

Is Chinese Privilege a myth?

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Malaymail, 17 January 2021

At a panel discussion hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies, a Singaporean think tank, it was suggested that the idea of “Chinese Privilege” in Singapore is a myth.

Panellist Mel Lin Fung, a Singaporean based in the US and founder of the People-Centered Internet initiative, said she was “agitated” by the idea.

“I really think if Lee Kuan Yew was here, he would really stomp on it, and I think it’s legitimate to do that,” she said.

Other panellists agreed that Chinese Privilege was a flawed concept. They argued that there were rich and poor Chinese in Singapore and that the idea of race-based privilege in the Singapore context was simply lazy thinking — just copying the US discourse around White Privilege.

This argument was widely criticised on social media.

Of course, any argument that purports members of the majority group in this country don’t enjoy a certain degree of intrinsic privilege puts you on tenuous ground.

It is clear that being Chinese in Singapore affords you a degree of privilege. For one, you can be prime minister.

To me, this arbitrary yet articulated line continues to be the clearest example of second-class status afforded to minorities — that you can be excluded simply on the basis of your race as opposed to capability or even political positioning is galling.

The privilege afforded to the Chinese majority trickles down too; ask any minority trying to rent a flat or look at most local ads which feature overwhelmingly members of the majority.

Trying to dismiss the idea that Chinese people in Singapore enjoy a certain degree of structural privilege is not coherent but what is the degree of this privilege?

After all, not every Chinese person in Singapore is affluent. Do the advantages of being born Chinese trump matters of class and wealth?

There are some real discussions to be had here, though they ought to be handled with more nuance.

There is no need to stomp on the idea of Chinese Privilege because stomping on ideas is generally dangerous and lazy. Particularly when these ideas broadly reflect concerns raised by minorities.

Fundamentally, Singapore’s experience and construction of race is vastly different from that in the US.

In the US, people deemed black were enslaved and deprived of the basic rights enjoyed by people classified as white.

This conferred whites an enormous historical advantage and many white families and white-owned businesses profited directly from the subjugation of blacks.

The Chinese did not enslave other races here. All of us — Chinese, Malays and Indians — were at a disadvantage compared to our English colonisers.

The deep discrimination suffered by US blacks with segregation and interracial marriage restrictions has no parallel in Singapore.

So, should we still call it Chinese Privilege? I understand the temptation because being Chinese in today's Singapore does convey benefits.

Many of these benefits are simply the result of the fact that Chinese are the majority ethnic group in the country and majority ethnic groups in most countries enjoy certain benefits.

My issue with calling it Chinese Privilege over majority privilege is it plays into the oversized role race plays in our lives.

Every Singaporean has been asked their race on every form — even bubble tea membership forms. Our eating habits are discussed in the context of our race, our choice of partners, the crimes we commit.

Every single thing a Singaporean does is viewed within the prism of race. And that obsession — be it state-driven or community-driven — only serves to drive a wedge between us.

Each time, we say “oh, that Chinese uncle” or “this Indian girl” we move further away from a coherent Singaporean/Malayan identity and we are all the poorer for it.

We also need to be aware that race is not necessarily the biggest dividing factor. Economic class is another crucial point of division. And this awareness is necessary.

I should be chastised if I try to position myself as less privileged than the elderly woman who collects cans in my coffeeshop — simply because she is Chinese, and I am not. My fear is that racialising terms can allow individuals to feel righteous without nuance.

Ultimately there are many kinds of privilege in Singapore or anywhere really. We should be aware of this and not reduce every issue to race.

What is important is that systems and processes do not unduly favour any particular group and that government and corporate institutions work to rectify biases that do exist.

People should have the space to raise concerns about discrimination and unfairness without being dismissed — that's the only way we can work to achieve a truly fair society.

And no stomping. Ever.

*This is the personal opinion of the columnist.