Asia in Transition 1

Kwen Fee Lian *Editor*

Multiculturalism, Migration, and the Politics of Identity in Singapore

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Editor
Kwen Fee Lian
Institute of Asian Studies
Universiti Brunei Darussalam
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Brunei Darussalam

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Introduction

Kwen Fee Lian

The term 'multiculturalism' first appeared in the early 1970s in Canada and Australia soon after they abandoned immigration policies that favoured whites only. These young immigrant societies, Joppke and Lukes (1999) contend, officially professed multiculturalism as a political strategy to mediate the competing claims of indigenous minorities, recent Asian arrivals and other non-European immigrant groups, and core European immigrants. Official multiculturalism, they remarked, had added appeal to such postcolonial societies because they lacked independent nation-building myths and clear breaks with their colonial past. Since then multiculturalism has at least in Western societies been dominated by debate in the 1990s over the challenge it posed to the working of liberal democracy and its ramifications for citizenship. Much of these works have been informed by political theories in attempts to reconcile the contradictions between the rights of groups and the rights of individuals privileged by the liberal democratic tradition in Western societies.

Despite their obvious western origins, Kymlicka and He (2005) comments, these theories have rapidly diffused around the world, providing the vocabulary and conceptual apparatus for a global discourse of multiculturalism. In particular, the liberal discourse on multiculturalism was dominated by issues concerned with minority rights, human rights, and liberal democratic values in the same way as earlier movements for women's rights, gay rights, and racial desegregation had struck a chord with human rights advocates. This global discourse, Kymlicka remarked, is dominated by what he describes as the ideology of liberal multiculturalism. This internationalization of debates on human and minority rights has had two consequences. It resulted in countries around the world, including Asia, being judged by the standards of liberal multiculturalism but it also exerted an influence over scholars who wrote on multiculturalism.

K.F. Lian (✉)
Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei
e-mail: kwenfee.lian@ubd.edu.bn

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In one of the first attempts to bring together contributions on multiculturalism in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, Hefner (2001) in his introduction to The Politics of Multiculturalism, states, 'the sociology or anthropology of pluralism and democracy must be concerned, not merely with measuring a society's conformity to a checklist of liberal ideals, but with understanding the cultural and sociological circumstances that make different responses to the problem of pluralism and citizenship likely'. The volume and its contributions uncritically equate multiculturalism with pluralism and civil society. The contributors on Singapore, for example argue that economic growth, political stability, and expanding educational opportunities have resulted in a differentiated society, citing the theater community, voluntary welfare associations, women's associations, ethnic minorities, Chinese-educated intellectuals, gays, and civil society activists as social groups that constitute social pluralism. As Giovanni Sartori (Joppke 2004) points out, pluralism in the political context is not multiculturalism. Pluralism requires voluntary group memberships, multiple affiliations, and reciprocal recognition. Indeed a plural society is one in which differences are accepted and conflict is resolved through compromise and conciliation. These conditions do not exist in multicultural politics, as it revolves around involuntary and mutually exclusive statuses and tends to render recognition a one-sided act by the majority society alone. The contributors in Hefner (2001) have mistakenly conflated multiculturalism with pluralism. Yet both concepts are so obviously loaded that the failure to distinguish between the two invariably leads to debates over issues at cross purposes. More often than not academic discourse on multiculturalism is dominated by the underlying agenda of democratization and participation. While it is no less legitimate to frame debates over multiculturalism within libertarianism, the failure to address the former on its own terms leads to the obfuscation of what it means and how it works, that is empirical multiculturalism.

The same can be said about the most recent attempt in Multiculturalism in Asia (2005). While several scholars in this volume have drawn attention to the cultural and political contexts in which ethnic minorities have evolved in a range of South-east, South, and East Asian societies and their contemporary plight in post-colonial societies, their discussion has been loosely circumscribed and stalemated within the debate that has bedevilled political scientists of Asian societies since the 1960s, namely why constitutional democracies inherited from their colonial masters have been ineffective in managing the cultural diversity of plural societies. The global discourse of liberal multiculturalism, Kymlicka in his opening chapter of the collection states, has its origins in Western society. Yet the management of multicultural societies in Asia is judged within a discourse and standards that may not be appropriate to them. Multiculturalism in Asia was intended to redress this by addressing regional specificities. This ambitious project however falls short, what it did succeed is demonstrate that the range and diversity of the societies dealt with are so far apart that few lessons can be drawn to illuminate the conceptual or comparative understanding of so-called Asian multiculturalism. Like The Politics of Multiculturalism it fails to deal with multiculturalism in its own right and is subsumed within the discourse of liberal democracy. Perhaps the

implied notion of an Asian multiculturalism in the volume is misconceived in the first place, not unlike the debates over the efficacy of 'Asian values' in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Does this mean that it is not possible to conceptualize multiculturalism in any meaningful way? For a start Parekh (2006: 13), in reflecting on multiculturalism, suggests that we have to step out of the shadow of political liberalism:

> By definition, a multicultural society consists of several cultures or cultural communities with their own distinct systems of meaning and significance and views on man and the world. It cannot therefore be adequately theorized from within the conceptual framework of any particular political doctrine which, being embedded in, and structurally biased towards, a particular cultural perspective, cannot do justice to others. This is true of liberalism as of any other political doctrine. Liberalism is a substantive doctrine advocating a specific view of man, society, and the world and embedded in and giving rise to a distinct way of life. As such it represents a particular cultural perspective and cannot provide a broad and impartial enough framework to conceptualize other cultures or their relations with it.

An alternative to the liberal approach of privileging the individual in tackling the multiculturalism issue is suggested by Chua (2005) who takes the opposite view that in Asian societies such as Singapore, it is possible to make the case for privileging the group or community instead. The communitarian model of multiculturalism assumes that the individual is simultaneously a member of a larger social unit, to which he has obligations and responsibilities towards—whether this is the family, the religious or ethnic group ascribed by birth, or even a neighbourhood community. In Singapore ethnoracial groups have evolved in the colonial period as immigrant associations that have had a significant influence on people's lives, and it is through them that the colonial administration had been able to exercise indirect rule. This practice has been taken to a higher level by the postcolonial government after 1965 by exercising direct influence through a corporatist strategy that recognizes ethnoraces as units of governance for the purpose of policy formation and the delivery of public goods. The state assumes that group affiliation is the basis of society but acknowledges that such affiliations are multiple and layered. In the state's view the affiliations that matter are the family, ethnic or religious group, the neighbourhood community, and the nation. This hierarchy of communities, as Chua describes it, underpins communitarianism as conceived by him. Accordingly, multiculturalism is not incompatible with the communitarian polity. The challenge for the communitarian state, in contrast to the liberal state is not in mediating between the rights of individuals and the claims of collectives but in reconciling the conflicting demands multiple membership within the hierarchy of communities may impose on the individual.

In his discussion of how Western democracies have had to manage ethnocultural diversity in the last 30 to 40 years, Kymlicka and He (2005: 23–28) identify four important trends. First, minority nationalisms such as the Quebecois in Canada, and the Scots and Welsh in Britain and their nationalist aspirations are recognized as here to stay and must be accommodated by the central government.

Second, the rights of indigenous peoples, for example the Indians in Canada and the Maoris in New Zealand, are increasingly been recognized and redressed by the state. Third, immigrants who are admitted to countries for permanent settlement are eligible for citizenship. Fourth, drawing from Walzer 'metics' refer to asylum seekers and guest workers whom the state regard as temporary, but in reality have become long-term residents for economic reasons. The last two groups are most relevant to Singapore; immigrants communities are a colonial legacy and metics are the consequence of a government who believes that the local population has reached saturation and the only means to propel further economic growth is to actively seek out new migrants—some to stay, most as temporary workers. Although immigrant communities do not have the same claims as minority nationalisms and indigenous peoples, some are recognized as the founding 'races' or communities of Singapore; namely, the Chinese, Malays, and Indians. It is interesting to note that the influx of recent immigrants has come from traditional sources (China and India) and has contributed to social tension, but the resentment appears to be strongest between the established and the new immigrants of the same ethnoracial group rather than between the groups. Furthermore, the addition of new immigrants from non-traditional sources, both European and non-European particularly from South-east Asian countries, have given a different complexion to multiculturalism in Singapore as we understand it and raises new challenges for governance.

Academic discourse on multiculturalism in Singapore has been driven by the concerns of liberal democracy in Western societies in the last decade as this review has shown, for example multiculturalism is discussed in the same breath as social and political pluralism by recent scholars to the point that what it means and how it works are lost in translation. Multiculturalism became a public and intellectual issue from the 1980s in many Western societies that had experienced significant migration a decade earlier, an unprecedented movement of people from cultural backgrounds far removed from that of the host societies. The ethnocultural diversity precipitated by such migration posed a social and political challenge in these societies, and in the libertarian climate of the period scholars, opinion makers, and governments explored ways of accommodating differences to varying degrees. While multiculturalism in settler societies like Canada and Australia is entrenched as an identity option for society as a whole, European multiculturalisms have always been for immigrants only and less nationally rooted (Joppke 2004: 247). Several years into the twenty-first century however, Joppke argues, there has been a retreat from official multiculturalism in the West (ibid: 243–44). This is attributed to decline in public support, the recognition of inherent failures of such policies such as non-integration, and a more assertive liberal state in insisting on minimum obligations for immigrants.

Multiculturalism is a recent development in Western states and the Western dalliance with it, if Joppe is to be believed, has all but ended in a retreat. Indeed multiculturalism in these societies is skin-deep. To a large extent the multiculturalism initiative in Western societies was externally driven. It was primarily directed at immigrants and promoted by universal liberalism. However in many parts of Asia,

particularly in South-east Asia, people live and operate in essentially multicultural settings. Multiculturalism is historically embedded in these societies and states have had to manage this problem from the start.

Multicultural governance in Singapore, ubiquitously touted as multiracialism by the ruling Peoples' Action Party (PAP), has functioned as a pillar for Singapore's nation-building project since independence in 1965, whilst serving as the ideological premise for the party's political dominance. Although others have explored at length the sociological implication of the PAP's racialist approach towards multiculturalism, little attention has yet been devoted to conceptualizing its historical relation to the colonial construction of racial difference and inequality in Singapore society. Tham Dek Won (Chap. 3) argues that the key to uncovering this connection lies in focusing on the emergence of a distinct anti-colonial form of multiculturalism in the immediate post-war period, when decolonization was taking place. This anti-colonial multiculturalism articulated the local middle class' growing dissatisfaction with the colonially established colour bar, a cause appropriated and championed by a newly founded PAP from 1954 before it was eventually reformulated and fully incorporated into its state machinery post-independence. In shifting the sociological focus towards the anti-colonial origins of multicultural politics, Tham seeks to challenge prevailing approaches to the study of multiculturalism in Singapore by demonstrating the centrality of decolonization to its emergence and development. Such an exercise in turn sheds light on the ideological reworking accomplished by the postcolonial PAP-led government in its construction of what is now known as multiracialism.

Lian Kwen Fee (Chap. 2) identifies the critical contributions of Benjamin (1976) and Brown (1994) in the conceptualization of multiculturalism in Singapore. Examining multiculturalism as discourse, Benjamin (1976) distinguishes between official multiculturalism as articulated by the state and in the public sphere. Then there is multiculturalism as people understand it in their private and everyday lives. The congruence between the official articulation of multiculturalism as nation building, everyday reality, and as the basis of effective governance makes Singapore unique as a model for the practice of multiculturalism. Brown (1994), drawing on the concept of the corporatist state, argues that the government is able to co-opt and secure the support of various groups including the major ethnoracial communities by claiming the role of moral guardian and competent manager. In bestowing political recognition on the Chinese, Malays, and Indians and the ubiquitous Others, multiculturalism is institutionalized in the practice of governance—in political representation, bilingualism, and the management of minority religious affairs. The politics of the corporatist state is no less the *realpolitik* of multiculturalism. What is less well documented is how a particular interpretation and implementation of multiculturalism has impacted on various ethnic communities, particularly those of minority status, with both intended and unintended consequences. Hence **e**qually important is how recipients respond to official multiculturalism, in either accommodating or resisting it. The contributors to this volume will address these issues and update contemporary developments in the practice of multiculturalism in Singapore.

Making sense of 'empirical' multiculturalism inevitably draws us into the politics of identity or the so-called politics of representation and recognition. 'The word identity', Stokes (1997: 2) declares, 'is now deployed not only to organize our knowledge of certain kinds of contemporary political conflicts, but also to reframe and refine our knowledge of a past in which the term was never used.' The right to property in industrial capitalism has given way to the right to meaningful existence in post-industrial society (Cerulo 1997: 393). Identity politics are self-reflexive and oriented towards the expressive actions of collective members (Melucci, cf. Cerulo, ibid). It is the product of economic well-being, the consequence not of economic dislocation but cultural displacement (Bernstein 2005: 52). Hence the politics of identity goes beyond the contestation of institutional and material power, to include symbolic power (Stokes 1997: 6).

The nation-state constructs and represents identity to draw boundaries for the purpose of inclusion or exclusion. What is unique in Singapore is that the ruling elite's interpretation and practice of multiculturalism—equal recognition assiduously accorded to the culture, religion, and language of the founding races (Chinese, Malays, and Indians)—does not privilege even the dominant Chinese community. The effect is to depoliticize racial aspirations and demands. Such an ethnic-neutral corporatist state does not engage in constructing 'others' but in producing narratives which exaggerate and essentialize differences. In Singapore it is not so much an ethnic majority that defines the identity of others but ethnic minorities that negotiate and locate themselves within a state ideologically and politically committed to multiculturalism. Hence Hale's (1997: 568) reference to identity politics as 'collective sensibilities and actions that come from a particular location within society, in direct defiance of universal categories that tend to subsume, erase, or suppress this particularity' is appropriate here. The categories of Chinese, Malay, and Indian are 'universal' categories from the state's perspective, but there are communities that find themselves because of their particular location having to work around the state' construction of ethnic identities.

Furthermore, Hale (ibid: 580–81) continues, identity politics draws attention to political activity that goes beyond the conventional in two ways. One is that it questions the dichotomy between public and the non-political private and in my view, suggests the utility of dissolving such a distinction. The other is that strategy and tactics may be employed 'working at the interstices, finding the inevitable cracks and contradictions in the oppressor's (read state) identity, discourse, or institutional practice, and using them to the subaltern's advantage'—constituting a third space in politics. The discussions on Ceylon-Tamils and Tamil Muslims in this volume highlight their particularity and their attempts to work the 'third space'.

Multiculturalism in Singapore is noted for its practice of assigning rigid racialized identities to all members of the nation-state. Christopher Selvaraj (Chap. 4) argues that the intended and unintended consequences of this ascription of identity, as experienced by the various ethnic communities in Singapore, cannot be adequately understood without reference to colonial racialization. His discussion focuses on the minority Ceylon-Tamil community. Persistently racialized as

'Indian', first as part of the imperial colour bar and subsequently under the aegis of multiculturalism, the Ceylon-Tamil community has strongly reacted to its Tamilization by the postcolonial state. This chapter documents the formation of an exclusive and unified Ceylon-Tamil community in response to colonial racialization as 'Indian'. This community solidarity was oriented largely around the articulation of a distinct status-based ethnic identity, derived from holding superior educational and professional qualifications and respected occupations within the colonial economy, thereby establishing a respected position within colonial society relative to the rest of the local population. The expansion of education and the rise of meritocracy after independence diluted and undermined the exclusive status of the community. State intervention that sought to subsume the Ceylon-Tamil community under the multicultural category of 'Indian' (of which the South Indian Tamils were the majority) drew a negative reaction from the former. Partly because of the Ceylon-Tamil disdain for being associated with their South Indian co-ethnics and partly because of individualization, community cohesion was finally fractured. Organized expressions of vernacular ethnic identities were tolerated by the colonial state as long as they did not disrupt the imperial order. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, has been employed by the postcolonial state with the clear intention of integrating and incorporating the diverse ethnic communities into a new 'national' order. It is ironically the highly disciplinary nature of postcolonial state (multi)racialization, Selvaraj concludes, that is key to understanding the (un)intended fragmentation and disenfranchisement of minority ethnic communities in Singapore.

The corporatist politics of multiculturalism in Singapore in the 1980s has facilitated the ethnoracialization of Singaporeans and led to the revitalization of ethnicity. While the practice of multiculturalism may precipitate ethnic revitalization, the unintended consequence is social fragmentation within groups. By highlighting intra-ethnic differences between several Indian sub-communities, Anil Singh Sona (Chap. 5) reveals the complexity of relations within the heterogeneous Tamil Muslim community—who constitute the majority of Indian Muslims in Singapore. Being neither Malay nor Indian, Tamil Muslims in Singapore are marginalized through their location at the interstices between the 'Malay' and 'Indian' categories in the official CMIO quadratomy, finding themselves having to manage the dilemma. Before the rise of Malay ethnonationalism in Malaya in the 1920s, Arab and Indian Muslim leaders, encouraged by the colonial administration, claimed to represent the Malay community on account of their business and intellectual influence. The ethnogenesis of Malay identity subsequently caused much resentment towards these leaders and their communities; until today Arab and Indian Muslims are ambivalent within official multiculturalism where the state prioritizes Malayness. In post-independent Singapore, an increasingly corporatist and racial state sought to subsume Tamil Muslim identity through its cultural policies and MUIS, the Islamic Religious Council—established by the government to manage Muslim affairs. A notable initiative by MUIS was to establish an umbrella organization, the Indian Muslim Community Steering Committee (IMCSC), to unify the seventeen Tamil Muslim sub-communities. This has met with limited success and

resulted in further differences amongst Tamil Muslim leaders. Ironically, while the postcolonial government incorporated multiculturalism and relied on racialization in its nation-building project to integrate and incorporate the diverse ethnic communities, such corporatization and racialization have resulted in the fragmentation of the Tamil Muslim community through conflict in leadership and the marginalization of several of its smaller sub-communities.

These two chapters focus on how two minority communities have responded to the state practice of multiculturalism. On the other side of the coin identity politics, Stokes (1997: 6) points out, has its origins in the imposition of collective presentations. In reconstructing the 'other', the state engages in narratives that overstate commonalities and exaggerate differences, and ultimately essentializes. Usually it is the dominant group that will attempt to define the identity of the subordinate group but in Singapore the ethnic aspirations of the Chinese majority have been effectively interceded by the PAP through multiculturalism. The state, in fact, constructs all the founding ethnic groups as 'others' and racializes them. The construction of Malayness in Singapore is particularly significant because Chinese-Malay rivalry and antagonism have dominated the political history of Malaya during decolonization, the formation of Malaysia, and the separation of Singapore. Lian Kwen Fee and Narayanan Ganapathy (Chap. 6) identify key historical and political moments which have been critical to the racialization of the Malays and the construction of 'Malayness' in Singapore. It began with the colonial discourse of race in Malaya: framed in Social Darwinist terms, the Malays were measured by their economic capacity relative to the Chinese and Indians. Following religious and racial violence in the early 1950s and 1960s the Malays were perceived as a political and security threat, which the PAP government was intent on neutralizing. After separation and independence in 1965 the government dedicated itself single mindedly to economic progress and Malayness was once again drawn into economic discourse. By the late 1980s a self-confident government challenged the Malays to identify themselves as Singaporeans through multiculturalism to head off their politicization. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Malayness was thrust into the global stage by the association of Islam with international terrorism. What this chapter illustrates is the relevance of bringing in state discourse in making sense of Malay identity politics.

The contributions referred to so far deal with multiculturalism as conceived by the PAP government in the 1970s and evolved over the next 30 years. They are premised on the state ascription of the population and the application of categorical identity embodied in CMIO. The population has become more diverse over the last 15 years both within the major ethnoracial communities as well as the new migrants who have settled in Singapore in significant numbers as a consequence of globalization and migration. In the latest figures released by the Department of Statistics in 2009, there are close to 5 million people living here. Over half a million are permanent residents and 1.25 million are foreign workers, half of whom are described as transient workers doing the jobs that local Singaporeans avoid. However, the ethnic composition of the stable population

(citizens and PRs) has remained stable, with a slight decrease in Chinese and Malays but an increase of Indians. How will this impact on the model of multiculturalism as conceived by the founders of Singapore in the 1960s? The last two chapters address this issue.

Since Singapore was unceremoniously dumped from Malaysia in 1965, lacking natural resources, and faced with an uncertain economic future the PAP leaders believed early on that the only way out is to nurture its human capital locally and attract others from overseas. Mabel Seah (Chap. 7) focused on one important source of highly skilled and professional migrants critical to a financial and knowledge economy, Indian 'expat' workers. A nuanced understanding of such expatriates in Singapore questions the accepted model of CMIO multiculturalism. First, there appears to be a fundamental clash between transnational professionals who engage in multiple cross-border movements and the CMIO groupings which sustain the idea of being situated within one's ethnoracial origins. Hence, while the CMIO approach to multiculturalism focuses on static identities, mobility is a core feature of the identities of transnational professionals. What appear to be contradictory orientations, Seah proposes, need to be reconciled for a better understanding of migrant integration. Second, even if one assumes that these Indian professionals identify with the CMIO model because they are after all 'Indians', multiculturalism as it is practiced in Singapore is challenged by intra-ethnic tensions precipitated by the arrival of such new migrants. Local Indians who have been in Singapore for at least two generations resent the presence of recent Indian migrants who hold positions in the knowledge, IT, and professional occupations—and pose a challenge to their status. Seah suggests that the challenge in this age of migration—of increasingly mobile populations—is to focus on the development of place attachments rather than on efforts at moulding new migrants into the existing mosaic of multiculturalism.

Transnational migrants pose a challenge to multiculturalism for the latter, as many of the contributors have highlighted, is premised on the bounded notion of nation-society-culture-identity. Within this container model of the nation the practice of multiculturalism reinforces ethnic essentialism. The rise of transnational migrants in the age of global migration appears to be a potential threat to the bounded nation. Lim Jialing's work (Chap. 8) on PRC student migrants in Singapore, increasing in numbers and significance because of the importance of China's economy to the island, reveals that these students—who do not really share ethnic affinity with and is resented by Chinese Singaporeans—manage the situation by actively utilizing and mobilizing theirnationality in cross-border interactions. Identifying themselves as PRC nationals rather than ethnic Chinese, they selectively represent Singaporean identity by playing up meritocracy, efficiency, and orderliness as traits that should be emulated and downplaying the significance of filial piety which they believe Chinese Singaporeans have moved away from. In constructing their cultural identities in Singapore they stress their PRC national identity because they feel Singaporeans respond to this more positively. In the process nationality is essentialised for transnational life.