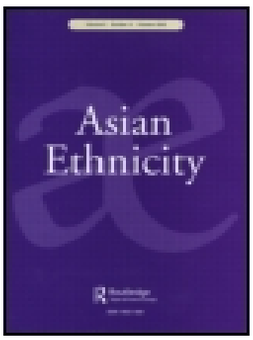

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ARTICLE

'Chinese privilege' as shortcut in Singapore: a rejoinder

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ABSTRACT

We disagree with Humairah Zainal and Walid Jumblatt Abdullah that Chinese privilege exists in Singapore politics and that it is perpetuated by the political hegemony of the long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP). Consequentially, we disagree that 'Chinese privilege' is thus a useful concept for understanding politics in Singapore. Our rejoinder argues that 'Chinese privilege' is under-specified and decontextualized by the authors, used uncritically as a shortcut for the consequences of the long-ruling party's political hegemony for ethnic relations, and is therefore a polarizing distraction to the critical analysis required to advance anti-racism discourse and understanding in Singapore. We show that the authors have mistook incumbent political privilege for Chinese privilege. We argue that ethnic majority and minority Members of Parliament from both governing and opposition parties have had to simultaneously serve as community leaders and transcend ethnic affiliations to represent national interests.

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Chinese privilege; politics; PAP; race; Singapore; parliamentarians

Introduction

The article by Humairah Zainal and Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, 'Chinese Privilege in Politics: A case of Singapore's ruling elite', published online by *Asian Ethnicity* in December 2019 can be summed up along the following lines. Chinese privilege exists in Singapore politics and is perpetuated by the political hegemony of the long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP). This can be seen in the advantages and benefits enjoyed by ethnic Chinese parliamentarians which are closed off to ethnic minority ones. 'Chinese privilege' is therefore not only evident but, as a concept, useful in understanding politics in Singapore.

We appreciate the effort of the authors to write about race, racism, and racialism in postcolonial Singapore. Too few scholars have provided grounded and critical assessment of the Singapore case which many international academics and policymakers view as a success in managing racial relations and promoting social harmony. The complexity of race, racism, and racialism as socio-political and economic phenomena across the wide range of contemporary issues in multicultural and multi-religious Singapore deserves scholarly attention. It is in this spirit that we engage with the assertions and arguments made by the authors in their article. We disagree firmly but respectfully with Humairah and Walid that 'Chinese privilege' is a useful concept for understanding politics in

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Singapore. Our rejoinder can be summed up as such: 'Chinese privilege' as a concept is under-specified and decontextualized by the authors, used uncritically as a shortcut for the consequences of the long-ruling party's political hegemony for ethnic relations, and is therefore a polarizing distraction to the critical analysis required to advance anti-racism discourse and understanding in Singapore. We point to four major flaws in their article.

The first issue we have is the ahistorical and delocalised application of 'Chinese privilege' in contemporary Singapore. The authors acknowledge that the concept is a literal transposition of 'white privilege' and rightfully note that that other scholars 'have highlighted certain shortcomings of "white privilege" as an analytical concept,' shortcomings made starker by the complexity of Southeast Asian societies.[1] Despite these admissions, they neither deem it necessary to discuss the limitations or the historical trajectory of 'Chinese privilege' nor seek to tighten the definition of the term for local application in their article. This neglect has important implications for the scholarship of privilege and racism.

Humairah and Walid take it for granted that 'Chinese privilege' exists solely because there is a Chinese majority. This assumption empties the concept of any local and historical nuances such as the deep intertwining of language, education, and ethnicity. Conscientious students of politics in Singapore would know that the term cannot apply to the Chinese-educated who saw their Chinese-medium schools disappear from the landscape and replaced by English-medium schools in the early years of the country's industrialisation. The same groups also suffered the loss of employment opportunities when English-medium education was preferred over Chinese-medium education. What about the concerns over the loss of Chinese dialects and the alienation of the older generations in the state's drive to promote Mandarin as lingua franca of the Chinese population? Would the authors then argue that 'Chinese privilege' was enjoyed only by English-educated Chinese and not Chinese-educated Chinese, or only by Mandarin-speaking Chinese and not dialect-speaking Chinese? Their vaguely defined concept is akin to a poorly polished lens that fails to pick up important cultural nuances.

The fact of the matter is that, in addition to race, identity politics comprises language, ethnicity, and class, all of which have deep historical specificity in postcolonial Singapore. This fact is obscured by the authors' simplistic application of the concept to the local. The treatment given by Humairah and Walid to the phrase 'Chinese' in 'Chinese privilege' reduces a complex ethnicity into a one-dimensional racial identity. Their homogenisation of 'Chinese' is arguably what the postcolonial state was trying to do with its education and cultural policies which targeted the diverse Chinese-educated and dialect-speaking groups that make up the Chinese population in Singapore. On the other hand, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have studied and highlighted the complexities of being Chinese and becoming Singaporean, as befitting a diverse diasporic group struggling for political accommodation in the making of a multiracial, multi-ethnic, and multicultural nation-state. It would be very relevant and interesting for an article to study the interaction between the ruling party's political hegemony and the complexities of Chinese-ness for a journal such as *Asian Ethnicity*. However, the concept of 'Chinese privilege', because of its straight-jacketed application to a complex community with a multiplicity of class, linguistic, and educational fissures, short-circuits this engagement and causes Humairah and Walid to neglect this crucial body of local scholarship.

Secondly, the authors make no distinction between 'Chinese privilege' and the advantages of political incumbency. Their lack of distinction blurs the conceptual contours of 'Chinese privilege' allowing the concept to be anything for anyone. For example, on one hand, they argue that Fasial Manap, a minority Member of Parliament (MP) from the opposition Workers' Party (WP), was attacked in Parliament for bringing up Malay issues; and this was evidence of Chinese privilege because, presumably, an ethnic Chinese MP would not have faced the same hostility for bringing up Chinese issues. On the other, the authors also note that 'PAP minority parliamentarians do not usually do the same [bring up Malay or Indian issues], because they believe in the importance of both maintaining party unity and not upsetting societal stability by discussing sensitive matters" and that "they tend to agree with the government more often than not.'[2]

If indeed these PAP minority MPs 'tend to agree with the government,' are the authors then suggesting that these minority parliamentarians are complicit in upholding 'Chinese privilege'? Would the authors at least grant them some sense of agency and acknowledge that these parliamentarians genuinely believed that the open discussion of racial and religious matters did more political harm than good? In any case, this assertion is false. Historically, there were figures such as Haji Ya'acob bin Mohamed who spoke his mind about Malay interests and criticised government polices during his three terms as PAP MP and after he retired from politics in 1980. More recently, Yaacob Ibrahim, who was formerly a minister in the cabinet, firmly reminded the government in Parliament not to forget, in the bicentennial commemoration of the founding of modern Singapore by British East India Company officer Sir Stamford Raffles, what the Malays had to go through under colonialism and still have to endure. What he said is worth quoting in full:

> Sir, this commemoration should also lead us to a better appreciation of our communities' history and our place in the region. Out of the colonial experience emerged many disturbing myths about this region, including the most toxic myth of the lazy native. This myth has been studied and debunked extensively, for instance, by the late Prof Syed Hussein Al-atas in his famous book entitled 'The Myth of the Lazy Native', which tore apart the colonial ideology behind labelling the indigenous population as lazy for not wanting to work in the mines and plantations. Nevertheless, that still lingers in the minds of some people.
>
> When I was growing up in modern Singapore, my own teachers dismissed my community as being lazy and unable to study hard. Sir, this is the burden of history that my community carries. It is unjust and unfair. If we are to commemorate the bicentennial we must also recognise the less savoury aspects of it – practices and ideas designed to meet the needs and maximise the profits of the empire at the expense of the indigenous population.[3]

More importantly, the authors failed to ask whether PAP minority parliamentarians enjoyed exclusive platforms such as closed-door meetings with community stakeholders and institutions or back-channels to government agencies and cabinet ministers. If so, then WP's Faisal is not suffering the ill-effects of 'Chinese privilege' but the more mundane disadvantage of being in an opposition party. In fact, this was the case in cabinet minister Masagos Zulkifli's rebuke of Faisal when the latter raised the issue of allowing Muslim girls and women to wear their religious headscarf in schools and the uniformed services during a debate on the motion to acknowledge the aspirations of Singapore women. It is unfortunate that Humairah and Walid raised this example to bolster their case but failed to observe that Masagos objected to Faisal's constant raising of the headscarf issue in Parliament whenever the opportunity presented itself by saying

that there was 'a right time, a right place and a right way to discuss this,' that 'Government leaders and community leaders of all races and religions have been actively discussing such sensitive and deeply emotive matters in a number of closed-door platforms.'[4] Denied of closed-door platforms and back channels because he was an opposition MP, not because he was a minority parliamentarian, Faisal could do little else but raise the issue in Parliament, the only platform available to him to represent his constituents. The minister's rebuke was thus disingenuous, but this example does not show 'Chinese privilege' or the burdens of minoritarian parliamentarians, only the political privilege denied to opposition parliamentarians.

Thirdly, the bar for 'Chinese privilege' seems to be set rather low. Humairah and Walid argue that minority Malay or Indian parliamentarians feel the consequences of 'Chinese privilege' because they are expected to 'become de facto leaders of their communities' while 'simultaneously expected to transcend those ethnic identifications.'[5] Chinese MPs, on the other hand, according to the authors, enjoy 'Chinese privilege' because they do not face this dilemma. Such arguments ignore the complexity of contemporary identity politics and flies against the face of evidence. Ethnic Chinese MPs too have to walk the fine line between 'community' and 'national' interests. The rise of China as an economic and geopolitical power over the last two decades has placed pressure on Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, not least Singapore. Many older and more conservative Chinese Singaporeans might feel culturally connected to China and thus instinctively supportive of Beijing's interests, while others are cognisant that such support may be at odds with their country's interest. So too ethnic Chinese MPs, whether of the PAP or opposition variety, have to constantly balance the strong support that their constituencies might have for China with the need to advance national interests which might, from time to time, contradict Beijing's interests. In short, the authors' claim that 'minority MPs are expected to go beyond ethnicity, and at times, minimize their ethnic affiliations' should be extended to ethnic Chinese MPs too.[6] The point here is that toggling between the interests of one's ethnic community and those of the nation is not unique to ethnic minority MPs, and is certainly a low bar for a demonstration of 'Chinese privilege'.

The example of the longest-serving opposition MP, Low Thia Khiang, who served from 1991 to 2020 and was WP's leader, is instructive in this regard. He was driven to politics by the injustice of the closure of the region's only Chinese-medium university, Nanyang University, his alma mater, by the PAP government and the discrimination faced by its Chinese-educated graduates. He won his seat amidst the PAP parliamentary monopoly in a constituency composed of tight-knit Teochew-speaking communities, with which he formed close personal relationships by speaking the dialect and assiduously attending community events such as Chinese religious and festive celebrations and funeral wakes. He was initially deemed a parochial MP representing ethnic Chinese interests. He was laughed at by the English-educated elites of the PAP for his halting command of the English language, but eventually won their grudging respect by learning to debate with them in English in a principled manner. In recent years, he also won the respect of the government leadership for calling on Singapore to carve its own multicultural Chinese identity in the context of China's rising assertiveness in the region. He said in Parliament in 2017, after a period of diplomatic tension with China:

> We have encouraged our businessmen, entrepreneurs and professionals to connect with their Chinese counterparts using deep historical and cultural links. We saw the complications when Singaporeans doing business and working in China came under public pressure during the events

> last year. Some Singaporeans were even of the opinion that we should appease China. Singapore not only risks becoming economically vulnerable to any strategic foreign policy shift by China, the multi-racial and multi-cultural character of our society will also come under pressure.[7]

Finally, the authors misdiagnose PAP privilege for 'Chinese privilege'. The authors point to the Group Representative Constituency (GRC) and the Reserved Presidency scheme to argue that they have eroded the state's capacity to embody the ideologies of multiracialism and meritocracy.[8] This is a valid criticism which has been raised by other observers, and we have no issue with this. However, the authors make no clear attempt to demonstrate how the GRC (which guarantees minority presence in parliament) or the Reserved Presidency (which guarantees a minority president at regular intervals) perpetuate 'Chinese privilege' or 'Chinese hegemony'. They fail to explain why the purportedly 'Chinese' ruling elite would seek to provide for more minority representation when it would be far easier to leave elections results in the hands of the Chinese voting majority. In fact, the PAP leaders acknowledged that they were expending their political capital by championing the Reserved Presidency despite public opposition because they believed this would firm up the multiracial character of the state. In other words, if political hegemony sustains 'Chinese privilege' as the authors claim, why would the PAP elite seek to implement mechanisms that ensure minority presence to their political cost? The more accurate explanation for GRCs and the Reserved Presidency is that they better serve PAP privilege, making it much harder for opposition politicians and anti-establishment figures to gain access to Parliament and the Presidency.

In conclusion, this rejoinder does not deny that racism exists in Singapore. It does not deny that ethnic minorities faced historical and structural impediments to their advancement, or that many continue to encounter everyday stereotyping, discrimination, and downright racism. However, it is precisely because such problems exist that we feel it is necessary to have conceptually clear and intellectually rigorous commentaries which seek to investigate race and race relations in Singapore. The easy borrowing of popular phrases and labels just will not do. Like Miriyam Aouragh, we think the concept of 'white privilege' has been increasingly exported out of the historical context of the US and deployed as a shortcut taking over the analysis of racism that is detrimental to transnational and trans-ethnic anti-racism movements and scholarship.[9] 'Chinese privilege' has appeared as an uncritically imported shortcut in Singapore in recent years, with little evidence to prove its existence other than the prescribed racial identities of those whose actions and articulations are being interpreted.

The result is that 'Chinese privilege' has become a pleasurable act of Foucauldian confession by some well-intentioned Singaporeans to reinforce their feelings of goodness and purity while avoiding genuine anti-racism actions, as Claire Lockard has written of 'white privilege' in the US.[10] The danger then is a performative discourse by scholars and such Singaporeans alike, full of sound and fury, ultimately signifying nothing. This rejoinder is important because we believe anti-racism scholarship requires critical analysis and trans-ethnic solidarities vis-a-vis all forms of racisms, not distracting shortcuts from concepts that have developed through specific histories and traumas elsewhere. The uncritical application of such shortcuts will only deepen existing racialisations and harden differences. And this will be to our collective detriment.

Notes

1. Humairah and Walid, "Chinese Privilege in Politics," 3.
2. Ibid., 9.
3. See Debate on Annual Budget Statement.
4. See Motion on Aspirations of Singapore Women.
5. Humairah and Walid, "Chinese Privilege in Politics," 7.
6. Ibid., 8.
7. See Committee of Supply.
8. Humairah and Walid, "Chinese Privilege in Politics," 6.
9. Aouragh, "'White privilege' and shortcuts."
10. Lockard, "Unhappy Confessions."

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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