"ONE UNITED PEOPLE"

Essays from the People Sector on Singapore's Journey of Racial Harmony

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"Is He Chinese?"

Kenneth Paul Tan

The daughter of John Raymond Francisco and Gladys Olga Klass, whose ancestors were Portuguese and Dutch respectively, my late mother Adeline Catherine Francisco belonged to the Eurasian community in Singapore. When she was alive, she would sometimes share memories of how her parents and grandparents had been pillars of the local Roman Catholic Church and how one of the pews at the Portuguese Mission's St Joseph's Church on Victoria Street had the family name on it. On the rare occasion when we talked about our family history and looked at old sepia-toned family photographs, it was quite clear that my great-grandparents and their children lived a privileged lifestyle in Singapore, involving

distinctively European tastes and sensibilities, a love of good food, as well as a rather austere Catholic piety and frequent acts of charity.

My father, Philip Tan Swee, met my mother as young teachers at Fowlie School in the 1960s. His father, a Cantonese-speaking Khek musician from China, had come to Melaka, Malaysia, where he married my grandmother, a Cantonese-speaking Teochew. My father was born in Melaka in the early 1940s before the whole family moved to Singapore.

As a young child growing up in this multicultural family, I spoke English, Malay, and a smattering of Cantonese. My Malay was learnt to a surprisingly fluent level of proficiency from a neighbour who came most days of the week to help with the housework and to look after my brother and me while both our parents were at work. When I reached school-going age, my parents chose Malay, rather than Mandarin, as a second language for me. Singapore's bilingual education policy at the time allowed some flexibility for a biracial child like me to choose a language other than that assigned to the father's official racial identity, which would in my case have been Mandarin.

My parents also thought it a good idea to engage a private tutor to improve my mastery of the Malay language, mainly for me to gain appreciation of the culture. My tutor's interest in the representational power of the Malay language was just as infectious as his command of the rules of that

language. *Peribahasa* (proverbs) and *pantun* (a poetic form), for instance, opened my eyes and ears to the intricacies of an immensely beautiful language and culture, which I wish today I had put more effort into learning.

My wife, Clara Lim, is Hokkien. Her paternal grandmother was Peranakan. But her family speaks Cantonese. When my mother was still alive, we all dined together very often. The dinner table was a cacophony of languages, which we used playfully to joke with one another. All of us could, of course, speak English. And that was probably the language we were all most fluent in. All of us, except Clara, could speak Malay. My father, Clara, and her mother could speak Mandarin. Flora, whom we employed as a domestic worker for over two decades, threw Tagalog into the mix. And Fita, whom we currently employ, takes great pleasure in comparing the Malay we speak in Singapore with Bahasa Indonesia. My mother could also speak the Kristang language, a severely endangered Portuguese creole. I knew a few words and phrases that I could trade with her. But all of us knew what "O Deus, yo ta mureh!" meant, a phrase we could exclaim in mock-ecstasy whenever we ate strong-flavoured food like oxtail soup or durian. The phrase means "Oh God, I'm dying!". This, along with other things said – and often deliberately mispronounced – in different languages, was part of the interculturally nonsensical conversations that playfully held our family together.

This is, in fact, my intercultural identity.

A minority within a minority within a minority

But in the eyes of the state, and therefore of much of the society I live in, I am Chinese. My Identity Card says so. And I am often required to say so whenever an official form needs to be filled.

But I am visibly a brown-skinned man. Which frequently attracts the question, "Are you Chinese?", whenever I meet another Singaporean for the first time, even in situations when that is among the least relevant aspects of who I am. Or, more discreetly, they might ask someone else about me: "Is he Chinese?"

I mostly attribute these questions to harmless curiosity. In a society conditioned to fit things, people, relationships, and experiences into simple and stable categories, I suppose being curious about things, people, relationships, and experiences that don't fit so neatly should not be a surprise. And curiosity is, after all, healthy, and creates the opportunity for learning. I would like to think so anyway.

And yet, something deep inside me wonders whether behind the question "Are you Chinese?" or "Is he Chinese?" is a judgement of some kind. That, despite my achievements and professional standing, everything in that moment reduces to the sense I get of being deficient, not Chinese enough. Where the unspoken follow-up question is "If he is Chinese…

… then why can't he read Chinese or speak Mandarin?" In school, I had instead learnt Malay, the language of a

community that has for decades been characterised through a historically distorted narrative of underperformance, a translucent barrier that members of that community must overcome every day just to dispel the stereotype and prove themselves worthy of the nation's smug benignity. Regular iterations of discreditation, condescension, and indignity can mould the collective mindset about racial difference and relative ability, which members of the minority community may themselves internalise in a tragically self-limiting way. What a heavy burden to carry. It tires me just thinking about it.

Or the follow-up question might be: "If he is Chinese, then why doesn't he look Chinese?" Or: "Why is he so tanned?" Or: "Why is he so dark?" And the thought that this question might be motivated by a deep fear or dislike of darkness crosses my mind. A big part of who I am is Eurasian, a minority group that, for the longest time, had been (un[der])represented in the official "multiracialism" orthodoxy as belonging to that last racial category known as "Others". And even within this minority community, the so-called "upper ten percent" – or "white Eurasians" – were historically at the top of a social hierarchy. Colour has always and everywhere been saturated with affective significance, as much as our liberal sensibilities would like to deny it.

But I also wonder whether these questions have their roots in a still fertile myth of racial purity. Were the questioners uncomfortable with the in-your-face racial hybridity of Eurasians, whose heritage includes "Western culture" that

may trigger anxieties about Asian values? Or was it a discomfort with the watering down of Chinese-ness through intermarriage? Were they passively critical of mixed parentage as a sign of inauthenticity or disloyalty?

As a child in the 1970s, when we went out as a family, there were occasional looks of curiosity from strangers who I believe meant no harm or disrespect. After all, I grew up seeing my father's Chinese family welcome my Eurasian mother and her family with open arms. And this was just as true of my maternal family's affection for my father and his family. So, I was never really confronted by hostility towards biracial families and people. I only really felt the sting of it through second-hand experience of reading about that undergraduate who, at a student forum in 2005, had asked a senior politician a question about interracial couples, which he said, "made his skin crawl". And then, seeing that viral video of a 60-year-old Chinese male lecturer berating an interracial couple on a public street, the man part-Indian and part-Filipino and the woman part-Chinese and part-Thai. I wanted so much to think of these as exceptional cases, when just a handful of people perhaps lost control on a particularly bad day. But I cannot help but wonder if such a view is more widely held, suppressed only by political correctness and state policing.

And so, in Singapore, my intercultural identity is constantly being boxed in situations in which I am reminded of my status as a minority within a minority within a minority.

Glass ceilings everywhere

At one basic level, I know in the broadest terms what it feels like to be in the minority, especially when that minority is viewed by the majority – and sometimes by the minority itself – through hardwired stereotypical lenses, described through language that betrays a bullying culture. I am reminded of that scene in the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire* when the Jewish Olympic champion sprinter Harold Abrahams explained how he got admitted to Cambridge University: "I'm what I call semi-deprived. It means they lead me to water, but they won't let me drink." There are glass ceilings everywhere. But their existence and effect are notoriously difficult to know, and much more difficult to prove, without sounding churlish. It is one of the most humiliating things to have to explain how latent discrimination limited one's prospects. Many would rather just say they were not good enough.

All of this has subtly influenced how minoritised people are (mis)recognised, forcing them sometimes against their better judgement to respond in ways that limit their sense of self in order that they may be acceptably legible to people conditioned to think in monocultural and stereotypically hierarchical terms.

Though I can empathise deeply with this, I cannot claim to have been disadvantaged extensively in my own life, which has mainly been a privileged one. I was lucky enough to have parents who worked hard and made good choices.

Lucky to have been surrounded by enough people who supported me generously and helped me out when I needed help. And lucky enough to have had opportunities come my way at the right time and place. And though I know what it feels like to be "othered" and even excluded when it matters, I am also very aware of my privilege. That my intercultural and intersectional identity has dealt me many cards to play beyond my minoritised status. Put another way, I may hit a glass ceiling in one room, but I have keys to open a door to another.

Other people may not be so lucky. Their intersectional identity, in contrast, traps them in the most disadvantaged positions in society, where their race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic circumstances, political convictions, and other facets of their identity all converge upon, and mutually reinforce, a hyper-minoritised status that leads to ridicule, exclusion, and real material disadvantage. Race, its intersectional relationship with other facets of identity, and its intercultural fluidity can be a resource for some, but it can just as easily be a painful burden for others. And carrying a painful burden that is scarcely visible in the series of sprints that constitute our lives is a terrible disadvantage in a competitive society that is quick to label.

So, when I think of the problem of inequality in Singapore, which has in recent years received greater public attention, I do not necessarily think, in the first instance, about the abstract measurements of income or wealth distribution.

Neither do I care very much for assertions that we should tackle poverty and not bother very much about inequality, as if the two were separate issues, one simply a distraction.

I am more interested in how people are systematically excluded, especially in insidious ways that limit their prospects, while ideological pieties such as "meritocracy" serve to obfuscate these exclusions by entrenching beliefs about how it is the individual, and not latent social attitudes and institutional inequalities, who must be credited and blamed for their success and failure.

In today's Singapore, we can all be very thankful that we almost never see racial violence and brutality of an egregious kind. But we do need to develop sensitivity towards the hidden and unexpected ways in which our rigid and placid four-part racial harmony can produce a certain closed-mindedness and intolerance that violate people's identities, communities, and prospects. Instead, we should allow ourselves to appreciate the richness, beauty, and power of a social performance that contains polyphonic voices, discordant sounds, and even some wrong notes. We need this to transition from our hard yet brittle multiracialism to real social diversity, empathy, equality, creativity, and resilience, all necessary for surviving the radical disruptions of economic globalisation, technological transformation, and game-changing pandemics. ♦

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