

# Conference on Managing Diversity in Singapore

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Ballroom 2, Level 3  
Orchard Hotel

PANEL 1  
Manifestations and  
Management of Multicultural Singapore

PRESENTATION BY

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# **Navigating Disconnects and Divides in Singapore's Cultural Diversity**

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# Background of Cultural Diversity (Historical/Social)

- Migrations and settlements of peoples and cultures:
  - Historical:
    - Maritime trade
    - Colonial period
    - Nusantara/Malay Archipelago, China, India, Europe, Middle East
  - Contemporary
    - “Traditional” sources and global sources
  - Trade, work, mission, settlement
- Races, ethnicities and cultures **over time**
  - **Ever growing diversity**: range, overlaps, hybridities
  - **Varied processes**: separation, interaction, exchange
  - **Gradual peaceful processes and “difficult” and “crisis” times**
  - Consequences on nation-building & social cohesion
  - Race and Religion - most problematic and sensitive; ob markers & talking about race and religion

# Background of Cultural Diversity (State)

- Legacies of colonial state: peoples, policies, practices
- **State multiculturalism** as approach to racial and religious harmony:
  - **'multiculturalism' as foundation** of nation-state, written into Constitution
  - **CMIO ethnic-based multiculturalism:**
    - Separate but equal groups and identities
    - recognition and preservation of particular racial / religious identities
  - **State institutions, legal means and mechanisms**
    - Constitution, Presidential Council of Minority Rights, Group Representative Constituencies
    - Minorities' protection through state legislation & apparatuses
    - Contempt of other racial/religious groups heavily policed through laws
      - Sedition Act, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act
    - Mediation centres, police, grassroots bodies
  - **No legislation against discrimination** and discriminatory practices
  - **No Commissions of Inquiry** on cultural and religious diversity (only official Committees of Inquiry to investigate specific issues)
- Hard and **soft state multiculturalism:**
  - flexibilities and spaces

# Some Realities of Multiculturalism & Diversity: Structural & Everyday Lived Experiences

- Tendency to view most issues along racial/ethnic and majority-minority lens (also local-foreign)
- Prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, particularly for ethnic minorities
  - Chinese majority privilege
- Traditional means of ethnic mobilization & negotiation – limitations
- New social media platforms (the Fifth Wave?)
- Competing and contesting worldviews in expanded public spaces:
  - Diverse views & new modes of social-political engagement
  - Legitimacy of authority and norms,
  - trust, justice, decency and dignity
  - Assertion of (minority) rights, fairness and equality by individuals and groups
  - Expectation of proper & fair management of infractions and tensions
- Significant cultural & religious incidents in real & cyberspace:
  - Intense public discourses on issues, policies, practices
  - Responses, expectations & challenges in managing diversity

# Background of 2012 Study by Lai & Mathews

## Aims:

- Examine some intercultural tensions and disconnects within S'pore's ethno-cultural diversity through selected case studies,
- understand how they are negotiated, managed or resolved by various stakeholders
- Identify societal values around infractions
- Identify principles and approaches of negotiation and resolution

## Methodology:

- Choice of case studies
  - Recent infractions of ethnic/religious relations
  - Tension points widely reported & debated on social media
- Analysis of content reported on social media
- Drawing out of values, processes, principles and approaches in responses, negotiation and resolution

## Case Studies (2011-2012):

1. `azan' call at McDonald's outlet (2011)
2. UOB "Blackface" Bollywood-themed D & D (2012)
3. "terrorist trainees?" - Muslim kindergarten children (2011)
4. `curry' incident (2011)
5. `There are more dogs than humans in Singapore' incident (2012)
6. Amy Cheong and the Malay wedding incident (2012)



## Azan Call during Ramadan at McDonalds (2011)



### Customer Alex's "insensitive" question on McDonald's Facebook:

- "Hi, I would like to raise a question, why are the McDonald outlets playing the Muslim chant during the dinner time in the restaurants? Can I request to play Buddhism chant on Vesak day? Please advice."
- "Not trying to be disrespectful. But **a bit irritating during dinner time. Not respecting other religion(s) at all.**"
- "By the way, **can you tolerate if they play Buddhist chant** in the restaurant?"

## What some Muslims were upset with:

- **Misinformation: Azan call** equated with Buddhist chant
- **Muslims' right to practice** their religion not given recognition; accusation that other religions had rights which were accepted
- **Lack of tolerance** – we put up with a lot of things, so why can't they?
- **Insensitivity** of majority members abt Ramadan's importance for Muslims

## Majority members of public who agree with upset Muslims:

- Reiteration of Singapore as a multiracial /religious society, **tolerance needed**
- Cited **other occasions** where different groups' cultural practices in public places and spaces pose inconvenience to others but are tolerated, e.g. 7<sup>th</sup> Month Chinese "Ghosts" Festival; lion dances during Chinese New Year

## Contesting voices:

- **Religious rights should not be practiced in a public space** – McDonalds is a restaurant for all people
- **Recognition of one group's religious preferences would lead to other groups imposing preferences**
  - McDonald's might become a "religious" restaurant?

# Institutional responses

- McDonald's restaurant:
  - prayer call not official (some franchises tuned in to an unauthorised channel)
- Alex's employer (Singtel, with a diverse and multicultural workforce):
  - "We have clear company values and guidelines and do not tolerate discrimination. We expect our employees to be personally responsible for the content of their personal posts online."
  - "We are disappointed that an employee recently posted comments that were seen to be inappropriate and we are counselling him."
- Business distancing itself from infraction:
  - business enterprise's main aim is customer satisfaction. Offensive items must be removed (earlier removal of Doraemon pig toy in Chinese zodiac by McDonalds over cultural sensitivities of Muslims)
- Employer response:
  - Necessary?

# UOB “BLACKFACE” BOLLYWOOD THEMED DINNER AND DANCE (2012)



Photo: ST

## The “insensitive” event:

- A Chinese reader emails picture to the Straits Times, complaining that it was offensive:
  - “It’s one thing to **wear a traditional costume** to a Bollywood-themed dinner, but another thing altogether to **paint your face black,**”
  - “they were **appropriating someone else’s ethnicity and treating it like entertainment**”.

## Why some Indians were upset:

- The portrayal of Indians as **black** was an **oversimplification** and **essentialising**
- “Black” as **unattractive**
- **Racial jokes** cannot be excused – it has detrimental effects....**memories of childhood “trauma”**
- **You simply don’t seem to understand what our experience has been like ...** if it happened to you?
- **Little effort to challenge racism** because it was not majority’s interest to do so

## Contesting voices:

- **Minorities overly sensitive?**
  - “This episode shows once again that some are getting hysterical esp via FB with our **political correctness**, sharks fins included. Soon, we won’t even be able to say someone’s got “a black face” — meaning that the person is unhappy.”
  - “In fact, it’s not just ‘**black**’ that is deemed racist when it comes to describing Indians, even calling them ‘**DARK**’ would get you in trouble.”
- **Intention/friendship in making racial jokes**
  - If you say i am racist, then i am racist... if you say i am a nice guy, then i am a nice guy... i will be whoever you make me to be, Mabel... btw, my best of friends are indians, we drink at pubs many times a week and we play football on wkends.. and of cos in the midst of our drinking/football banter, we crack mungen jokes, thambi jokes all the time and have a ball of a time..... this shld be life’s mystery to you such things can happen right?

# Institutional response

UOB employer:

- pictures were not meant to offend or discriminate against anyone. UOB takes racial harmony very seriously and proudly employs more than 20,000 employees of about 50 nationalities. In fact, the occasion was one that was celebrating this diversity.
- However, we apologise if members of the public have been offended by the photos and have instructed the staff to remove the photos from their personal sites.
- the staff involved would be counselled.



## **HUDA KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN: YOUNG TERRORIST TRAINEES? (2011)**

## **The Insensitivity (2011):**

- Jason Neo posts a picture of school bus with Malay children from Huda Kindergarten dressed in their traditional Malay uniform and headwear and poses question – Bus filled with young terrorist trainees?

## **What Muslim minority members feel about this:**

- posts continues the **stereotype linking Muslims to terrorism**
- Little appreciation of Muslims' need to **preserve their religious/cultural heritage**
- Jason Neo is **representative of the PAP government that is seen as being suspicious of Malays, lacking trust**

## **Counter Voices:**

- Censoring Jason is **suppressing reasonable questions / concerns** from being raised
- **Freedom of speech** greatly curtailed
- Some **religions are very sensitive** when allegations made

# Institutional responses:

- **Political party:**
  - Young PAP & PAP issued statements condemning Jason's statement.
  - Jason asked to resign from YPAP
  - Young PAP Chair and Vice Chair write officially to Huda, visit the kindergarten and offer to help build greater understanding of Malay institutions
- **Police:**
  - Jason Neo investigated under Sedition Act.

# The 'Curry' Incident, Aug 2011



# About the `Curry' incident:

- **Mediation case** reported in TODAY `Number of neighbour disputes hit high' (8 Aug 2011).
- Community Mediation Centre's **(CMC) contentious outcome**:
  - Indian neighbor can cook curry only if Chinese neighbor is not in
- **FB furore**: pages, websites, local & foreign presses, civic action
- FB site: From `cook a pot of curry' to `**cook and share a pot of curry**'; other similar FB pages
  - From **initial anti-PRC sentiments** to cook to **show solidarity** & cook and share curry with PRC friends
  - 65,000 hits (local, abroad), **mass `cook & share a pot of curry day on 21 Aug 2011**

**Issue: who can cook curry and when – heritage and rights**

## **Institutional responses:**

- Community Mediation Centre: mediator was neutral, solution was mutually agreed on
- Ministry: why dig up an old case (7 years ago)?
- NMP: tolerance, respect and acceptance evolved over time; foreign favoured over local

## **Public responses:**

- Outrage at **unfair & unreasonable solution**
- **Mediator's skills and neutrality questionable**
- **Offensive to** local ethnic (Indian) and Sporean (esp curry-loving) culture and established heritage practice
- Questioning excessive **immigration** policy
- **Anti-PRC/immigrant sentiment**
  - FB 'Cook and Share a Pot of Curry' page moderators: from warnings against racist remarks, to cook **and share**

# “More dogs than humans in Singapore” Incident (2012)



孙旭：最烦的就是新加坡那些不小心碰一下就在那边瞪着你或嘴里絮絮叨叨的中老年瘪三了，在新加坡狗比人多啊🙄

昨天 21:44 收起回复 | 分享



1楼 李云志：你这状态还是快删了吧... 回复

2012-02-18 22:28



2楼 陈野文：华人的地方都有的，别太针对了。。 回复

2012-02-18 22:44



3楼 舒琪：alex又要来找你了 回复

2012-02-18 23:28



4楼 黄煦：对滴！我特别怕他们这的老人，一个个的..... 回复

2012-02-18 23:40



5楼 孙旭：回复黄煦：就是，一群挫逼，我现在脾气真他妈算好了 回复

2012-02-18 23:55



6楼 孙旭：回复舒琪：我拿刀等他 回复

2012-02-18 23:55

添加回复

## Sun Xu 's comments on Chinese microblog Weibo (18 Feb 2012):

- “The most annoying are those middle aged/old bums/good-for-nothing types in Singapore who, if you bump into accidentally, would just glare at you or grumble; ah, in Singapore there are more dogs than people/humans”
- Advised by friends to delete post (... Alex Tan would find him soon [Alex Tan is a Singaporean blogger who lodged a police report against another PRC student Wang Peng Fei in July 2011, for his ostensibly racist remarks against Singapore women and Singaporeans in general]. Sun Xu initially declined to remove the post; instead responded saying that he would be waiting for Alex with a knife. Alex Tan proceeded to file a police report against Sun Xu for ‘intentional harassment’.
- Sun Xu received widespread condemnation from Singaporean ‘netizens’, many calling for his MOE scholarship to be revoked and for him to be sent back to China. (He been on MOE scholarship since secondary 3, was a final year Mechanical Engineering student at NUS at time of posting.)
- Sun Xu sought help from the Chinese Embassy in Singapore at a weekly event “Student Reception Day”.

# Institutional Responses

- Chinese Embassy:
  - “The Chinese Embassy will not submit any request to NUS. We believe the university will handle the matter in a just and fair manner.”
- NUS:
  - Received complaints about Sun Xu and investigated the matter
  - NUS held **disciplinary meeting** on 13 March 2012
  - Provost’s Office issued circular on 26 March 2012:
    - A community service obligation of 3 months
    - A fine of \$3,000
    - An official reprimand
    - undergraduate scholarship benefits terminated for the final semester
- Sun Xu: issued a **public apology** on his Facebook page that remarks were inappropriate and insensitive.

# Amy Cheong and the Malay Wedding (2012)

 Write Post  Share Photo

 **Amy Cheong**  
19 minutes ago near Gay World Park · 

How many fcuking days do malay weddings at void decks go on for??? Fcuk!!!! Pay for a real wedding u asshole, maybe then the divorce rate wont be so high! How can society allow ppl to get married for 50 bucks? Kns!

Like · Comment

 **Amy Cheong**  
Yesterday at 3:35pm near Gay World Park · 

Not to mention as u happily start ur new journey, there will be hundreds cursing u to death, me included. Food for thought.

 **Amy Cheong**  
Yesterday at 3:33pm near Gay World Park · 

Void deck weddings should be banned. If u cant afford a proper wedding then u shouldnt be getting married. Full stop.

 3  5

 **Amy Cheong**  
8 hours ago near Gay World Park · 

my people? what are u? a tribe? different species? aliens? what does that mean?

 **Amy Cheong**  
Yesterday at 4:20pm near Lorong Tiga Estate · 

Whats for... Book in the next 5 minutes and get a FREE access to the water tap! Book in the next 2 minutes, we will give you a bonus water pipe!!! Convenient for washing the plates your guests will eat of. Dont miss out!!!!

 **Amy Cheong**

 

 Works at NTUC Membership  
 Studied at University of Western Australia  
 It's complicated

    

## **Public responses:**

- FB outrage at Amy's cultural and class prejudices
- Questioning "foreign talent" hiring policy
- Questioning employer responses
- Police reports made

## **Institutional responses:**

- **Employer** (NTUC): immediate dismissal
- **Police**: warning letter to Amy 1 year later

# 10 THINGS AMY CHEONG NEVER KNEW ABOUT THE MALAYS



## **#01-MALAYS DON'T SLEEP**

Even though the next day is Monday, the FB thing spread like wild fire across the internet

## **#02-MALAYS ARE INFLUENTIAL**

Amy Cheong was fired from her job within 12 hours

## **#03-MALAYS LIKE BUSINESSES**

While some sees void decks as only fit for funerals and dumping ground for old people, the Malays turned it into a bustling economic activity each weekend

## **#04-MALAYS GOT TALENT**

Why do you think all 3 Singapore Idols are Malays? Because they get to practise karaoke every weekend

## **#05-MALAYS ARE RICH**

Each weekend, you get to taste high class dishes that are usually served in fine restaurants or hotels

## **#06-MALAYS ARE FUN**

A Malay came up with a suggestion via the NTUC MEMBERSHIP FB page that Amy Cheong should serve volunteer work on a Malay wedding...

## **#07-MALAYS ARE PEACEFUL**

So far nothing builds up to a revolution called THE MALAY SPRING

## **#08-MALAYS ARE FAST**

Emails reached Halimah Yaakob, Lim Swee Say and PM Lee Hsien Loong faster than Amy Cheong changes her underwear.

## **#09-MALAYS & NATIONAL DUTY**

Divorces happen once in a while, Malays get married & re-married every weekend

## **#10-MALAYS HAVE DOAs**

The Malays accept your apology but we also pray (doa) that your children or relatives will marry a Malay and have a blessed void deck wedding

# Discussion

- Cases articulate disconnects/tensions along lines of:
  - Ethnicity, religion and culture
  - Majority-minority (azan call, Muslim kindergarten children, Bollywood “black” faces)
  - Local-foreign (curry, more dogs than humans)
  - Reveal ‘old’ and ‘new’ challenges in cultural diversity:
    - Malay/Muslim minority and Chinese majority
    - Indian minority and Chinese majority
    - Locals and foreigners/new immigrants
- BUT public responses also cut across these lines:
  - Muslims' criticism of ‘digital lynch mobs’ against Alex; non-Muslims called for tolerance, respect and acceptance (azan call)
  - Sporeans of all backgrounds against being insulted (Bollywood, “more dogs than humans” & Malay wedding incidents)
  - Sporeans of all backgrounds against unfair and unreasonable mediation, cultural prejudice and xenophobia (curry incident)
- Public responses in hyper-diverse society:
  - Diversity of emotions and views
  - Anxieties, confusion and clarity
  - Raw emotion and public reasonableness both present

# Diversity and its Discontents and Dangers:

## Larger contexts of incidents/issues & public responses

- Historical inequality, discrimination, exclusion among citizens:
  - Majority-minority divisions along ethnic, religious and cultural lines
  - Strength of minority grievances about majority dominance and insensitivities
- Contemporary economic, social and cultural issues about globalization and massive and rapid immigration:
  - Displacements
  - Local vs foreign/global divisions, xenophobia?
  - Strength of minority grievances:
    - “Now you Chinese know how we [minorities] feel about discrimination”
    - ‘Chinapore’ & ‘re-Sinification’
  - Local Chinese cultural disconnects with PRC Chinese & official misassumptions about cultural similarities
  - Government immigration policies:
    - Economistic
    - Neglect and misassumptions about integration and social interactions

# Navigating Diversity

- **Real and symbolic significance** of ethno-cultural and religious dimensions of life (do not underestimate)
- **Tensions and conflicts in diversity will arise**, navigated by
  - Groups, organisations and state
  - Individuals (**interpersonal levels & micropolitics** very important)
- **Netizens' use of social media** to highlight sentiments, spread concerns and seek solutions on significant issues:
  - **Harmful or helpful**
  - Demonising & lynching, report to police, punishment, quick solutions
- **Institutional responses:**
  - **Reactive, punitive** (dismissal of employee, legislation)
- **Importance of approaches and principles of conflict management**

# Approaches and Principles towards Conflict Management:

- **Negotiation, mediation and resolution as necessary skills and processes**
  - **Limitations** of neutrality, impartiality, simplistic majority count, punitive action
  - **Offence:**
    - Quick to take offence
    - quick/right to offend and free speech
    - Beyond offence and apology
- **Positive principles and values:**
  - Clarity, knowledge, deeper and more nuanced understanding,
  - Ethics, common decency
  - Sensitivity and appropriateness, judicious judgement
  - Tolerance, respect, acceptance
  - Fairness, reasonableness, justice and equality vs racialism
  - Intercultural education (awareness, intelligence, skills, competencies)
- **Towards meaningful and lasting** peace, cultural understanding and exchange:
  - what we have built over time (processes and spaces of interaction)
  - cooperation rather than conflict prevention (positive narratives)
  - **Always ask:** what can be reasonably expected for a peaceful, good and vibrant multicultural society?

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