Rethinking Race: Beyond the CMIO Categorisations
Laavanya Kathiravelu

Introduction

The Singaporean media, online civil society space and even parliament was abuzz in August 2011 over an incident where a Singaporean Indian family had limited the cooking of curry in their home after their neighbours, an immigrant Chinese family, had complained to the local mediation centre about the offensive smell of the dish being prepared. The outcome of the mediation, which involved the Indian family agreeing to cook the strong-smelling dish only when their neighbours were not at home, caused furor amongst Singaporeans across races. Claiming curry as a dish enjoyed by *all* Singaporeans, a "cook a pot of curry" day was declared by a group of citizens and went viral across social media. The incident temporarily overshadowed even the local presidential elections, and caught international attention as part of the backlash against immigrants and foreigners in the city-state.

In isolation, the above incident can be written off as a provocation of a small and vocal group of netizens, that is not indicative of a larger societal fracture. However, within the context of routine and everyday racial profiling and xenophobia directed towards migrants in multicultural Singapore society, this incident is symbolic of larger issues. This chapter shows how such instances must be read within the failure of national policies that use race[1] as a key category in defining, dividing and governing the population. It also shows how these policies are further complicated with the arrival of Asian immigrants with similar ethnic backgrounds as local-born Singaporeans.

The myth that this chapter unpacks is two-fold. Firstly, there is the myth of a racially harmonious and meritocratic Singapore, a construct that is coming undone by recent immigration. Secondly, the chapter unpacks the myth of the ever-present threat of racially-instigated violence that underpins the need for socially divisive categorisations and policies by the state.

Politicians, commentators and even academics in various parts of the globe have lauded Singapore's management of ethnic and cultural diversity as a successful way to administer a population composed of multiple cultures, religions and linguistic groups[2]. Especially in contrast to ethnic and religious tensions playing out in some European states, and civil conflicts across Black-

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[1] Race here is acknowledged to be a social construct, but one that has significant and tangible consequences, as the Singapore state understands it as expressive of real divisions, and others use it to indicate pre-existing biological and/or cultural differences.

[2] See for eg. Vasil, Raj. *Asianising Singapore: The PAP's Management of Ethnicity*. Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 2000, or Brown, Michael E. and Sumit Ganguly (eds.) *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

White lines in the United States, Singapore's relative civility and lack of overt race-based conflict appear to illustrate successful and enlightened governance.

This chapter, however, argues that the state of inter-racial politics and harmony in Singapore is at a crossroads, rather than at a happy equilibrium. This issue requires rethinking how 'race' has been used as an unproblematic category to manage the population. Categorisations of race have entrenched social divisions and instituted privilege. This contradicts the ideals of an equal and meritocratic society - espoused as values foremost to the nation's identity. The basis of a racialised mode of ethnic governance is the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) model, which is based on the notion that separate management of racial groups ensures optimal functioning of society. The effects of these racialisation policies have permeated almost every aspect of life in the city-state, creating key social divisions among Singaporeans.This chapter shows how this model is ineffective, problematic and unsuitable for the Singaporean nation-state, especially with increasing levels of migration and growing diversity that further complicate older social divisions. Finally, the chapter ends by reconsidering the ways cultural and racial diversity can be better dealt with in Singapore.

The Myth of the Race Riots

It can be claimed with little disagreement that what have been termed the 'race riots' of the 1960s have been used as a primary reason to justify strict management of cultural, religious and racial issues in Singapore. Overstating the threat of racial violence, however, has limiting effects on conversations about race today[3]. One important outcome is how race has been so tied to the riots that Singaporean Malays continue to face prejudice as a result of their perceived untrustworthiness as a community, as evidenced by their alleged role in the riots. The continued discrimination of Malays and their exclusion from high-level positions in the armed forces and other government roles can be traced to the narrative of Malay culpability within the discourse of the 'race riots'. Here we can see how powerful a tool the narratives of the 'race riots' are in shaping notions of inter-race relations and trust between communities in the present day.

The 'race riots' have been seized upon as a key incident in history and social studies textbooks and National Education activities in order to educate young Singaporeans about the importance of racial tolerance. These are relevant lessons; however, the ways in which notions fear and threat are overarchingly directed at co-citizens is troubling and divisive. What is also problematic is that in the mainstream re-telling of the story of the 'race riots', the perceived inherent incompatibility of the races becomes a pre-condition for the riots, and accepted as a fact. The riots are not viewed historically, as a case of race becoming politicised through a particular issue at a certain point in time – in the political

[3] See for eg. Lee, Kuan Yew. *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*. Singapore: Marshall Cavandish, 1998. Lau, A. *A moment of anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the politics of disengagement*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.

conflict between the governments of Singapore and Malaysia in the 1960s. Here, it is racialised difference itself that caused the violence. This then necessitates the state playing a leading role in maintaining peace and mitigating the threat of violence. Within this reading there is then no possibility of racial difference existing peacefully without an authoritarian and overarching state presence.

We must, however, also see these efforts of the National Education program within a broader framework. Every nation has myths that are used to define it against others, which identify the population as a unique and singular entity. This is the larger purpose of much formal education meted out by public school systems. However, in the Singaporean case, the threat of racial riots has been magnified to the extent that it has become a national myth, enshrined in events like Racial Harmony Day (the first day of the 1964 riots), invoked in political speeches, and repeatedly re-told in museum exhibits. In effect, this threat is largely constructed, with little contemporary basis and relevance. However, using fear to mobilise the population has longer-term consequences in dealing with different social groups and the nation as a whole. The selective importance placed on isolated incidents of rioting in pre-independence Singapore can then be seen to be a political tool that enables the control of a docile population.

The Failings of the CMIO Policy

The Singaporean state classifies the population into racial categories at birth and when issuing national identity cards, work passes and on other official documents. This policy can be seen as similar to the racial classification systems of apartheid South Africa or the United States segregation policy in the era prior to the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Both these systems, like the Singaporean model, ascribe race onto a citizen and institute laws based on such an ascription. In Singapore, one's attributed race also determines where you can buy a home and what kind of welfare you have access to, amongst other privileges[4]. Today, race categorisations are also used in many developed countries to ensure a more equitable distribution of state resources through positive discrimination of groups that have been historically and structurally disadvantaged, such as African-Americans or Malay Malaysians[5]. In Singapore, however, race is not a category that is self-identified. We do not get to choose which race category we most identify with. Instead, the state decides where we belong based primarily on paternal lines of descent. This is not in line with practices in most developed nations such as the United States, United Kingdom

[4] Due to a racial quota system in public housing provision, where 85 per cent of Singaporeans live, you can only buy a home in an area or block where your 'race' is not overrepresented. Public welfare and educational enhancement programmes are also instituted through racially demarcated organizations such as MENDAKI and SINDA.

[5] For examples, there are positive discrimination policies in Australia for Aboriginal Australians, in New Zealand for indigenous communities like the Maori, and the United States for African-Americans.

or Australia, where the choice to identify with a certain race or ethnic category is usually voluntary and self-nominated. In these countries, the individual has a right to decide which ethnic community they want to belong to and be associated with. More importantly, he or she also has a right to choose not to be identified racially in any way. In contrast, in Singapore, racial labeling cannot be avoided. This classification determines how access to educational resources, housing and welfare is allocated. In this way, state policies make clear that the population's access and rights are differentiated, rather than all citizens having the same opportunities to make claims based on a shared belonging to the nation.

In the Singaporean context, popular understandings of what 'race' means are rarely debated, and critical discussions of how race is socially constructed for political purposes are sorely lacking. The fact that racial categories imposed by the state have no basis in biology or genetics is not widely acknowledged. The danger is that 'race' is held to be biological and pre-existing, inherent in a person. This means that fellow citizens are always seen as raced, rather than as classified so by the state. This distinction is extremely crucial. In everyday interactions, there is an unconscious and uncritical labeling of fellow Singaporeans in racial terms. There is then no way to be seen outside racial boundaries.

Any policy of racial classification systematically collects race data but also allows the state to use it to govern the population. Such an approach has been criticised due to a long history of it being used to discriminate, stigmatise and enslave subordinate populations.[6] In Singapore, there is little official debate about how such data can be misconstrued and misused. Scholars, however, have pointed out that the CMIO model is problematic in a number of ways.[7] Rather than valuing differences amongst the population, it has served to homogenise social groups and eliminate the diversity and heterogeneity within them. The closure of Cantonese, Hokkien and other Chinese language radio stations on Rediffusion, and the promotion of Mandarin as the singular language of the Chinese community are well-known examples. The CMIO model has also instituted what sociologists have termed racialisation. This means that a racial identity is immediately associated with a number of stereotypical characteristics that are often used as a means to justify particular actions toward that group. What is often articulated as the 'Malay problem' by parliamentarians and even by members of the Singaporean-Malay population themselves is an example of such

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[6] Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistance of Racial Inequality in America*. 4th ed. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. New York, London: Routledge, 1995.

[7] Chua, Beng Huat. "Between Economy and Race: The Asianization of Singapore." In *Space, Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalising Cities*, edited by Ayşe Öncü and Petra Weyland, 23-41. London: Zed Books Ltd, 1997. Purushotam, Nirmala Srirekam. *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998.

a problematic racialisation.[8] In this case, the less privileged socio-economic position of many Malay Singaporeans is equated with their 'race'. Lower levels of formal educational and economic achievement are then articulated as a problem of 'race', rather than one faced by lower-income students and workers (where Malays are overrepresented). In education, the problem is better understood as a structural one, where lower-income students lack access to resources (such as funds for extra tuition classes) that are available to wealthier students. This is a class issue, not a racial or cultural one. This example shows how particular racial groups become associated with stereotypes through the process of racialisation.

Another insidious and even more damaging effect of this racialisation policy has been to identify and divide citizens. The category of Singaporean then becomes an always hyphenated one: it is incomplete without an assigned racial component, like Chinese-Singaporean. This also fosters a climate where racial privilege thrives, since the majority race becomes the accepted representative of the entire population. Privilege exists when a particular group gains advantages in society by virtue of its identity, such as better access to socio-economic networks and opportunities and political representation unavailable to other groups. Such a group is often a majority group, whether in terms of race, gender or class.

Here we can take the example of Rathi Menon, a Singaporean-Indian woman, who won the Miss Singapore crown in 2014. She subsequently faced abuse online from fellow citizens for her dusky skin colour and other physical attributes that were deemed undesirable. Looking at the incident through the lens of racial privilege, Rathi did not conform to a majority ideal of beauty or race identity; she was thus seen as a poor representative of the nation. In this case, while the majority race can stand for the minority groups, the latter can only stand for itself.

In Singapore, majority privilege can be translated into acts of Chinese privilege. An example of Chinese privilege is when most main characters in English-language local television programmes can be identified as Chinese, and representation of Indian and Malay characters is often in stereotyped and limited. Chinese privilege also exists when elite schools cater to the majority race, as with the Special Assistance Program (SAP) school system. Another example of Chinese privilege is being eligible for a far wider range of jobs because one is Chinese and speaks Mandarin. These are just a few examples of how everyday and normalised discrimination of racial minorities in Singapore occurs because of the racialisation of the population, which has attendant effects that favour one group while discriminating against others. This of course does not deny that other forms of distinction such as socio-economic class and gender do not also lead to discrimination. However, state policies on racial classification have undoubtedly created an unequal playing field for Singaporeans from minority and marginalised race groups.

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[8] Rahim, Lily Zubaidah. *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 2001.

All societies have some measure of inequality. However, it is an obligation of a multiracial and meritocratic state to ensure that discrimination along lines of race is minimised. When the need for racial harmony is based on a fear of violence, and merely tolerance is advocated, the opportunity to build greater trust, understanding and appreciation of other cultures and communities is diminished. An overriding emphasis on the practical need for racial harmony discourages discussions about social inequality and the need for respect and empathy amongst citizens. Rather than a necessary and desirable moral good in itself, the state's multiracial policy is portrayed as a utilitarian solution to the ever-present threat of racial violence. This creates a sense of precariousness, fragility and distrust, so that fear of a differently raced person always exists. Fear, rather than mutual respect, becomes the basis of multicultural living.

The Changing Race Landscape in Singapore

Due to accelerated immigration trends in recent years, the landscape of race has been fundamentally altered. Over the past 15 years or so, Singapore has aggressively increased its population through extensive naturalisation of middle class immigrants. Presently more than a quarter of the resident population of Singapore are new citizens or permanent residents. If the numbers of temporary migrants on employment passes and work permits are counted, the proportion of 'foreigners' increases further. This migration has changed the face of demographic diversity in Singapore and has significant implications for the management of race and other demographic factors such as socio-economic class, gender, immigration status, and country of origin.

Hosting a large proportion of migrants and foreign-born residents is, in itself, not problematic. Singapore is a nation that was built on migrant labour, and there are many other countries that have successfully socialised migrants into citizens. However, the widespread and vocally xenophobic sentiments against Singapore's recent migrants demonstrate a breakdown in race relations. The rise of anti-foreigner sentiments in the past decade can be seen as a sign of the failure of Singapore's multiracial model. The model limits social diversity to four pre-defined racial groups and denies the possibility of meaningful interaction, accommodation and influence across cultures. Although multiracialism is celebrated as a mark of Singaporean culture, issues of racial tensions, inequalities and discrimination are also rarely discussed in public. Instead, they are defined as "OB (out-of-bound) markers" by the state, deemed too sensitive, with the potential to disrupt a fragile racial harmony. Although Singaporeans are seen to have become politically more mature in recent decades, many political leaders and senior civil servants still espouse paternalistic views about what is appropriate public discourse. As the Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Kishore Mahbubani, warned, 'In Singapore, on some things, we need to widen out-of-bounds (OB) markers. But on issues involving race and religion, I would say, make the OB markers narrower. I actually believe that, because we're too small to afford the kind of

ethnic strife that other countries have suffered.'[9] This narrow demarcation of OB markers has pushed discontentment over racial issues to the less regulated spaces of popular discussion – that is, Internet forums and citizen journalism sites. Mainstream, open and honest public discussion suffers as a result.

The Singapore state, in supporting high rates of naturalisation, perceived the inclusion and assimilation of foreigners as a relatively unproblematic process, given the shared heritage and culture of a large majority of recent immigrants. Most of them come from India, other parts of South Asia, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, all origin countries of most early migrants to Singapore. So, despite the large increase in the population of almost 20 per cent in the past 15 years, the racial composition of Singaporeans and Permanent Residents has hardly changed. The proportion of categories defined as 'Chinese' and 'Malay' have decreased, and that of the 'Others' and 'Indian' categories have increased, but each only by less than 2 per cent.

This remarkable stability in the racial composition of the population – despite large-scale immigration - can be explained by two factors. The first is the maintenance of the CMIO classification system, rather than adopting a more pluralist model that differentiates within and across categories. The 'Others' category, for instance, does not distinguish between distinct groups such as ethnic Koreans, white Americans and Filipinos - groups with unique cultural histories. The CMIO model homogenises a growing range of new immigrants in order to maintain the appearance and semblance of continuity in the racial make-up of the population Within the C, M and I categories, the model also does not differentiate between local-born and foreign-born Chinese, Malays and Indians. The second factor is that the state largely incorporates immigrants who can be readily identified by their physical attributes as Chinese or Indian. This classification is an important criteria for granting citizenship and permanent residency, in addition to the economic value potential new citizens are perceived to add to the country.

In selecting people with shared languages, religions, cultural practices, foods, and physical appearance as locals, the problem of integration is presumed to be diminished. However, this is a fallacious supposition, which is being exposed with intra-racial strain becoming more prominent. Chinese and Indians are hugely heterogeneous groups. Coming from different national backgrounds, and strands of immigration, they are shaped by different national histories and the policies of various nation-state regimes. This is in additional to regional differences within the geographically large origin countries of China and India. The problems with further homogenising communities of Chinese and Indians - racial groups whose internal differences have been unacknowledged thus far - are now growing. Within the 'Indian' category, for instance, highly-paid new immigrants from North India are seen as skewing demographic realities. With

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[9] The Straits Times "Kishore Mahbubani: make OB markers on race and religion narrower", 6 June 2015 http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/kishore-mahbubani-make-ob-markers-on-race-and-religion-narrower. Accessed 23 February 2016.

higher educational and income levels, this group contrasts with the existing South Indian core, which has a larger percentage of lower income families. Yet, because of the immigrant Indian group, the Indian community is held to be upwardly mobile, and therefore less in need for welfare, while in fact the class positions of most local-born Indians have not changed. It is important to emphasise here that I am not advocating an anti-foreigner agenda. Instead, in taking anti-foreigner sentiments seriously, we must acknowledge the need for change in Singapore's race and integration policies. This is true not just in relation to immigrants from India and China, but also foreigners from other parts of the world, as well as temporary low-wage migrants such as construction workers and domestic helpers, who also live in the everyday spaces of the nation.

The historical lessons of inter-race conflict can no longer be the myth on which the Singaporean nation builds its multiracial identity in the 21st century. These myths, constantly re-created and invoked, do not have the same meanings or appeal to a contemporary population that does not share the ethnic heritage and genealogy of early migrants to Singapore. The state must come to terms with the fact that classifying diversity in terms of four simple 'racial groups' is not sufficiently nuanced or representative given the current migration from around the world and changing demographic realities within the population.

A New Starting Point for Multiracialism

A new starting point for multiracialism is necessary to deal with changing levels of social diversity in Singapore, in order to accommodate the influx of foreign professionals and workers in the past 15 years. National identity cannot be based on an exclusionary and limited concept of race, as the nation is increasingly composed of citizens, semi-permanent residents and transient migrant groups.

The changing demographics also pose obstacles to building strong ties between citizens and foreign residents. What seems to be emerging, in one instance, is a two-tiered citizenship: locally-born Singaporeans are expressing a sense of entitlement to civil service jobs and coveted places at local universities, while newly naturalised foreigners are seen as less deserving. Here, the state's measures of race-based assimilation have proven inadequate, in failing to consider that economic and cultural divides may outweigh any perceived racial affinity between local-born Singaporeans and naturalised foreigners. Increased competition for jobs and higher education have made socio-economic class distinctions between working class and middle-class residents much more visible and deeply felt. Economic stratification, in many instances, thus needs to be acknowledged as more crucial than race. This factor is also played out in relation to xenophobia towards temporary migrants in Singapore, who comprise of both low-income workers and middle class professionals. These groups face differing forms of discrimination, much of which has to do with the fact that Singaporeans are feeling the impact of the increased costs of living, decreased social mobility and the increasing infrastructural squeeze.

A first step towards a new framework for multiculturalism is to acknowledge that race is a political way of marking identity that has undesirable consequences in everyday life. In classifying people into distinct racial groups, one's identity is made to seem permanent and unchangeable, and differences between communities become fixed. This does not mean that we should deny or appreciate less our cultural and racial diversity, but it is necessary to discuss the artificiality and adverse effects of such categorisations. The state has to encourage and facilitate these discussions as it moves towards dismantling outmoded racial classifications.

A second step is to establish a new basis for social belonging that can build a strong consensus and sense of community along the lines of an inclusive national identity. Rather than relying on unchanging and pre-defined categories, the basis of Singaporeanness should be truly multicultural and multiracial. This means moving away from top-down and state-centric categories, by allowing Singaporeans to identify themselves in ways that they are comfortable with. This is possible, as evidenced in the opening vignette of this chapter that described how a group of Singaporeans spontaneously organised the 'Cook a pot of curry' day - in celebration of multiracialism and what it means to be Singaporean.

Conclusion

There is much that is positive and heartening about how various cultures and peoples interact and co-exist in Singapore today. There is a general level of tolerance and even pleasure in living in a place that is composed of vibrant differences – Singlish, uniquely local foods and love of a shared heritage are all markers of our national identity. Singaporeans are also increasingly cosmopolitan in embracing peoples and practices from other parts of the world. We should build on these existing qualities to further emphasise the need for greater solidarity, respect, and shared investment in the nation. This starts with re-thinking the basic CMIO categorisations. In emphasising racial differences, we are also denying our commonality as members of the same nation. Being Chinese, Malay or Indian, means that we cannot just be Singaporean. The nation is made up of more than just these four groups, and its strengths are in banding across them. As we envision the kind of country that we want future generations of Singaporeans to live in, let us create new national myths around the importance of looking past racialised differences and respecting one another as equal members with a shared national identity that is more significant than individual race.