may be contradictions in its policies. A consequence of PAP hegemony studied here is 'Chinese Privilege'. Since the PAP does have ideological hegemony, instances of Chinese privilege are overlooked, or form the 'blind spots' of Singaporeans, since they are regarded as unavoidable outcomes of meritocracy, or the

natural course of affairs. As a result, there would not exist massive aversion to unequal outcomes, or issues faced by minority parliamentarians.

Race-based politics in Singapore: a brief survey

Singapore practises a race-based system of politics. What is meant by race-based differs from other systems that are premised upon ethnicity. In neighbouring Malaysia for instance, politics is centred on the primacy of Malays, which drastically differs from Singapore. A particular race is explicitly preferred in Malaysia, but in Singapore, that is not the case. Nonetheless, race figures prominently. Since the very founding of Singapore as an independent state is in ostensible opposition to the values that Malaysia practises, it is unsurprising then that Singaporeans would scoff at the proposition that Singapore adopts an ethnic approach to politics. Yet, ethnicity is indeed an unmistakable part of the socio-political scene in Singapore: ethnic identities are stated in identification cards, public housing estates have ethnic quotas in order to nudge inter-mingling between the ethnic groups and to prevent ethnic enclaves from emerging, and political parties have to field a multi-ethnic slate of candidates when contesting elections. The approach to ethnicity is consistent with the state's overall interventionist stance: in every sphere of life, the PAP does not leave things to chance. As Lee Kuan Yew remarked:

> "I say without the slightest remorse that we would not be here, would not have made the economic progress, if we had not intervened in very personal matters – who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit (or where you spit), or what language you use … It was fundamental social and cultural changes that brought us here." [21]

Central to the PAP's decision-making matrix on ethnicity is its historical experience. The racial riots of the 1960s and the merger with, and eventual separation from, the Malaysian Federation entrenched the salience of ethnicity in the psyches of PAP leaders.[22] Ethnicity had to be consciously managed, as for the PAP, it was perhaps the single most potentially debilitating force in a society.

Ethnicity is therefore given much consideration in the political realm. The Group Representation Constituency (GRC) and the 2017 Presidential Election bear testament to this fact. The GRC, a system whereby candidates had to contest in teams of 3–6 persons, of which at least one member must be from either the Malay or Indian communities, was ostensibly introduced to circumvent the problem of racial voting: if the majority Chinese voted along ethnic lines in a purely First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system, it would be entirely possible that no minority parliamentarians were elected; or so the argument goes.[23] The justification for the GRC rests on a couple of presuppositions: first, Singaporeans are extremely racial in their outlooks, and hence, racial preferences matter in voting; and two, it is the state's duty and prerogative to intervene in the daily affairs of Singaporeans in order to prod outcomes that are favourable for societal order. Similarly, the Presidential Election in 2017 was a manifestation of the salience of ethnicity in politics. The election was reserved for candidates from the Malay community to ensure that minority candidates are elected from time to time. Under the constitutional changes to the elected presidency as debated in Parliament in 2016, the 2017 election was reserved for Malay candidates since no one from the Malay ethnic group has been president for

five continuous terms.[24] Candidates running in this reserved election had to meet the same criteria as those running in open elections.[25]

As a country that abjures affirmative action in the most vociferous terms, it is perhaps strange that realpolitik has led the state to implement these two electoral tools. In essence, both the GRC and Reserved Presidency are affirmative action measures, even if they are not admitted to be such outright. The GRC forces parties to field minority persons, and could lead to the 'riding on the coat tails' effect: those candidates may be perceived to get into parliament on the basis of their Chinese counterparts' popularity, and may not possess the same amount of standing in the eyes of the public.[26]

A similar line of critique was directed at the Reserved Presidency scheme. It was noted by many observers that Halimah Yacob was a popular-enough candidate who could have won in an open election; instead, pursuing the Reserved Presidency would not only undermine the notion of meritocracy,[27] but it could also call into question her credibility as President. In their article that highlights the contradictions between the discursive constructions of the presidency by the PAP government and the consequences of the state's formulation, Mohamed Nawab and Waikar argue that while the state has constructed the presidency as an institution that is crucial for Singapore's political system and national interests, it has inadvertently undermined the credibility of these discourses. The presidency was initially framed as a way to safeguard multiracialism and meritocracy. However, its construction and reconstruction by the state has paradoxically eroded its capacity to embody these ideologies.[28] Yet, the PAP has maintained that in spite of the 'political costs' that may arise from these difficult decisions, it has to do 'the right thing'. The paternalistic attitude of PAP leaders is accompanied by its claim to moral authority: even if the people do not want something, PAP has to do it because it is the correct thing to do, and the party is willing to suffer from a dip in popularity because of its actions. Of course, such claims ignore the political advantages that arise from the implementation of these schemes. The GRC system made it harder for smaller parties to penetrate the electoral hegemony of the party, as the barriers to entry got even larger.[29] Indeed, to date, only one GRC (Aljunied) has ever been won by the opposition since its introduction. The Workers' Party won Aljunied in 2011, and retained it in 2015. There were also murmurs on the ground that the Reserved Presidency was implemented to prevent Dr Tan Cheng Bock, a former PAP parliamentarian who was subsequently critical of the party, from becoming President.[30] Cheng Bock had almost won in the 2011 Presidential Election, losing narrowly to the PAP-backed Tony Tan. Even though the PAP addressed this criticism and denied it, the rumblings persisted amongst many Singaporeans.[31] In reality, both could be concurrently true: the PAP could be genuinely concerned about ethnicity and felt a pressing need to engineer outcomes that are favourable for ethnic relations, and at the same time, could reap political advantages from the said policies. These objectives are not mutually exclusive.

Manifestations of Chinese privilege in Singapore's politics

In Singapore, privilege is often understood from a classed perspective. The idea that privilege can also take on racialised forms may be difficult to grapple for many Singaporeans- overt racial discrimination is rare; parliamentarians from the minority communities are always elected; and most Singaporeans believe that the education

system and other public services are colour-blind.[32] The PAP could rightly point to these metrics as incredible successes for a small city-state that underwent ethnic clashes prior to its independence. Yet, there is some cause for concern, proving that there is much to be done, and plenty of room for improvement. After the unopposed victory of President Halimah Yacob in 2017, social media was rife with comments that were replete with ethnic chauvinism.[33] Many Singaporean Malays and Indians have said that they have experienced discrimination in applying for jobs.[34] Perceptions of Malays being denied promotional opportunities or positions in government still persist and every now and then, unsavoury incidents pertaining to ethnicity and/or religion come to the attention of the public.[35] However, such lingering issues exist everywhere and is not the focus of this paper. The point of bringing these incidents up is to show that race still features both in the institutions and in the psyches of Singaporeans. This article will now turn to the manifestations of Chinese political privilege.

The paradox of minority representation in parliament

We argue that Chinese privilege extends to politics. For example, the GRC system confers certain responsibilities to minority parliamentarians, and as a corollary, privileges the Chinese MPs. Parliamentarians from the Chinese community are not expected to be representatives of the Chinese as much as the Indian and Malay MPs are. It is true that Chinese MPs are expected, at least informally, to be involved in many activities that are organized by various ethnic Chinese clan associations and serve as a bridge between the government and the Chinese, as Malay and Indian parliamentarians are. However, there is a crucial point of difference: Malay and Indian MPs are all elected by virtue of the ethnicity, at least in part, since the GRC system mandates that each team has a minimum of one minority MP. Malay and Indian parliamentarians thus become *de facto* leaders of their communities. Yet, paradoxically, these minority MPs are simultaneously expected to transcend those ethnic identifications, even if their presence in Parliament is precisely to ensure minority representation. Such is the perennial dilemma for minority MPs.

As rationalized by PAP leaders including Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, the purpose of having the GRCs is that minority representation would be ensured. As said earlier, this meant that Malay and Indian MPs would be *de facto* representatives of their communities even if the said constituents do not directly elect them. The assumption made here, which has been explicitly stated by the PAP, is that voters do make their decisions based on ethnic lines. PAP elites still believe that ethnic voting occurs. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong avers, 'Let's be honest with ourselves and deal with this squarely: For a non-Chinese to become an MP, it's not easy.'[36] The GRC is thus a 'stabiliser' in that it guarantees ethnic diversity in Parliament, it forces political parties to be multi-ethnic in their approaches to politics, and it circumvents the problem of ethnic voting. Malay and Indian MPs who are elected via the GRC system are thus, at least in part, chosen *because* of their ethnicity. They are thus granted with the responsibility of serving and representing their communities, acting as a conduit between the latter and the government. These MPs are further involved in community self-help groups, namely Mendaki (Council for the Development of Singapore Mala/Muslim Community) for the Malays and SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association) for the Indians. In line with the state's ethnicised approach to socio-political affairs, an

organization that is designed to uplift the socio-economic and educational status for each ethnic group exists. Both SINDA and Mendaki are led by PAP Ministers, and many of their board members comprise the minority parliamentarians. The link between being an ethnic minority MP and a steward of the community is solidified via these associations.

At the same time, almost paradoxically, minority MPs are expected to go beyond ethnicity, and at times, minimize their ethnic affiliations. The 'national interest' is often assumed to be primary, and ethnic affiliations can never come before the collective need. What constitutes national interest though, is usually defined by the PAP itself. Nowhere has the conundrum facing minority MPs been more amplified than the exchange in Parliament between Masagos Zulkifli, a PAP Minister, and Faisal Manap, the only Malay opposition MP from the Workers' Party (WP). In April 2017, Faisal called for Muslim women to be allowed to don the headscarf (*tudung/hijab*) in frontline positions such as the uniformed services. Faisal claims he was merely echoing the aspirations of many Malay/Muslims in the country, a point that is corroborated by the *Suara Musyawarah* (Conversations with the Community) report.[37] Instead of addressing Faisal's concerns, Masagos went on a tirade, impugning Faisal's motives for raising the matter. The minister said:

> "He dwells on issues that can injure or hurt the feelings of the community rather than inspire them. In fact, Mr Manap has used many occasions to potentially discordant issues in the House … It leaves a lingering feeling of unsolved and unsolvable, and impatience that one day I believe will explode. Is that what Mr Faisal wants? … Do you want to go back to the politics of race and religion of the 1960s, the politics we wanted to avoid when we left Malaysia? If we don't want that, why do we let a member constantly raise these issues to stir the community?"[38]

The *ad hominem* attack on Faisal was reflective of a deeper matter: ethnic minority MPs cannot be seen to raise 'sensitive' subjects that would threaten the stability of the country, as defined by the PAP. There were many other issues deemed 'sensitive' that have been discussed in Parliament, including Prime Minister Lee's unprecedented decision to hold a parliamentary session to discuss the accusations made by his siblings in regard to their father's (Lee Kuan Yew) will.[39] Somehow though, Faisal's question was considered divisive and inappropriate for the public forum of parliament. In reference to this incident, Alami Musa, former President of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) and current Head of Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), wrote in an opinion piece, which lauds the PAP government's handling of religion, that 'Raising issues of religion in Parliament for the sake of winning political support or gaining political mileage is politicising religion and is against secularism.'[40] Community leaders such as Alami seemed to share Masagos' assessment that some issues should be discussed behind closed-doors, in spite of observations that such an approach has failed to instil confidence in the Malay community that its leaders are adequately representing it.[41] The above-mentioned incident was not the only occurrence in which Faisal was chided for raising matters on behalf of Malays/Muslims. In 2016, the opposition parliamentarian was taken to task by no less than the Defence Minister, Ng Eng Hen, after the former had asked the government to consider having halal food on board navy ships in order to make the navy a more inclusive organization which could enlist Muslims. Ng reprimanded Faisal for 'only championing in his speech for Muslims' in spite of knowing that

Singapore is a secular and multi-racial country. Faisal responded by stating that he has raised more 'national' than 'Muslim' issues, and that as a minority MP elected via the GRC system, it was indeed his duty to raise the concerns of his co-ethnics.[42]

Hence, while Faisal was elected in a system whereby he is supposed to represent his ethnic constituents, he must be circumspect in doing so, and is expected to remain reticent on issues that the community may expect him to champion, when the 'national interest' may be endangered. In actuality, even Faisal's response to Ng was emblematic of the problem: the distinction between 'national' and 'Muslim' issues is an unhelpful one. When one distinguishes between 'national' and Muslim" concerns, a few problems may arise: first, the impression may be given that national needs are always at odds with the desires of Muslims; and second, it is as if Muslims are not equal citizens of Singapore entitled to the same right of articulating their concerns. Therefore, even though Faisal was challenging some of the state's pronounced positions, the language he used may imply that he has accepted the dichotomy between national issues and a minority community's concerns.

No doubt, some may agree with the PAP's approach of not allowing racially and religiously sensitive issues to be discussed openly in parliament as consistent with its mantra of maintaining order and harmony at all costs. Furthermore, some may argue that the above-mentioned incidents simply demonstrate the PAP's aversion to the opposition, and not a manifestation of Chinese Privilege. A few points need to be raised. First, this article does not make a normative judgment on whether Faisal or Masagos/Ng Eng Hen was right. It simply seeks to show the presence of Chinese Privilege in Singapore politics. Second, it is not the argument of this article that the PAP does this with the purposeful intent of perpetuating Chinese hegemony. In fact, that is the opposite of what we are positing. Rather, we argue that these approaches can and do unintentionally perpetuate Chinese privilege. Third, while it is true that Faisal was treated harshly because he is a member of the opposition, it is precisely because of his position as a member of the opposition that he was able to articulate these issues openly. PAP minority parliamentarians do not usually do the same, because they believe in the importance of both maintaining party unity and not upsetting societal stability by discussing sensitive matters. Finally, if parliament is not the appropriate platform to bring up such issues, the purpose for having the GRC system seems to be moot, as that was the original intent behind having it.

Chinese political privilege extends beyond this puzzle faced by minority MPs. Malay and Indian MPs and Ministers are expected to play the role of mediator between the state and their communities; they tend to agree with the government more often than not, since they are, after all, members of the ruling party. A couple of examples are in order.

The first is the incident involving the Hindu community. There was some controversy over the ban of musical instruments at Thaipusam processions in Singapore. Thaipusam is a festival celebrated by Tamil Hindus whereby they embark on a foot procession, accompanied with some rituals and the playing of musical instruments. In 2015, three men were arrested after getting involved in a scuffle with police officers during the Thaipusam procession. The men were alleged to have lost their temper at the law enforcement officials after they were told they could not play drums during the procession. Naturally, there was some disquiet amongst the Hindu community in Singapore over the whole incident. Minister of Home Affairs and Law, K. Shanmugam, responded

to the incident on his own Facebook page, labelling the concerns raised about the ban on musical instruments as 'valid'. At the same time, Shanmugam iterated the government's position, and stated that in fact, Hindus were in a privileged position since they were the only ones who were allowed to have a religious procession on foot.[43] The ban on live music was subsequently lifted the following year. The point here is not about the ban, or its lifting, but rather, the difficult position minority MPs find themselves in, between their communities and the government.

Another incident is the oft-cited hijab issue. While this matter resurfaces every now and then, in recent years, the issue was most amplified in the public sphere in late 2013/early 2014. A group of activists began requesting the government to reconsider its ban on the hijab for certain frontline government positions. The movement was largely organic. In response, the government had a closed-door dialogue with a selected group of about 100 Muslim leaders, which did not include most of the activists who agitated for the policy change, to explain its position.[44] The former Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, declared during the episode that it would be 'problematic' to allow the hijab to be worn for some jobs.[45] Unlike the Thaipusam incident, however, the hijab issue has not been resolved, even if the clamour has dissipated, though it is not unlikely that it would be resuscitated in the future if the matter still persists. The public stances of Ministers Shanmugam and Yaacob are not unexpected: they are cabinet members, and one would expect them to espouse positions that are in line with the collective will of the executive branch of government. What is perhaps more instructive is the reaction of other Indian and Malay-Muslim MPs during the Thaipusam and hijab incidents: even the PAP backbenchers did not deviate from the official party position. Although public dissent is rare in general in the PAP, it is still possible to find examples of MPs challenging each other in parliament. For instance, during the debate on Section 377A, a law which criminalizes homosexual acts between males, a few PAP MPs stood up to disagree with the government's stance.[46] Yet, when it comes to matters of race and religion, rarely do we witness the backbenchers calling the government to account on particular policies, or even mildly challenging the party elites.

This is not unexpected, and is very much in line with the party's approach, and PAP hegemony. On racial and religious matters, dissent is not tolerated as much as in other spheres, so it is natural that PAP MPs would toe the party line. For the purpose of this paper, the reluctance of Indian or Malay PAP MPs to take up causes that their community may find important highlights the salience of the concept of Chinese political privilege. While these individuals are elected on the premise that they would be representatives of, and spokespersons for, their communities, they are not allowed to do so in a manner that may undermine the government's legitimacy. They are thus expected to be Malay or Indian, but not too much. Such is the quandary facing ethnic minority MPs in Singapore's political system.

A note here is due. We do not dispute the PAP's intentions in maintaining stability, and its special considerations toward the sensitive issues surrounding race and religion being raised publicly. The point we are making is that in its obsession of this pursuit, minority parliamentarians are faced with certain dilemmas and issues that Chinese MPs are not.

Tensions between race and meritocracy

Some government policies contradict the principles of meritocracy that has long been the ideological tenet of the state. Two recent events that illustrate the continued salience of Chinese political privilege are worth highlighting.

The first is the PAP's insistence that only Chinese candidates are suitable for the Prime Ministerial position. In a ministerial forum held on 28 March 2019 at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, the candidate who is expected to succeed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, shared with the audience that while the younger generation of Singapore's population is open to having an individual from a minority race as their prime minister, the older generation is not.[47] In response to a question raised by a member of the audience, who noted that Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam was a popular candidate to take on the position given his popularity in his constituency's election results, Heng argued that this seemed unlikely based on his interactions with people on the ground during the past few general elections.[48] The question then arises: if the government believes that the electorate is not ready for a minority President, such that it had to amend the constitution to guarantee a minority President, why did it not appoint a non-Chinese Prime Minister when it had the opportunity to? Whether Heng's assertion on the prevalence of racial voting is accurate is not the point of contention; what is emphasized here is that minorities such as Tharman, who are popular and whose capabilities are not doubted, are deemed to not be suitable for the premiership, because of their ethnicity.

The second is the government's ongoing support for SAP schools. These schools were established in 1979 to promote the learning of Chinese language, culture and values in response to their perceived decline. While SAP schools were initially formed to address concerns over cultural preservation, their relevance has taken on an additional (economic) meaning, which is to promote bilingualism amongst Singaporeans, perceived to be important for business dealings with China given that it is currently Singapore's largest trading partner.[49] Such schools continue to have a place in the education system. Despite questions about the relevance of such schools in multi-cultural Singapore, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung insisted on its importance at a book launch at Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre on 23 February 2019. The event marked the 40th anniversary of SAP schools.[50] Although programmes like the Elective Programme for Malay Language in Secondary Schools (EMAS) are offered, they are different from the SAP schools. SAP schools are exclusively for Mandarin speakers, since students need to read both English and Mandarin, and therefore, ensures more racial homogeneity in their composition, whereas EMAS is just a programme in schools that have a healthy mix of ethnicities within them.[51]

Moreover, as Barr and Skrbis (2008) argue, SAP schools are sites where elitism and Chinese privilege are compounded. The education system is segregated in a way that privileges the elites who are then carefully selected by the government to serve in politics. SAP schools, which are schools with a predominantly Chinese environment, are among the elite schools that offer resources and programmes that boost their students' chances of obtaining government scholarships. These include the 'Political Leaders Attachment Programme' offered by schools such as Hwa Chong Institution, which select students to gain mentorship from politicians. The ethnicity of government scholarship holders, as well as the ethnic make-up of the top leadership in Singapore should therefore not come

as a surprise. More than 90% of the Public Service Commission (PSC) and uniformed scholars have been Chinese. Students from SAP schools have clinched these prestigious government scholarships almost every single year since 1978. The denial of access to such opportunities to capable minorities underscores a grim reality: that members of minority ethnic groups have to work additionally hard in order to succeed. Hence, the privileges conferred to the Chinese elites reiterate a critique of Singapore's ideology of meritocracy, which is that while the system rewards individuals on the basis of talent, effort and achievement, it does not ensure that everyone competes on a level playing field. A look at the Fourth Generation (4G) PAP leaders would corroborate this point.[52] 1 of the 16 4G leaders who are political office-holders was educated in Malaysia and attained Singaporean citizenship as an adult (Dr Janil Puthucheary): of the remaining 15, 6 were educated at SAP schools, which is a significant proportion.[53]

Conclusion

This study has attempted to understand and problematize the utility and contours of the concept of Chinese privilege in politics. We postulate that it is important to talk about Chinese political privilege as a means of comprehending how privilege can be manifested via both formal and informal means. It must be emphasized that privilege does not have to be the consequence of intent; often, well-meaning policies result in privilege of a particular group, as the example of the GRCs demonstrates.

Again, it needs to be reiterated that privilege is different from racism. Stating that Chinese privilege exists is vastly different from saying that racism is rampant; the latter would involve active discrimination, while the former is associated with advantages which are unwittingly conferred upon someone due to factors beyond his/her control. Acknowledging the racial nature of politics and society in Singapore would assist us in thinking about Chinese political privilege.

Moreover, racial privilege is just one manifestation. One can derive privilege from one's gender, sexuality, religion and of course, class. Every individual holds multiple identities, of which race is just one of them. The intersections between these categories need to be interrogated, as different politicians may be simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged because of the multiple identities possessed. We hope that this will form the basis for further research in the future.

In the broader sense, accepting the concept of privilege helps us deconstruct the notion of meritocracy. Especially in Singapore, the concept of meritocracy has largely been accepted by the citizens, as people believe that hard work will bring success. Deconstructing the privileges individuals enjoy would assist in critically understanding the sources of one's own accomplishments. In doing so, one needs to thoroughly interrogate the concept of political hegemony, especially in terms of how it shapes discourse, draws the boundaries of acceptable thoughts and behaviour, and how it is manifested.

Notes

1 Tan, "Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global City," 7–27.
2 Ibid.
3 Mutalib, *Singapore Malays*, 133.

4 This article acknowledges that sociologically, the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' should be used in distinct ways; while 'race' refers to groups of people with differences or similarities in biological traits deemed by society to be socially significant to act as boundaries of social identity, 'ethnicity' refers to a category of people who identify each other based on shared cultural practices. However, such is not the case in Singapore. The government adopts a race-based approach in dealing with social issues and in balancing the needs of its population. As such, the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' will be used interchangeably in this article.
5 McIntosh, *Race, Class and Gender in the United States*, 188–192.
6 For example, see Bonds and Inwood, "Beyond White Privilege," 715–733, also see Moosavi, "White privilege in Britain," 1918–1933.
7 McIntosh, *Race, Class and Gender*, 188.
8 See the article by Petra-Dierkus-Thrun, "Chinese Privilege, Gender and Intersectionality in Singapore: A Conversation between Adeline Koh and Sangeetha Thanapal," Boundary 2, 4 March 2015. https://www.boundary2.org/2015/03/chinese-privilege-gender-and-intersectionality-in-singapore-a-conversation-between-adeline-koh-and-sangeetha-thanapal/
9 For example, see Saggar, "Race and Political Representation in the United Kingdom," 69–93, also see Trimble, "News Representation of Canadian Political Party Leadership," 314–330; and Rosette, "Race Matters for Women Leaders," 429–445.
10 For example, see Trimble, "News Representation of Canadian Political Party Leadership," 314–330, also see Davies, "Political Leadership in Popular Culture," 121–133.
11 Chua, *Communitarian Ideology in Singapore*, 37.
12 Antonio Gramsci, cited in Woolcock, 204.
13 Abdullah, "Selective History," 473–486.
14 Ibid.
15 See the article by Margaret Chan, "Brownface is not Singaporean," *The Straits Times*, 7 August 2019. https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/brownface-is-not-singaporean. Accessed 4 September 2019. In this article, Associate Professor Chan dismissed some minority Singaporeans' opposition to an advertisement in which a Chinese man painted his face brown to represent Malay and Indian Singaporeans.
16 Abdullah, "Selective History," 473–486.
17 Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*.
18 Saiya and Manchanda, "Do burqa bans make us safer?"
19 Case, "Can the Halfway House Stand," 437–464; and Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*.
20 Abdullah, "Selective History," 473–486; Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm"; Geddes, "What do we Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" 115–144; Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose*; and Mutalib, "Future of Opposition in Singapore" 313–342.
21 Mutalib, "Future of Opposition in Singapore," 321.
22 Low, "Racial Riots in Singapore," 431–455, also see Hill and Kwen, *Politics and Nation-Building in Singapore*, 91–113.
23 Lee Kuan Yew lamented that young Singaporeans were not cognizant of the 'need to return a racially-balanced slate of candidates', while Goh Chok Tong, his successor and the second Prime Minister of Singapore, argued that the GRC would ensure a multi-racial parliament in perpetuity. See Mutalib, "Electoral Reforms and Politics in Singapore," 664.
24 *The Straits Times*, 8 November 2016.
25 Ibid.
26 Tan, "Limits of Electoral and Spatial Integration," 422.
27 Senior PAP leaders such as Dr Yaacob Ibrahim admitted that many Singaporeans, especially the younger ones, saw the move to be going against the grain of meritocracy, see *The Straits Times*, 7 November 2016.
28 Mohamed Nawab and Waikar, "People's Action Party and Singapore Presidency," 382–405.
29 Tan, "Manipulating Electoral Laws in Singapore," 632–643.
30 Ibid.
31 *Channel News Asia*, 15 September 2016.

32 Mathews, "Survey on Race, Religion and Language," 121.
33 For example, a comment on the following thread by one Lawrence Poh makes reference to Halimah's Indian ancestry: 'An Indian will twist and turn (selalu suka pusing macam gasing.' See comments section, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/i-do-not-serve-any-political-party-halimah-yacob-talks-about-her-9166308.
34 Ibid, p.22. The figure is 26.4% for Malays, and 24.2% for Indians.
35 *The Straits Times*, June 3, 2017.
36 *Today Online*, August 21, 2016.
37 *Asia One*, September 12, 2013.
38 *The Straits Times*, April 4, 2017.
39 *Today Online*, July 3, 2017.
40 *The Straits Times*, May 12, 2017.
41 Ibid.
42 *Today Online*, April 8, 2016.
43 *Today Online*, February 7, 2015.
44 *The Straits Times*, January 25, 2014.
45 For a detailed explanation about the hijab debate in Singapore, refer to Humairah and Wong, "Voices Behind the Veil," 107–121.
46 Abdullah, "Electoral Innovation in Competitive Authoritarian States," 190–207.
47 *Today Online*, March 29, 2019.
48 *The Straits Times*, March 29, 2019.
49 *Channel News Asia*, February 23, 2019.
50 *The Straits Times*, February 23, 2019.
51 Ibid.
52 Since SAP schools were started in 1979, it is only makes sense to have an analysis of the educational background of 4G leaders, and not before, in ascertaining the point we are making.
53 These are Ong Ye Kung, Chee Hong Tat, Grace Fu, Koh Poh Koon, Ng Chee Meng, and Josephine Teo. Refer to *Today*, January 4 2018.

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