

In many places the question: “What is your race?” transgresses civic social boundaries, yet it seems Singaporeans must suffer these indignities everyday.

Interestingly, Singapore’s milieu of speculative fiction and fantasy writers offer a novel range of scenarios and ways of negotiating the city-state, with edited volumes including *Singa-Pura-Pura: Malay Speculative Fiction from Singapore* (2021) and *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction* (2013–18) showcasing regional issues and imaginaries.

Historian Morakot Meyer and scholar and translator Zhu Tingshu from Mahidol University propose ASEAN as a potential alternative regional identity, an acronym for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines founded in 1967.<sup>8</sup> They recount that “Southeast Asia” was a military term coined by the British during World War II. While it may have come to describe an “imagined community”, to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase, ASEAN is an economic reality. Others propose “Nusantara”, a Javanese word describing the Malay archipelago, that evokes the continuities and cultural routes that stretch out across present-day Indonesia and Malaysia, encompassing Singapore and the Cocos and Christmas Islands. It is also the name of the soon-to-be capital city of Indonesia

Thus, the Bureau senses an opportunity for platforms, organisations and spaces that entertain future scenarios, parallel universes and generally alternatives to stiff national narratives and stifling stereotypes. Aside from reading groups, techniques derived from forum theatre, drag, cos-play, live action roleplaying (LARPs) and formats such as interventions, raves and situations make space for disidentification and social experimentation. Performative modes imply that ideas do not remain as thought experiments, but are elaborated as they are embodied and felt out. By such means the Bureau proposes to discuss, deconstruct and playfully defuse the tensions defining the problems of race in Singapore; and so that the aspirational myth of a race-blind meritocracy may be enacted, rehearsed and collectively realised.

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<sup>8</sup> Meyer, M. & Tingshu, Z. (eds), 2017. *Multicultural ASEAN: Diversity in Identity, Language, Memory and Media*, Multicultural ASEAN Center Project, Mahidol University’s Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia.

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Conceived by Community & Education resident Sumugan Sivanesan, the Bureau of Race Neutrality is a participatory artwork, collective think tank and collaborative consultancy that seeks to divest from race as a category of difference.

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Cover image is lifted from a controversial advertising campaign for the E-Pay system, 2019, in which Singapore celebrity Dennis Chew performs caricatures of Singapore’s CMIO categories. The campaign sparked outrage for its portrayal of minorities by one of the Chinese majority, especially for its use of “brownface.”

# Bureau of Race Neutrality Singapore



## Racial Harmony

Race is often determined according to visible physical attributes such as skin colour, with factors including language, customs, citizenship and socio-economic status also contributing. Racism manifests when one racial group believes it has inherently superior traits to others. As a science, race has been debunked, nevertheless it persists as a social construct that is often deployed to divide, sort and govern populations.

Singapore has retained the racial categories inherited from the British, who defined the population racially to organise them occupationally according to stereotypes about their “inherent predispositions.”<sup>1</sup> In their first colonial census, 1871, the British identified 33 racial categories. These have since been streamlined into four broad groups: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others, predominantly Eurasian (CMIO). Singapore citizens and permanent residents are assigned a race upon registration determined according to their paternal lineage. A person is allowed to change their race twice: once before the age of 21 and once at or after the age of 21. Since 2011 Singaporeans can register as being of “double-barrel” race, reflecting the races of both parents eg Chinese-Indian. Double-barrel registrations are limited to two components, and for Government policies such as “mother tongue” language education and HDB housing allocations it is the first race that is taken into account.

According to state-endorsed narratives, Singapore’s sorting of its citizens into essentialised racial categories and their subsequent governance is to ensure social harmony.<sup>2</sup> Most often, the inter-communal frictions of the postcolonial period are cited as the reason, and in particular the 1964 “racial riots.”<sup>3</sup> Singaporean sociologist Laavanya Kathiravelu contests this logic:

[I]n the Singaporean case, the threat of racial riots has been magnified to the extent that it has become a national myth, enshrined in events like Racial Harmony Day (the first day of the 1964 riots), invoked in political speeches, and repeatedly re-told in museum exhibits. In effect, this threat is largely constructed, with little contemporary basis and relevance.<sup>4</sup>

Since independence, 1965, and throughout its development into a contemporary “global city” Singapore has maintained its population as a remarkably consistent composition of its racial categories. Recent figures place these at: 75% Chinese, 15% Malay, 7.5% Indian and 1.5% Others.<sup>5</sup> This ratio, as a national “recipe” for social harmony and economic success, is of great interest to the Bureau. How is it maintained? How accurate are these

statistics? How is its effectiveness measured? Why is it so important that these ratios remain the same?

Notably, Singapore has had experienced significant immigration over the last twenty years, from a population of around 4 million in 2004 expanding to around 6 million at present. According to 2023 figures, Singaporean citizens and permanent residents number 4.14 million alongside a non-resident 1.77 million people who make up approximately 30% of the workforce. While non-residents are not subject to these racial categories, many of them are racialised as foreign contracted workers and treated as interchangeable and dispensable labour with limited rights.

## Mixed-race/Fixed-race

Rather than look to the past to justify Singapore’s continued functionalisation of race, what if we look towards the future? Based on their research into Singapore’s evolving demographics, political scientist Chan Heng Chee and sociologist Sharon Siddique from the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities developed a suite of “personas” inhabiting Singapore in the year 2040.<sup>6</sup> These affirm aspirational narratives of future generations who are ethnically promiscuous, with globalised family networks and career paths. They predict Singapore will continue to enhance its workforce with selective immigration, as birth-rates are not sufficient to manage its expanding economy and aging population.

Already many young people in Singapore identify as “Third Culture Kids” (TCK). As children, TCKs’ parents frequently moved countries for work, so that their country of residence is not necessarily the one in which they were born and may differ from the one of which they are citizens. Indeed, TCKs might hold different passports to their parents or siblings. An article recently published in a youth magazine claims that 1 in 3 marriages in Singapore are transnational.<sup>7</sup> Such families may find that they are multiethnic, “mixed-race”, and that they do not readily fit into Singapore’s racial categories. For TCKs, race might seem to be mutable, contextual and as such, a marker of cosmopolitan sophistication. By contrast, being of fixed-race is like being ghettoised into a rigid identity, regurgitating out-moded social scripts.

Because the state enforces strict racial boundaries for governance, Singaporeans must shoehorn themselves into inflexible demarcators of difference when going about their day-to-day activities. For example, citizens have their race printed on their national identity cards and this information is required for seemingly unrelated tasks, such as opening a bank account. As one participant quipped in during a preliminary Bureau consultation, Singapore’s insistence on its racial categories “have made stereotypes into a way of life.”

1 Rocha, Z. L., 2011. “Multiplicity within Singularity: Racial Categorization and Recognizing ‘Mixed Race’ in Singapore,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 95–131.

2 Vasu, N. & Ahuja, J., 2018. *Multiracialism*, Straits Times Press & Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore.

3 See Cheng, A. L. H., 2001. “The Past in the Present: Memories of the 1964 ‘Racial Riots’ in Singapore,” *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 431–455; Vasu & Ahuja, 2018.

4 Kathiravelu, L., 2017. “Rethinking race: beyond the CMIO categorisations,” *New Naratif*, September.

5 National Population and Talent Division, “Population in Brief 2023.” <https://www.population.gov.sg>

6 Chan, H. C., & Siddique, S., 2019. *Singapore’s Multiculturalism: Evolving Diversity*, Routledge, London & New York.

7 Campus Magazine, 2020. “Home is Everywhere and Nowhere: Third Culture Kids (TCK)” <https://www.campus.sg/home-is-everywhere-and-nowhere-third-culture-kids-tck-campus-sg/>