

THE WORKING/UNDER-CLASS IN SINGAPORE: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE MALAY COMMUNITY

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
BACHELORS IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS,
DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND FILM.
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX, 2017

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INTRODUCTION

“We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion. To build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.” (The Singapore Pledge 1965)

A pledge to promote national consciousness, a pledge that promotes Singapore’s multiculturalism and bond. The pledge is a promise that Singapore will grow to stay united as one, ‘regardless of race, language or religion’ (Singapore National Pledge, 1965) Being a Singaporean, the pledge and the national anthem were staples in every aspect of my life, they posed as constant reminders that Singaporeans should not be biased and that Singapore functioned on a racial harmonious level. I was immersed in a country that had not only conquered the odds but proved to be a formidable player in the economy and made a name for itself, from a report by the UN (Helliwell and Sachs 2016) stating that Singaporeans were the happiest citizens in the Asia-Pacific region (UN 2016 cite), to surveys claiming that Singapore is the most expensive city to live in (The Economist 2017 cite) However, what these reports failed to reveal were real statistics that proved only the majority of those in the middle-classes and above were the Chinese and Indians as discussed later in this study. What does this then reflect on the Malays in Singapore?

The Malay community in Singapore has always been known to be a very tight-knit and family oriented community. However, with a population of 5.61million since the end of July 2016 (Singapore Department of Statistic 2016), only 13.4% of Singapore’s population is made up of Malays, thus deeming them an ‘other’ amongst the Chinese majority. This creates the potential for hostility and racism. The Malays are considered an ethnic minority and just like the African-Americans in the USA, have been the subject of mainly negative stereotypes

by “others unfamiliar with the practices of another”. (Noorain 2009, p. 1)

From my personal understanding, the Malay community is mostly seen as the working/under-class in Singapore. The main issue that I wish to address would be how and why the Malays are finding it hard to move up the social ladder. Could it be due to the overwhelming negative ideologies that majority have decided to succumb to? Or is it really due to their slower socio-economic development that majority of Singaporeans have already become used? There have also been considerably fewer representations of middle or upper class Malays in many television series’ or news articles. “The concept of ethnicity as social capital (or ‘ethnic capital’) (...) has been used to explain how ethnicity can result in advantageous outcomes for some communities” (Mellor 2010, p. 76).

Through intersectional analysis of popular and official discourses, and through analysis of interviews with Singaporeans from different backgrounds, I will demonstrate how the Malay community in Singapore, despite being renown for her multi-racialism and multi-culturalism, still lacks social mobility and reinforces the common stereotypes. There are many associated meanings when one discusses the Malay community, mostly negative connotations; Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of habitus explains the power of being influenced into learning such negativity or to justify social inequality. 99.2% of the Malay community are of the Muslim faith (Statistics of Singapore, 2015), "government discourses have represented tight-knit minority ethnic and religious communities, particularly Muslims, as problematic” (Mellor 2010, p. 76). The aim was to conduct individual qualitative interviews with 4 select individuals comprising of 2 non-Malay Singaporeans and 2 Malay Singaporeans. By interviewing non-Malay Singaporeans, I was able to gather different perceptions of the Malay community and quite possibly gather data on racial stereotyping by another race. The

interview with the 2 Malay Singaporeans gave me more personal insight into the issue at hand and how the effects of such a 'deficient culture' posed as a problem.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

"Class continues to be a significant means of analysing forms of inequality" (Lockyer 2010, p. 123) Biressi and Nunn (2013) further explain class as:

"being formed through material conditions and economic (in)securities and as being shaped by early disadvantage or natal privilege and the uneven distribution of life chances and opportunities which these conditions create"; to "recognise class as an ongoing social process experienced across our lifetime trajectories" and "that classed subjects are shaped by the classed judgements of others and by prevailing political and popular discourses which often work to privilege, protect or normalise particular lifestyles, conducts and values." (p. 1)

Savage (2015) explains in his work that "the working classes were a dangerous force of commoners who would drag down standards and lead to social and cultural decline if they were allowed too much influence." (Savage 2015, p. 29) Skeggs (2004) also points out that "the working class have consistently been differently cleaved into the respectable and unrespectable, but they have always remained classified as different." (Skeggs 2004, p. 97) With the influence of media and populist culture, "recognition of difference is a lot more difficult to maintain" (Skeggs 2004, p. 97) On the social ladder, the underclass is a step below the working-class; often seen as "morally dissolute, 'shameless' and socially corrosive and therefore dangerous." (Biressi & Nunn 2013, p. 51) Another way of identifying the under-class as Savage (2015) remarks would be the term 'precariat'. He draws similarities from the underclass – "which has been widely used in the past to designate a group of people

‘underneath’ the class system who have been excluded from the social mainstream” (Savage 2015, p. 352) to describe the precariat’s. The implications of being associated with the underclass are “relentless and disparaging and/or unhelpful. (...) Whereas ‘working-class’ continues to signify for some a persistent if weakened attachment to a politics of class respect (or at least to the practices of paid work), for the underclass no such associations exist.” (Biressi & Nunn 2013, p. 52) Lawler (2008) and Back (1996) discuss that the working class are generally never “taken seriously” and are easily distinguished by the middle class (as cited by Savage 2015, p. 335). The working and under-class is widely considered to incoherently convey their insight, knowledge and feelings incoherently conveyed.

However, it is thought-provoking for a specific ethnicity to be “generally known” as the working/under-class especially in multi-racial countries such as Singapore and the intersectionality of ethnicity and class will be further discussed. Balibar (1991) notes that "it is important to investigate the vulnerability to racism of certain social classes and the forms they give to it in a given conjuncture". (Balibar 1991, p. 39) To understand why and how the Malay community are mainly found in working/under-class categories, one would need to first understand the history and culture of Singapore.

An introduction to Singapore

Singapore is a city-state in south-east Asia. It is known as the ‘Little Red Dot’ or ‘Lion City’ and was once a British colonial trading post. Singapore is an Anglicisation for its more native Malay name – Singapura, which translates to Lion – ‘Singa’, city - ‘pura’. This was based on Sang Nila Utama’s account, claiming he saw a lion when he first found the island in 1299. Before the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, who founded modern Singapore, it was estimated that a thousand-people lived on the island, mostly indigenous Malays and few

Chinese. After Singapore was established as a trading post, there were 80,000 inhabitants on the island, more than half being Chinese.

In 1963, Singapore joined the Federation of Malaya but on August 9th 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia and gained independence. Lee Kuan Yew, a prominent figure in Singapore's history became Prime Minister and built Singapore up to become a First World country. Singapore has a population of 5.3million as of 2016 and is known for being a multi-racial population, with 75% of its population being Chinese, 13.4% Malays, 9.1% Indians the rest made up of other nationalities. (Singapore Department of Statistics 2016) Singapore maintains that multi-racialism by striving to cater to every race, for example, public transport announcements are made in 4 official languages – English, Standard Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil in addition to dedicated television and radio channels for the different races.

The dominant political party of the Parliament of the Republic of Singapore – People's Action Party (PAP), hold 83 of 101 seats and have been undefeated ever since its election in 1959. The economic success of Singapore comes from a

“strongly socially engineered society that is governed by a political party intent on maintaining high levels of economic growth, preserving its political hegemony, and so convinced of the judiciousness of its political philosophy that dissenting beliefs are barely tolerated.” (cite Rahim 1998, p. 1)

Class Systems in Singapore

As Savage (2015) mentions Britain has been obsessed with class systems and drawing boundaries to differentiate the individual classes for a fairly long time now. The same could

also be said for Singapore as our South-East Asian culture focuses very much on ‘face value’ which signifies personal dignity. One can compare face to that can be given, lost, taken away and earned (Genzberger 1994 cite). For example, if one gets embarrassed by a situation, one ‘loses face’, should one feel obliged to attend an event, one ‘gives face’ to the host. To have face is to be perceived by peers as being in a high status; mainly the Chinese Singaporeans strive to have and maintain face.

Singapore’s success is renown and news of it is far spread, however, what is unknown to foreigners would be the struggles of the Singaporean working and underclass. Scholars (Pang 1975, Islam & Kirkpatrick 1936 and Lee 2001) have also observed that both income and racial prejudice have become more apparent and despite Singapore’s affluent society, has not been able to extinguish such “social ills”. (Lee 2001, p. 57)

In a social stratification survey done by Tan (2015) in 2011, he makes it known that the term “class” “had yet to appear regularly in public discourse” (Tan 2015, p.8) and explains that:

the “relative absence may perhaps be attributed to the preoccupation with race and religion as potential sources of social division and conflict that could hinder nation-building process” (Tan 2015, p. 8)

He also, points out that “various proxies or indicators of “class” have indeed been used frequently, for instance, “income”, as in “low-income” households, or “middle-income” housing”. (Tan 2015, p. 8)

Tamura (2003) explores the history behind Singapore’s class system and how the government not only favours the middle class but is ‘obsessed’ with them as well. Since the 1960s, Singapore’s economy has been grown rapidly and “the immense influence of the PAP over

all political, economic and social sectors of the nation is a well-known story”. (Tamura 2003, p. 184) During the recession in 1985, despite introducing more private enterprises in the economy, the government still reigned as the main stockholder in the economy, which allowed them the power of regulation. (Tamura 2003, p.184) Tan (2015) contributes to Tamura’s argument by stating that in the 1980s, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made a statement claiming that Singapore was a “middle class society” – 80% of Singaporeans were residents and owners of the properties they resided in (The Straits Times 1987). Tamura and Tan both acknowledge that Singaporeans have been influenced to work towards entering the middle-class society, with one “characteristic of Singapore’s middle class being the close relationship between income, education and language” (Tamura 2003, 186).

In 2005, Prime Minister Lee (as cited by Poon 2009) highlighted a social concern termed by him as ‘dysfunctional’, ‘low-income’ families. He points out in the speech that “all races are represented. But among the groups, the Malay community is over-represented” (p. 71). How race and class intersectionality works as Balibar (1991) explains is that tension between classes are strained by an “inbuilt tendency to racism” (p. 205). For Prime Minister Lee to have singled out the Malay Community and identify them as a social problem not only racialises a divide in the Singapore community but also showcases how the government strategises to tackle social problems racially. This leads us to the next section where race in Singapore is discussed in further detail.

Race in Singapore

After gaining independence in 1965, the PAP government “denounced communalism and ethnic privilege” (cite Rahim 1998, p.1) and was determined that their own brand of meritocracy and multiculturalism would better the condition of the Malay community and

other socially disadvantaged Singaporeans. Drawing inference from the Malaysian government's exclusive support towards the Malay community – especially the economically disadvantaged *bumiputra*¹ community, the PAP was hesitant to provide such aid and did the opposite; perhaps so as to not anger the dominant Chinese community due to its inequality. As a result, “the only tangible form of assistance was the continuation of the policy of free education for Malays which was originally initiated by the British colonial authorities.” (Rahim 1998, p. 2). However, the PAPs brand of meritocracy and multiculturalism had failed the Malays and to explain such an intractable disposition, the cultural deficit thesis of the Malays was relied upon and used time and again by the PAP.

The cultural deficit thesis explained proper by Rahim (1998)

“social disadvantaged ethnic communities have remained economically and educationally marginal primarily because of their negative values and generally moribund attitudes which in turn create the material conditions that reproduce their social disadvantage” (p. 3)

As they are mainly responsible for their communities marginality, “the onus is thus placed on them to reform their negative values and attitudes” (Rahim 1998, p. 3)

There are many things that are unseen and unknown to inhabitants, such as Singapore's fierce and competitive education regime. Apart from English, Mother Tongue – identified by ones race, is a mandatory second language subject for every student studying in Singapore. In 1999, there was a noted change in the Chinese language syllabi to accommodate students of different competency levels, ‘CLB’ – Chinese Language for ‘B’ students, was for students struggling with mandarin, and higher Chinese for students more proficient in the language. “The policy of bilingualism ha[d] also been adjusted by the state to emphasise the need to

¹ *Bumiputra*, a Malaysian of indigenous Malay origin; literal translation - Sons of the Earth

groom a bicultural Chinese elite from the ranks of a general bilingual population" (Poon 2009, p. 79). It is duly noted that in 1982 however, a program was set up, and is still running till today, to empower and cater to the "bottom 30% of the Malay/Muslim population, and is therefore highly subsidized" (Yayasan Mendaki 2016). Yayasan MENDAKI provides early assistance to prepare Malay/Muslim children for school, to do better in school and to be ready for the future. With the comparison of these two situations, they are an indication of racial biasedness as it illustrates the government's desire to nurture the Chinese and aid in building up their academic abilities and the implied understanding that Malays require much more. To further understand the disparity between the Chinese and Malays in Singapore one will have to take a closer look at the Malay Community.

The Malay Community

In Singapore's heritage, there are many renown Malay figures; Sang Nila Utama first found and named the island Singapura, the first president of Singapore (1965-1970) was Yusof Bin Ishak and the national anthem – Majulah Singapura, was composed by Zubir Said in 1958 and is sung in the national language – Bahasa Melayu. Despite such strong leaders in the past from the Malay community, the Malays still lack social mobility and due to that, common stereotypes are reinforced. (Noorainn 2009)

Firstly, we consider the economic aspect of the Malay community which places majority in working or underclass status'. Over the years, the Malay ethnic group has shown to be the majority percentage in lower income brackets, with SGD\$200-S\$599 (estimated £113 – £340) a month in 1991 (Department of Statistics, 1991) and SGD\$500-S\$999 (estimated £280 – £566) per month in 1998 (Department of Statistics, 1998). In 2010, the average household income for Malays was S\$4,575 (estimated £2,592) as compared to SGD\$7,326

(estimated £4,152) for a Chinese household. Also, comparing the Census results of 2000, 46.15% of the Chinese population held senior position jobs, professionals or associate professionals and technicians, unlike the Malays, who only had 23.35%. These results however are typically taken to reflect the stereotype that Malays do not work hard enough and are very careless with their spending.

This leads to the second contributing factor to the Malays as a ‘deficient culture’ – education. Tan (2015) remarks that despite “class background”, any child who is competent enough for University will not be rejected entry based on insufficient funds, however:

“it is difficult to prevent the advantages accruing from differences in social and cultural capital from enhancing the odds of some classes doing better than those with less or no access to such resources.” (Tan 2015, p. 9)

Scholars studying the survey statistics (Lee 2001, Tan 2015) note that a child from a lower social background might not be able to achieve as much success in school as compared to a child from a higher class standing. Savage (2015) supports the statements by explaining that those from more privileged backgrounds are equipped with a variety of capital. “Expansion has not, unfortunately, led to greater equality among young people from different backgrounds” and “going to university, then, is strongly related to social class” (Savage 2015, p. 224 & 226). Tamura (2003) also observed that in 2000, only a small amount of Malays in the “Malay-speaking portion of the population (which is made up almost entirely of Malays)” (Tamura 2003, p.188) managed to graduate with a diploma and university degrees.

Noorain, who wrote her undergraduate thesis *Malay Stereotypes: Acceptance and Rejection in the Malay Community* (2009), is a Malay herself, and points out that the socio-economic growth of Malays are not as constant as other ethnic groups (p. 2) and this contributes to their ‘deficient culture’ and the ‘negative perceptions’ of Malays. Cultural deficiency as Banfield

(1974) explains stems from a “single problem: the existence of an outlook and style of life which is radically present-oriented and which therefore attaches no value to work, sacrifice, self-improvement, or service to family, friends, or community” (Banfield 1974, p. 235) The problem is so deeply rooted that it passes on from generation to generation. Ng (2015, p. 383) quotes Alatas’ (1977) surmise on Malay subjugation, “once an ideology becomes supreme, it is accepted in some degree by the dominated party” (Alatas 1977, p. 166).” Negative perceptions can then inspire negative representations in the media.

METHODOLOGY

With qualitative interviewing, the interviewer can collect rich and detailed information about “how individuals experience, understand and explain events in their lives” (Clifford 2016, p. 1) With an interview, it provides answers in better detail as compared to surveys and “allows insight into how individuals understand and narrate aspects of their lives” (Clifford 2016, p.1). In Kvale’s (1996) book on qualitative research interviewing, he stresses on incorporating “the practical issues of the interview method and the theoretical issues of the nature of interview knowledge” (Kvale 1996, p. 14). However, Flinders (1997) argues that while knowing the theory behind something is important, it is equally as important to know the methodology as “methodological decisions require a more middle-range level of thinking” (Flinders 1997, p. 288)

As I wanted to know the effects and opinions from my interviewees, the interview had to be able to tap into the interviewees attitudes and perceptions on how they relate to the issue at hand. (Krueger 1988) Krueger also explains that for the interview to be successful is for the response to be as candid as possible, to reveal raw information and viewpoints. I was wary of how my questions were phrased as there might have been problems with regards to ethics when I was interviewing the Malay Singaporeans.

One definite issue I faced was the language and the challenge to represent spoken speech on a page. Language is not at all what is on a page and has much more life to it. The reason for the methodological interview was to have the felt experience and be given something statistics are not able to provide. It became particularly relevant when the interviewees from Singapore felt comfortable enough to be themselves and speak to the interviewer as if they were speaking and opening up to a friend, so much so that the English reverts back to the way one would speak in Singapore – by using ‘Singlish’ and local lingo. I have tried to represent the texture of the language within the limits that I could. As this was a high-risk research piece, interviewees will be identified by their initials for protective reasons but will have descriptions of their background to aid in profiling them proper.

FINDINGS

Media Stereotypes And Resistance

In this segment, I will present a series of data collected about the examples of stereotypes of the Malay community and forms of resistance to stereotypes in the media.

One representation of the Malay in the media would be an uncultured and brash character. An example of such would be from a local drama *First Touch (2002)*, the boyfriend of a Malay nurse – Faridah, confronts Dr. Yong of stealing his girlfriend. “The ruffian punches Yong in the nose, demonstrating the violent and irrational tendencies associated with uncivilized behaviour.” (Tan 2004, p. 294) Faridah is not impressed with her boyfriend and expresses that Yong is a much better man than him. From this, one can infer that Chinese are more superior than Malays in terms of masculinity and that the Malays should learn to be more levelheaded and learn from the Chinese culture. It is also duly noted that the stereotype of a

working-class or underclass person is known to have uncouth/irrational behaviour, the fact that it has been ethnicised here causes a subtle correlation of Malays to the lower class.

Applying Rahim's (1998) theory, Tan (2004) also uncovers another stereotype that "emphasises Malay separateness" and how it corresponds to the:

"cultural-genetic deficit thesis, an implicit notion that many Singaporeans harbour about the inescapably cultural and biological determinants of Malay under-achievement, incompetence, unreliability, and dependency". (Tan 2004, p. 302)

He raises an example of another local movie – *12 Storeys (1997)*. A Malay neighbour approaches Meng – who can speak Malay, for help. He would like Meng to tutor his kids whose studies are not that great. Meng tutors the children for free and the Malay man promises to "repay his kindness with a meal" (Tan 204, p. 302) Not only did that situation enhance the stereotype that Malays are unable to achieve in their studies, but also that they do not know how to speak English properly and that they do not have enough money (for a tutor).

The reason why cultural distinctiveness of the working-class or Malays is represented a certain way is "not just about creating entertainment value (...) but is also about attaching authenticity to the self through the appropriation of other cultures" (Skeggs 2004, p. 105) by the middle-class.

Moreover, a model who had been approached by Romanian photographer, Mihaela Noroc, for her project 'The Atlas of Beauty' received backlash by Singaporean netizens for not being 'pretty enough'. Nadia Rahmat, a Singaporean Malay was chosen to represent the beauty of Singaporean women. When her photo resurfaced in 2016 it received unpleasant comments

regarding her looks saying she was not ‘Singaporean enough’ and ‘ugly’. The New Paper (2016 cite), a local newspaper wrote an article on this incident and included an interview with her and some of the comments along with the names of those who made them; they were all Chinese names. This situation posed as uncanny, as despite Noroc’s (2017) aim of “celebrating diversity” through portraits of women from around the world, paired with embracing diversity in Singapore, Rahmat still faced backlash as Singaporeans did not seem to be the most accepting of this diversity, perhaps for the fact that the model chosen was not Chinese.

Singapore has a yearly Miss Singapore Universe contest, a national beauty pageant that is telecast ‘live’ by the local television station. For the past 10 years, only one winner belonged to the minority race – Indian, while the rest were of Chinese ethnicity. “The significance of representations lies in the way in which they become authorised and institutionalised through policy and administration” (Skeggs 2004 p. 117). Drawing inference from the beauty pageant, Singaporeans might have grown accustomed to associating Singaporean beauty standards with the Chinese ethnicity, therefore making that a norm; and when the situation where a Malay woman is seen to be representing ‘Singaporean beauty’, they retaliate as it is out of the norm and not what the majority ‘authorised’.

When Nadia Rahmat received such criticism, a wave of Singaporeans stood by her side and supported her and a recognizable duo was among that wave. Local YouTube celebrities and of both of Malay ethnicity, Munah Bagharib and Hirzi Zulkiflie of the MunahHirziOfficial (MHO) channel are known for their comedic antics but underlying messages through their YouTube videos. They featured Nadia in one of their parody music videos titled “Work Parody – Rihanna (Singapore)”, while using the tune to Rihanna’s song “Work”, they

changed the lyrics and sang about Chinese privilege in Singapore instead.

This leads us to the next point regarding Munah from MHO. In 2015, Munah was hired to feature in an advertisement by Nivea to promote the Nivea Extra White & Firm Q10 Deodorant. However, the advertisement backfired and caused a group of female activists in Singapore to condemn the brand for stigmatizing women with dark underarms, what's more a woman of colour. In the advertisement, Munah is shunned by people around her who are displeased with her dark underarms; it is only after using the whitening deodorant that she becomes social accepted and well-liked. The supposedly humorous advertisement inadvertently emanated a sense of racism that a Malay woman had to look to skin whitening products to solve her social ostracise.

Effects Of “Deficient Culture”

Skeggs (2004, p. 118) says that attaching negative connotations to the lower classes is a “mechanism for attributing value to the middle-class self”, therefore, not only does it boost one's value but it also represents the authority a higher class has over the lower classes that it can attach such negative values, “thus maintaining class divisions”. Taylor (2010) also conveys that misrepresentations or continuous negative representations are questionable “because they place blame on the actions of individuals for their marginalisation rather than recognising the effects” of real problems such as poverty or ethnic discrimination “on both the ability to establish and maintain ties and the efficacy of these social networks in ‘escaping’ social disadvantage.” (Taylor 2010, p. 75) Munt (2007) also asserts that “class tourism” has been around for a long time and “generally, it is the economic mobility of higher status classes that confers the freedom to wander socially downward and consume the

visual spectacle, to enjoy the erotic/affective satisfaction to be found there.” (Munt 207, p. 140)

Lisa McKenzie (2015) says that “the language, which demeans the poor, is powerful and has been with us for many generations” and continues by recounting how the government in the U.K. have used it “in gaining political capital among the electorate, when needed”. This links to a speech made in Bahasa Melayu by Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2005 during the National Day Rally, when he openly addressed the issues with the Malay community². He stated that the Malays did not possess any skills or fixed income, dropped out of school before completing their Secondary education, were getting married and having children early, but were getting divorced as fast. He also advised for the Malay community to be more aware of the situation but more importantly to change their standard/manner of living. For the Prime Minister to have emphasized the matter on such a public scale and linking the ‘deficient culture’ to the Malays surely suggests the small political space available for alternative explanations/mobilisations.

PERSONAL STORIES AND DIFFICULT CONFESSIONS

To further understand if the ideology of a “deficient culture” does affect the Malay ethnicity in Singapore and how it may have shaped the way others perceive the Malays, a methodological interview was conducted and the results are as follows.

² Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s (2005) speech proper: “Mereka tiada kemahiran atau kerja tetap. Mereka berhenti sekolah sebelum tamat pendidikan menengah. Ramai yang menganggur, dan mempunyai anak-anak kecil yang tidak mampu mereka tanggung... Ia menjejaskan masyarakat Melayu lebih daripada India atau Cina kerana lebih ramai pasangan Melayu yang berkahwin muda dan bercerai awal... Kita perlu bantu keluarga-keluarga ini supaya dapat berdikari... tetapi lebih penting memberi bimbingan untuk mengubah sikap dan cara hidup mereka.”

Malays = or ≠ Lazy?

Through the interview, all the participants, engaged with the concept of ‘laziness’ in the Malay community in relation to their socio-economic position; most responses were connected to work and education. A 22-year-old Singaporean Chinese woman – JH, recounts a time where she had worked in Maybank³ in Singapore. There were many Malays working in the back office, and she noted that they were satisfied with their job because it was simple tasks like clearing and flipping through cheques. She acknowledged that the simplicity of a humdrum job was enough for them to provide for their family at the end of the day.

Offering a different perspective, HF – a 23-year-old, Singaporean Malay doing freelance jobs in the media business was determined to identify that he was different from a ‘stereotypical Malay’. HF had interests in photography, videography, the performing arts and was a traditional Malay dancer on the side as well. From his perspective, a Singaporean Malay was someone who chose

interest and passion over money

They pursued their dreams because

we know eventually, it will put food on the table... If you're serious about something, you will earn from it

When asked how he would then define a stereotypical Malay, he replied

[the Chinese] would say Malays are lazy and not as serious as them

understanding that the Singaporean Chinese mainly looked for the job that paid the highest.

(resigned voice) It feels as if they see us [all] as lazy or not as competent, [but] maybe we're not trying to compete, maybe we have other priorities that we are going for other than the highest paying job.

³ Malayan Banking Berhad is a Malaysian universal bank

A fellow Singaporean Malay interviewee countered HF's statement. It was notable that DA, a 23-year-old, retail staff working in Zara took several minutes to respond when asked what he would associate with being Singaporean Malay. He cross-questioned me several times before asking in an uncertain voice,

DA: huh... I can't be racist, right? (nervous laughter)

INTERVIEWER: (laughs as well) Honestly, you can be anything you want to be.

(After some time) DA: I feel like they are very lazy. They give up very easily, especially when it comes to studying, most of the Malays that I ask regarding future studies say "I haven't been to school in a very long time" or "I'd rather not try"

In 2014, DA dropped out from his final year in Polytechnic and acknowledged that he took studying for granted back then –an experience that also made him aware of his ethnicity.

I had a lot of motivation but couldn't succeed... I'm not trying to speak ill of them, but compared to [my] Malay friends, I feel like I'm different... They don't try.

Throughout their interviews, HF and DA kept emphasising that stereotypes could not apply to everyone in the group and strived to present themselves in a more positive light despite the ideologies following their ethnicity.

While he was aware that his statement was derogatory to his own race, in the latter part of DA's response, he pointed out a positive attribute about the Malay community.

But one thing I really love about the Malays is that they're really close to their family.

Family first, income later

Coming from a family of 5 (parents and 2 older brothers), which is above the national average household size of 3.39 in terms of persons (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2016), DA spoke very fondly of his family. Despite always being busy with work, when everyone was present at home, the environment was vibrant; with conversations ranging from

each other's well-being to sharing about their daily activities. His family also made it a point to meet up with extended family every Sunday to bond over meals and leisurely activities. For HF, his parents were concerned for him and constantly asked for updates on his life. They were worried that HF was not able to grow accustomed to his current lifestyle as he used to earn SGD\$3080 a month during his army regularship⁴ as compared to SGD\$600-1000 now doing freelance jobs. Despite earning a remarkably lower amount and being responsible for all his expenditures, HF still voluntarily gives a considerable portion of his earnings to his parents as a way of giving back.

In another interview with a Chinese Singaporean woman, FX – a 22-year-old University student studying in the UK, pointed out that one negative stereotype of the Malay community was that they started families at a much younger age than most Singaporeans; this topic was also raised by DA. He explained that Malays wanted to get married early because they would be able to spend more time with their children and parents who had gotten married around 30 or 40 years of age, would not

have [the] energy to do much by the time their kids get older; all they have is a lot of money. [That's why] I like that quality time Malay families spend with their kids.

However, from FX's point of view, starting a family early was not reasonable and was also why she felt Malays were predominantly typed as the working/underclass.

They always give birth early, they have no financial planning, they don't look very far ahead and look at things [on a] short-term [basis]. That's why instalments are very important to them, because if [they] can afford it now, they don't think about whether they can afford it in the long term.

⁴ National Service is a statutory requirement for every male Singaporean citizen to undergo 2 years of compulsory training. A regularship is when one signs on voluntarily to the army and serves for an extended period of time.

With regards to Malays being typed as the working/underclass, JH states that the lack of extra income for Malays was due to the lack of motivation to try for better jobs – which would then require more work as well, as they usually aim to ensure that their family is satisfactorily taken care of until the next pay cheque arrives.

Yes, Malays are perceived as working/under-class. Yes, I am working-class too but...

All the respondents agreed that the Malays were predominantly found in the working and underclass with a few highlighting that Chinese Singaporeans were mainly in the middle and upper class. HF linked that to a previous point he had made.

Chasing your passion is the longest journey ever, throughout the process, people will see you as working or under class (...) as long as you haven't found yourself somewhere you're supposed to be and in a stable position, you wouldn't be considered as middle class and upper.

Given the four class systems to choose from, HF said he belonged in the working class

for now... Because I haven't found a stable job or a proper calling of what I'm supposed to do. You know? ... I have no self-branding yet, but then again I have a diploma so I wouldn't type myself as an underclass, so [at least] in terms of education, I have something.

He believed that his cultural capital was better than the stereotypical Malays for a Singaporean Malay himself.

When asked to give herself a class, FX, an International Business Undergraduate student said proudly

I've always thought myself to be middle class. I never thought that I was upper class or very poor... I don't think I'm very poor because I know I'm privileged

(immediately corrects herself) I'm not saying I'm [that kind of] privileged, I'm just

saying that I've never had to think about how to pay my school fees, while some of my friends have to the find means to do so.

DA identified himself as working-class but immediately followed up with statements as if insecure of his standing.

It's not that I'm struggling with money, I just want to save up for the future. (...) if I was single, I'd continue schooling without working. My parents are obliged to pay for my school fees and the only reason I have to work and study at the same time is because there's marriage and my future kid to think about

While JH was the only one who truly understood what each class meant, she acknowledged that she saw class from an economic sense, and that the real differentiating point for the middle class and upper class was the cultural aspect. She told me that while her family could identify as the upper class in Singapore because

we own a freehold landed property back in Singapore, which considers you the top 1% in Singapore because there are only 74,000 freehold houses. I don't feel it though (...) I would perceive myself as working class

JH, who enjoyed combat sports and political related readings, revealed that apart from a set allowance her parents gives to her, she looked to forex trading to earn extra income. When asked what made her aware of her class position, she mentioned that it was the way her circle of friends lavishly spent their money as compared to her own spendthrift ways, reinforcing that she perceived class from an economic point of view.

Education vs. Income

Comparing everyone's highest form of qualifications, HF and FX have a Diploma each, while JH has an A-level certificate⁵ and DA has an O-level⁶ certificate but in time to come, JH and FX will have a degree each. When asked about his future plans, DA smiled as he responded

as of now, I just plan to finish my fucking diploma (laughs)

For DA, his future involved being adequately educated before settling down; he previously mentioned that he would have chosen studies over work should his relationship circumstances be different. Not only is alternating between studies and work a commendable feat which shows determination – the opposite of laziness, pursuing a further education also breaks the stereotypical Malay norm.

While all participants shared that their parents never pinned any specific ambitions on them, there was a distinct similarity towards parenting styles for like ethnicities.

Singaporean Malays -

HF: They just told me to do what I like to do (...) they're fine with it, as long as I'm serious about it and I'm responsible for my own life.

DA: They told me to study hard and you can do anything you want (...) they were very strict when I was growing up, (...) but they're understanding and know that everyone has different tastes and ambitions.

⁵ Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-level)

⁶ Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (O-level)

Singaporean Chinese -

FX: They wanted me to do anything as long as it would get me rich in the end. They don't care about my happiness, they just want me to earn money, have job security... they don't care what I do, I can be a road sweeper if it pays me \$8k.

JH: They want me to be rich, that's the only thing. As long as any occupation doesn't earn [enough] money, they don't want me to do it (laughs)

Without assuming this might have applied to every Singaporean, it was still interesting to observe that both sets of Singaporean Malay parents raised their children knowing to each his own whereas both sets of Singaporean Chinese parents made it a point to send their children to University and to instil in their children the ideology that their endgame was to get rich.

The discriminated and the discriminators

While the orderly ways of Singapore are commendable, behind the scenes of its multicultural façade lie a plethora of ethnic and class discriminatory accounts which these interviews only managed to gather a hint of.

HF recounts of the kindergarten he attended under the PAP where he had to learn how to speak Mandarin as the institution did not offer Malay. He did not see this as a problem but took it as an advantage and learned the new language while struggling to speak Malay back home. His Malay still did not improve much when he attended Primary and Secondary School where his main group of friends were Chinese. There was a moment in Secondary school which made him aware of his ethnicity as he realised he was the token Malay in group projects that required multiracial groupings.

My siblings said I was like a Chinese stuck in a Malay body, which I didn't understand. (...) then this happened and reminded me that I am Malay... but not that it's a problem, my friends never made it a problem either

One other incident that he faced was during his military service where he was keen to sign on for the navy but heard from seniors and peers that they did not 'welcome' Malays. During a briefing, HF decided to raise questions

[conversation he had with the Navy representatives]:

HF: *Can a Malay like me sign on in the navy?*

Navy Representative: *Yes, you can! We are now open [to that idea], so Malays can join the navy*

HF: *What about food on board, will there be halal food?*

Navy Representative: *Uh... in training school, there will be halal food, on board the larger ships, there will be halal food, but (uncertain tone) the smaller ships...which are the ones we are mainly on... might not be able to provide halal food.*

HF then asked what would happen if he had signed on and was going to be out at sea for weeks

and you know what they said? They told me I can prepare my own food and come! (incredulous laughter) Can you imagine, 2 weeks of breakfast, lunch and dinner that I have to bring on my own?

He recognised that as a form of discrimination even though they were welcoming him to the navy, they did not cater to a Muslim person's diet. HF also shared that some vocations in the army did not allow Malays as the Singapore Army worries that during times of war, the Singaporean Malays would 'betray' Singapore and side with neighbouring countries- Malaysia and Indonesia's population are majority Malay [and/or] Muslim – because their ancestors resided there.

When I was in OCS⁷, I didn't bother putting signals as one of my choices, (mocking tone) so okay fine, infantry for the Malay then. Is it because I'll be the first to die?

(laughs)

His last recount of being discriminated as a Malay person was one where he was the most vocal about and truly felt was that it was unreasonable and unacceptable. HF had a very close Eurasian – half Chinese, half European- friend whose house he would visit rather often

(...) his parents were racist. After I'd leave his house, his dad would tell him not to hang out with a Malay (...) I guess it was because he had his fair share of meeting those stereotypical Malays and even though [his parents] realised I wasn't 'that kind' of Malay, they still insisted that they had met enough of Malays to say that they're not a good bunch. They kept telling him to stop hanging out with me, so eventually I couldn't even step foot into his house. (...) it's still happening in Singapore...

[Singaporeans] *not giving us a chance.*

DA also used the interview to agree on the point of Singaporeans not giving the Malays a chance. He confided that one requirement for jobs in Singapore was the ability to be bilingual, but the languages employers preferred were English and Mandarin. Many of the customers in Zara were Indonesian Chinese to which Zara hired Malaysian Chinese workers who spoke three languages – English, Chinese and Malay

(...) and what do they do with the Malays, they put us in the stock room to do 'sai kang'⁸ (...) what for put us on the job floor? (...) we should all be given a chance

While Indonesians speak Bahasa Indonesia which DA notes is slightly similar to Bahasa Melayu, employers still hired Malaysian Chinese workers because they were trilingual.

While DA and HF were discriminated based on their ethnicity, I asked JH and FX if they had

⁷ OCS: Officer Cadet School

⁸ sai kang: translated from Hokkien refers to an undesirable and unpleasant job, or in literal terms 'shit job'

ever discriminated other races before, to which both sheepishly agreed. A few excerpts are as follows.

When FX was still schooling, she noticed that her Malay peers often carried branded school bags (e.g., Roxy, Billabong etc.) while her own parents refused to buy one for her, she confided in them and her father explained that

Whatever [Singaporean Malay children] want, their parents buy (...) they always earn \$1 but spend \$2 and don't have financial perspective. So, they buy these things to make their children feel good about themselves and boast but in the end, won't have any money for their own.

JH was honest as she reflected that she never had many interactions with Malay people growing up, but that

JH: My parents were racist (nervous laughter) but not towards the Malay... more towards the Indians

INTERVIEWER: *So they never really said much about the Malays?*

JH: (pauses to think) Maybe that Malays are less intellectually inclined? (nervous laughter)

One interaction that she remembered suddenly during the interview was of a friend she had in Secondary school. She claimed that the girl had pearl white skin but a Malay name

I don't remember her as a Malay because of her skin colour. I completely regarded her as a Chinese. (...) and I made friends with her on the basis that I thought she was Chinese.

Effects of discrimination

Although JH and FX stated that they had never been discriminated based on their ethnicity and acknowledged that Singapore did have 'Chinese privilege'. Upon asking how they felt

about Malay people facing prejudice, both JH and DA replied similarly that it was all based on perspective.

JH: if the person is okay with it and retreats to their community, or if he's happy continuing the way he is, then there's not much of an effect of discrimination on them.

DA: it really depends on perspective (...) whatever they say to me, it might be offensive to [another] Malay, but I grew up being surrounded by Chinese people, I got used to it. I think it's better if you asked a sensitive Malay guy this question instead.

HF felt that if a Malay person proved himself as a non-stereotypical Malay by working hard, then he would not receive prejudice. As he had always worked hard on chasing his dreams

I don't think anyone has ever seen me as a lazy Malay

FX felt that it was unfair for Malay people to receive prejudice ever since she moved to the UK and was surrounded by a much more culturally diverse group of people, instead of Singapore which she said was like a bubble.

We only have 4 races, and these 4 races will judge each other, but now I look at everyone and we're all human.

Habitus and the Influence of Media

Parental influence was a common topic during the interviews, such as previously mentioned, the passing on of ethnic impressions for JH and FX. Also, those from a more privileged background seemed to have more capital. For example, JH and FX's fathers' occupations were both 'business man' as compared to HF and DA's fathers' who were a technician and logistics driver respectively. Also, bearing in mind that all of JH's and FX's siblings had graduated with a degree made the statement more relevant and applicable.

From all their responses, it was also noted that they had all seen some form of ethnicity being stereotyped as a specific class in the media. HF noted that comedians used racial stereotypes to amplify their jokes, television advertisements did not use Malay people as viewers would question the credibility of the product and lastly, social media influencers who were admired for their beauty and lavish lifestyle were rarely Malay or Indian. FX also noticed that if there was a video of a dispute that had happened in Singapore, comments by netizens were littered with accusations of the Malays starting the fight. JH brought up the recent Presidential Election case where the government claimed that the role of the next President of Singapore was reserved for Malay candidates but had tough requirements to fulfil.

How [is anyone supposed to] be a President if you have to be from a company worth at least SGD\$500m? (sceptical tone) How many Malays can reach that, no wait, how many Chinese can even reach that?

She also pointed out that a satirical comedy program –The Noose, from the main English Channel in Singapore had a great deal of segments that mocked not only class but races in Singapore.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Backtrack to the beginning of this research, I had established several hypotheses and wanted to determine the degree of accuracy for each of them. While my research and findings had come across multiple instances of negative ideologies of the Malay community, it was through the interviews that concluded that it was all a matter of perspective. As disparaging as some ideologies of the Malay community might be, the two Malay participants had risen to the occasion and proved their divergence from the cultural deficit thesis. Despite their socio-economic differences compared to JH and FX, they grew desensitised to forms of discrimination, stayed motivated and showed signs of wanting more from life like becoming

successful, instead of settling in a comfortable position or giving up. Taking into consideration as well that HF and DA had received further education, post-secondary meant that they were in the small percentage of Malay speaking Singaporeans that had/will have graduated with a Diploma.

Pertaining to the matter of “ethnic capital” which Mellor (2010) mentions, it is noted that ethnicity indeed brings about favourable consequences for certain communities, but Shah (2007) also mentions that ethnic capital may not always be successful either.

During the interview, education was a prominent factor for the Chinese Singaporeans’ success and it was of utmost importance for them to excel; this ideology was indeed a norm for majority of the Chinese Singaporeans. In terms of relating ethnic capital and educational outcomes, the second generation were influenced by their parents or community members to achieve social mobility and better education. As for the Malay community however, one might regard ethnic capital not as advantageous as the common conception through the community was to provide just enough for their family and to live. However, Mellor (2010) also articulates the government “emphasised the benefits of bridging social networks as a route to social mobility.” (p. 76) Instead of bonding capital, the government opts for bridging capital which refers to “ties that connect heterogeneous groups, allowing people to ‘get ahead’” (Mellor 2010, p. 75). The concept then of bridging capital and Bourdieu’s theory on habitus could be recognised from DA and HF’s interviews where many a times, both DA and HF had mentioned that they had grown up being closer to the Chinese Singaporeans than Malays, it is also noted that they had ambitions of becoming successful and ensuring that they would not be perceived as ‘lazy’. This argument however could be expanded during further research into this matter as HF and DA are merely two individuals who speak for

themselves and are unlikely to share similar views and experiences with others in the community.

In the matter of the media, representation has always been of vital concern for the manner in which ethnicities and/or class are demonstrated to viewers as compared to how they are understood outside the media. “Furthermore, the existence of those representations is often seen as reinforcing the appropriateness and validity of them.” (Mills cite 2005, p. 7) Drawing inference from my findings and the interview results, one would also agree that stereotypes are affecting both the stereotyped and the viewers. The common effect being the subconscious acceptance and ingraining of material on the viewer that it immediately gets activated upon interaction which might cause unfortunate circumstances. Tan (2009) also remarks that stereotypes are “circulated and re-circulated” as the audience relates “pleasurably” (p. 124) to them and will therefore continue to remain a profit-making scheme.

In conclusion, Malays have historically been under-educated and did not have the capital which therefore caused the ethnic stereotypes to become a superstructure- an ideology that goes over a class structure. It is still unfair to conclude whether they have been held back by negative ideologies, the lack of capital or the lack of education. Despite discrimination, Malays in Singapore continue to be a tight-knit community that exude strong family values and an understanding nature that no two are the same albeit their fairly relaxed way of life. Nonetheless, through shared insights from the two Singaporean Malays, I am able to say that one can grow to become desensitised to negative ideologies, overcome ‘laziness’, pursue an education and emerge different from the negative stereotypical image of a Malay person in Singapore.

Appendix

Interview Questions

Profiling:

1. What is your current age?
2. What is your current occupation?
3. What are your hobbies?
4. (do you mind) How much do you earn a month? (Give a range?)/ students: Do you do any jobs on the side?
5. What is your highest formal qualifications? (PSLE, 'O'/'N' Level, Diploma, Degree etc)
6. What type of home do you live in? (HDB - if HDB, how many rooms, Landed, what kind of landed? Bungalow, Semi-D)

Personal Details:

1. Tell me about your family? What did your parents work as?
 - a. How many siblings? 2 What was the highest form of education they had/have? Both diploma What are their current occupations?
 - b. When you were growing up, did your parents have any expectations of what they wanted you to do? Did you receive any career advice? Have your ideas changed since you were in Secondary School?
 - c. What are your plans for the future? (Family, relationship, studies, career etc.)

Class & Ethnicity in Singapore:

1. What do you associate with being Singaporean Malay?
2. Was there ever a moment where you became aware that you were a Singaporean Malay?
 - a. Was there any experience that made you aware of your ethnicity?
3. How did you develop these impressions?
4. Have you ever been discriminated based on your race? Almost.
 - a. Do you think there is a lot of prejudice against Malay people? How do you feel about

that?

5. Do you know that Singapore is the most expensive city to live in? Do you also know that Singaporeans have been voted the happiest citizens in the Asia-Pacific region? Do you agree with these statements? Cost of living rising, pay not rising.
6. Do you think the class system in Singapore is apparent? Could you tell me of an experience that made you aware of your class position? Would you give yourself a class label? (Under-class, Working Class, Middle Class, Upper Class) Why would you say so?
7. From your perspective, would you say that Malays are generally in the working/under-class? Which race is predominantly found in Middle/Upper Class?
8. Why do you think Malays might be predominantly typed as the working/underclass?
 - a. Have you ever witnessed a race/ethnicity being stereotyped as a working/under-class/middle class in the media? (Facebook comment, YouTube video, newspaper article, MediaCorp shows)
9. Do you think these ethnic/racial stereotypes are different for different genders?
10. How did you find the experience of doing this interview? is there anything you would like to add?



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

STUDY TITLE

The Working/Under-Class in Singapore: A Closer Look at the Malay Community

INVITATION PARAGRAPH

You are being invited to take part in a qualitative study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The aim of the study is to understand the intersectionality of class and ethnicities in Singapore. I will be researching into specifically the working/under-class and why a specific ethnicity is often viewed as the lower-class. I would like to study the opinions of fellow Singaporeans and gather ones thoughts about the effects it might produce on not only the Malay community but the society as well, in terms of media portrayals. This study will be over a period of 2 months.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You have been invited to take part in this study as:

1. You are a Singaporean citizen
2. You are (either) a Malay (or) one of the principal races in Singapore.
3. You have grown up in Singapore and have sufficient knowledge in this topic and know the Singaporean culture fairly well.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participating in this interview is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason'.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IF I TAKE PART?

I will be asking simple background questions that will not require confidential information. I will be however seeking personal stories and genuine responses as that will greatly benefit my study. Each interview will be approximately 1 hour.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

You will be contributing knowledge to better social relations in Singapore in this short study.

WILL MY INFORMATION IN THIS STUDY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Simple facts about yourself will be disclosed in the final research study. However, private and confidential information will not be disclosed. If you would like me to anonymise or use pseudonyms, I would be happy to comply.

The Working/Under-class in Singapore: A Closer Look at the Malay Community

**Version no. 1
15 March 2017**



UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX

CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

PROJECT TITLE: The Working/Under-Class in Singapore: A Closer Look at the Malay Community

Project Approval Referece: _____

I agree to take part in the above University of Sussex research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- Be interviewed by the researcher
- Allow the interview to be photographed / video taped / audio taped
- Make myself available for a further interview should that be required

I understand that I have given my approval for my name and/or the name of my town/community, and / or the name of my workplace to be used in the final report of the project, and in further publications.

The following clauses should be included in all consent forms:

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

I believe that _____ (name) understands the above project and gives his/her consent voluntarily.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Address: _____

Date: _____

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