

‘Chinese privilege’ a borrowed label but important to discuss and set in Singapore’s context, experts say

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SINGAPORE — Discussions about the privileges of the majority race might be a concept originating from the west, but they are useful as a baseline for Singaporeans to discuss their lived realities, academics at a forum said.

However, the trouble lies when notions such as Chinese privilege are not adapted enough for a local context and are thrown around as a blanket term, one of the panellists said.

At the Forum on Race and Racism in Singapore, held on Friday (June 25) by the Institute of Policy Studies and the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, the panellists were Associate Professor Elmie Nekmat and Associate Professor Daniel Goh from National University of Singapore (NUS), Dr Laavanya Kathiravelu from Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and Mr Goh Sin Teck, editor of the Chinese newspaper Lianhe Zaobao.

Assoc Prof Elmie is from the department of communications and new media at NUS, Assoc Prof Goh is from the department of sociology at NUS and Dr Laavanya is from NTU’s School of Social Sciences.

The discussion’s moderator Paulin Straughan, a professor of sociology at the Singapore Management University’s School of Social Sciences, noted that people in Singapore borrow plenty of labels from societies abroad — Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and white privilege — and asked what were the dangers of importing these ideas and changing the labels to suit Singapore’s needs, such as the concept of “Chinese privilege”.

Both Dr Laavanya and Assoc Prof Goh pointed out that this phenomena is not new and gave examples of how the concepts of meritocracy or even terms such as “garden city” came from the United Kingdom. They were, however, contextualised for Singapore.

On whether the notion of privilege is relevant for Singapore, Dr Laavanya believes that it is.

“It has resonated among young people here because people are struggling for a language to talk about their social reality,” she said. “So these ideas or these concepts are useful to express particular feelings.”

Still, context matters, Assoc Prof Goh said.

“My objection to the term ‘Chinese privilege’... is that we are not adapting it enough,” he said. “We are borrowing without contextualising it and without putting it in a proper kind of institutional perspective.”

He explained that any form of privilege does not exist independently of institutions, which include social organisations such as families or work places, and they must be included in any critique.

“To use it (labels such as ‘Chinese privilege’) as a blanket term will be to revert to the same kind of racism and racialisation that we do not want,” Assoc Prof Goh said.

He added that telling the majority of the population that “you have privilege, you don’t realise it, (therefore) you are complicit in racism” is not helpful, because it puts everyone into a defensive posture and cuts off conversation.

Instead, he suggested that people share their encounters of racism with each other.

“Let’s open up the space for conversation... The question of privilege is important and it has to be discussed.”

REJECTING IDEAS OF PRIVILEGE

Offering an explanation for why some Chinese reject the idea of racial privilege, Mr Goh of Lianhe Zaobao said that they may be feeling marginalised themselves.

This group tends to be the older “silent majority” who cannot speak English and this language inadequacy causes them to “face frustrations and marginalisation”, Mr Goh said.

He added that he feels sorry for them when they say they do not believe they have any privileges, only to have it misinterpreted to mean that they do not believe racism exists, when that is not the case at all.

“They are just saying that, ‘As a Chinese-speaking individual, I do not see myself enjoying any privilege at all’.”

That is why the term “Chinese privilege” is not helpful in forging understanding between people but divides them instead, Mr Goh said.

In response, Professor Straughan said that this is why conversations are needed, as they help distil misunderstandings and clarify “the very complex thoughts that go into very simple statements”.

“Race relations are very hard to articulate, particularly if you're trying to talk about lived experiences,” she said.