

Hard Truths and Harder Questions: Race and Religion in Singapore

I have, at times, been critical about how race and religion are treated in Singapore. In particular, when race and religion are *not* spoken about as a society, and the uncomfortable hush surrounding the discourse when they are. Sometimes asking questions is harder than coming up with the answers.

It is often easier to accept that things are just the way they are. Growing up in a Chinese family that counts itself as irreligious, we navigated a fluid line that many Chinese Singaporeans would recognise – celebrating festivals and participating in rituals that may traditionally have been of religious significance as recently as our grandparents’ generation. These traditions have become so enmeshed with our cultural identities that you don’t question your participation in them. As with most children, I guess, for the first decade or two of my life, that simply, was my reality.

Reality is of course, not simple. The issue of race and religion certainly not so. Indeed, as I write this I have turned over in my mind and on paper the phrase I use above – ‘Chinese Singaporeans’ – or should it be ‘Singaporean Chinese’? In my limited experience of living abroad, I am surprised each time I struggle to explain the difference and significance of the two to acquaintances who, in a different stroke of destiny, were born into societies that have not had to grapple with such questions right from the start. Although, this too, is starting to change¹.

Growing up in Singapore, I took for granted that most of my schoolmates and teachers looked and sounded like me. Their names looked and sounded like mine. I never had to explain why there were two characters in my first name, or experience the disgruntlement of being repeatedly called ‘Ke’ or ‘Wei’ instead of the full complement. When we were out and about as a family, we spoke freely in Mandarin and English, and lamented, if anything, the fact that my own grandparents and those of their generation spoke mainly in dialects that we didn’t understand. The Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model² I learnt in school seemed logical and hardly discomfiting. I never stopped to consider how it would feel to be part of the ‘Others’ – the category literally, or the less tangible concept that is the opposite to ‘Us’. I noticed my Malay and Indian schoolmates who had to pack up their belongings and congregate in a separate classroom during Mother Tongue lessons, while I stayed put in the classroom, unconscious of but certainly comfortable in being part of the majority.

Years later, I made the decision to move abroad to the UK for my university studies. It was a daunting prospect in many ways. One of the most impactful realisations I had, and one I was thoroughly unprepared for, was the newfound experience of being in the minority. Cambridge, where I first lived and studied, has benefited from years of assimilating peoples from all over the world. It has become a pluralistic and multicultural city today. Nevertheless, I became keenly conscious of being different, and for once, *not* part of the majority. It brought into keen focus for me the fact that I sound different when

I speak, even if I naively believed that this shouldn't be a problem when speaking what I consider to be a first language. I made efforts to learn about the different culture and way of life, but soon realised that the interest is often not reciprocal. In fact, had I been asked how life is like in Singapore for me, I would have been left tongue-tied at having to explain things that, to me, never had to be explained. Had I ever asked my Malay and Indian schoolmates and neighbours what life in Singapore is like for *them*? To say I didn't know how to do so is forgiving; the truth is I never thought that life in Singapore could be any different for *them*, as it is for me.

After several years buried in books, I relished my first forays into clinical medicine, coming into close and frequent contact with more slices of society in my role as a doctor. Technical skills like making a diagnosis and performing medical procedures can be taught. Meeting a patient where they are, having been where they have been, is a much more nuanced and personal endeavour. How does a patient's culture and background influence their description and understanding of pain? What does religion – or absence of one – mean to the patient approaching the end of their life? I – or anyone – could not be a good doctor without possessing an understanding, or at least a willingness to learn, about these facets of a person's life. My patients – and to a large extent these days, my colleagues – come from very distinct ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They have often grown up in families that look different to mine, in countries that organise themselves on different principles and values to those which I have been taught. Yet, these do not render meaningful relationships impossible. It takes first, an honest acknowledgement of the difference, followed by a willingness to foray into one another's reality, however uncomfortable this may be.

Just as body tissues that have been wounded can and often become hypersensitive to pain, so will discussions about race and religion in Singapore always be tender and emotive territory. Understanding these 'hard truths'³ about our nation's circumstances is only the first step. Continuing to have the hard discussions is the true challenge. There is little doubt that Singapore has come through some turbulent times. However, as we grow from our early days to our current state of abundance, and possibly much-feared complacency, a true test for our generation and those to come is whether we can become a mature populace that is able to grapple with the really difficult issues of our time.

I am thinking about moving beyond apps and acronyms, campaigns and catchphrases that are attractive and easy to get behind. We identify readily with, and rightly so, the warmth of the 'kampung spirit'⁴, relish the diversity in hawker food that our multicultural society has produced, and are proud to call ourselves the 'little red dot'⁵ in our signature self-deprecating fashion. But I am wondering if we would ask ourselves: How do we *really* feel about the tide of religious fundamentalism? What is our view on homosexuality? Do we dare to articulate these views, and to hear what others have to say? Are we really doing enough – our best? – for our aged and needy? What *is* enough? Are we truly *comfortable* with the less desirable effects of our meritocratic system? What about differences in socio-economic

attainment between races? The temptation is often to retreat behind our online personas, or into our separate mental enclaves insulated by our personal interests and beliefs. It is a hope of mine and mark of a mature populace if we can talk about these things in a measured and civic-minded way.

The value of continued and honest discourse is intrinsic. Discourse does not always have to lead to a policy paper or neat answer. I have attempted to avoid saddling this essay with citations of copious research or news articles. Perhaps, this is a challenge to the SG75 team and wider Singaporeans: Can we sit with a discussion that is uncertain, imprecise and emotive? Are we capable of seeing the value of discourse for its own sake? It is not about who wins the argument, or cites the most facts and figures. It is a means to foster understanding and awareness of a different point of view. Because I never asked my non-Chinese schoolmates and neighbours what it was like for them, I only ever had a singular version of reality in mind, one that I now know is woefully incomplete.

We are technocrats, and we favour analysing a problem, quantifying it, and proposing solutions. In fact, we are realists and pragmatists too, so we do know that in every solution there are pros and cons, and no one solution is perfect. We are good at that. I am reminded of a conversation I had with a friend at university, who is a recipient of a Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) scholarship. Over dinner, we spoke about the system of selection and awarding of prestigious public sector scholarships to talented eighteen-year-olds fresh out of school. Conceding that the system is not perfect, my friend nevertheless retorted that she ‘can’t see any better way to do it’. We are very good at that, aren’t we? To say, ‘This is the best we can come up with, there is no other choice. Look at country *x* or *y*, it could be much worse.’ Can we challenge ourselves by asking instead: How *can* it be better? In what ways might we be ill-informed or mistaken? *Where does our hubris lie?*

In an interview chronicled in ‘Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going’, Mr Lee Kuan Yew draws comparisons between Singapore and the USA to illustrate the challenges of nation-building with a multiracial, multireligious population. He believed that the Americans have succeeded, at least thus far, in creating a national identity strong enough, such that being American supersedes being of a certain race, for example⁶. He acknowledged that the building of this national identity continues to be a challenge for modern-day Singapore. Not only that, but the Americans believe that they can be the best in the world, yet they can always be *better*.

I would love to see a Singapore where we ask ourselves: What are we *not* good at? The first answers that come to mind might include: the arts, football, making babies, mixing with different races, taking up low-skilled jobs, having a credible opposition...and so on. But can we then really ask ourselves, honestly: *Why* is it that we are not good at these things? What *values* or *prejudices* underlie these problems? What do we ignorantly believe about others that make them seem so *different* to us?

Because at the end of the day, we in fact all want similar things for ourselves and those we love. We desire a good life, whatever this may mean for the individual, being able to strive for the things that

matter to us, and being valued for the things we contribute to the common good. These universal aspirations are common to us all, and I feel are more vital than the elusive 'Singaporean identity' we strenuously try to define. I have come to eschew the explicit symbols of nationhood – flags, face paint, fly-pasts⁷, or pledges⁸, pink ICs⁹ and PAP politicians¹⁰. Instead, I think of the many individuals who *choose* to lay down roots and make a home in Singapore. It is always a choice – to stay in Singapore, or to immigrate into it – and we are united in this choice. Instead of aiming for interracial, interreligious, and intercultural tolerance or acceptance, let us strive towards *appreciation* – an appreciation that others have chosen to take a stake in Singapore despite the heterogeneity of cultures, races and religions. To my fellow Singaporeans, new and old, and perhaps especially those who are most unlike me, thank you for choosing, and for choosing year after year, to make Singapore your home. When we ask the right questions, we find we are more alike than we are different.

Endnotes

¹ The 2021 Census conducted by the Office for National Statistics in the UK identified trends towards increasing ethnic heterogeneity in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022).

² Singapore's CMIO model of ethnic classification is used as a tool to enable research and policy-making, but has been regularly criticised for being outdated and excessively rigid. For instance, see this 2021 article by The Straits Times Associate Editor Chua Mui Hoong, titled 'Categorising Singaporeans by race: The CMIO system is 100 years old and needs an update', available to subscribers at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-cmio-system-is-100-years-old-and-needs-an-update>.

³ A collection of interviews with the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew was published in a volume titled 'Lee Kwan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going' (Han et al., 2011). The title refers to Mr Lee's desire to insulate younger Singaporeans from the complacency that might arise from not confronting the 'hard truths' about Singapore's beginnings and unique circumstances.

⁴ 'Kampung' is a Malay word, meaning 'village'. The term 'kampung spirit' has found its way into common parlance in Singapore, used to refer to a sense of shared heritage, community and solidarity (National Archives of Singapore [NAS], 2023).

⁵ In an article for the Asian Wall Street Journal in 1998, former Indonesian president B. J. Habibie referred to Singapore as a 'little red dot' on the map, next to Indonesia's considerable land mass. Most viewed this comment as pejorative and dismissive of Singapore's small size. It has been reappropriated over the years by Singaporeans to represent the success the island nation has achieved, despite its physical limitations.

⁶ These views are published in Chapter 5, pages 213-214 of 'Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going' (Han et al., 2011).

⁷ The national flag, red-and-white face paint, and aerial fly-pasts are common sights at Singapore's annual display of nationhood at the National Day Parade on 9 August.

⁸ Singapore's National Pledge is recited daily in schools with the right fist clenched over the heart. It aims to foster a common identity and sense of belonging among citizens of different races and religions (National Heritage Board [NHB], 2021).

⁹ Singapore citizens, born or naturalised, are issued with a pink national Identity Card (IC).

¹⁰ The People's Action Party (PAP) was founded in 1954 and has been the governing party since Singapore achieved self-governance in 1959.

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4 July 2023

(2290 words)