Sticky Raciolinguistics

Vincent Pak, *National University of Singapore, Singapore and King's College London, UK*
Mie Hiramoto, *National University of Singapore, Singapore*

ABSTRACT
Singapore's postcolonial multiracialism is held together by state policies that categorize its citizens into four major race groups ordered according to their size: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others. This postcolonial framework—with its colonial logics of statal race management and categorization—governs social life in Singapore. Recent race talk has birthed a contentious term—*Chinese privilege*—that has found its way into common parlance and is now deployed as an explanation for overt and covert racism. "Chinese privilege," continuous from White privilege, may be understood as the belief that sociopolitical advantages are accorded to those racialized as Chinese. We take cues from Ahmed's (2004b) notion of "stickiness" to consider how (1) Western ideas of racialized power rooted in Whiteness are reconfigured in postcolonial Singapore and (2) the processes of racialization and racial categorization are uncritically reproduced in invocations of Chinese privilege as censure and confessional. We interpret the notion of *sticky raciolinguistics* as the inextricability of race-language conaturalization from antecedent centers of White-settler colonial thought.

Separation from Malaysia in 1965 allowed Singapore to become independent as a sovereign state. At this time, the population was dominated by the Chinese community despite the status of the Malays as Indigenous people; the region's long-standing trading hub history had already complicated the Indigenous and immigrant-to-settler ratio since the early 1900s. It was clear that race was a crucial factor in the transition to independence—tensions between the Chinese and Malay populations led to racial riots in 1964 that cemented Singapore's commitments to public and political multiracialism and multiculturalism, which were tenets subscribed to by Lee Kuan Yew, the state's

Contact Vincent Pak at Blk AS5, 7 Arts Link, FASS, NUS, Singapore 117570 (pak@u.nus.edu); Mie Hiramoto at Blk AS5, 7 Arts Link, FASS, NUS, Singapore 117570 (ellmh@nus.edu.sg).

We thank Joshua Babcock and Jay Ke-Schutte for their incredible efforts as organizers and guest editors of this special issue, as well as Pavan Mano, Rebecca Starr, Hsi-Yao Su, Andrew Wong, Qing Zhang, and the NUS EL Sociolinguistics Reading Group for offering us incisive suggestions to better this article.

Signs and Society, volume 11, number 1, winter 2023.
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https://doi.org/10.1086/722622

https://doi.org/10.1086/722622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

founding prime minister. Mandating that the three main races—Chinese, Malay, and Indian—must maintain harmonious coexistence, Lee's government sought to incorporate multiracialism into the laws and policies of the land (Cheng 2001), including a framework of race management that persists today. The CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others) framework (Goh et al. 2009) guides virtually all forms of interracial relations in Singapore, in accordance with the demographic proportions of each race. Modeling it after the representative racial distribution at the time of independence, the state formulated a CMIO schema from the beginning: 75 percent Chinese, 15 percent Malay, and 8 percent Indian Singaporeans contributed to a balance of the racial groups (Parliament of Singapore 1989). As of today, the majority Chinese population makes up roughly 74.2 percent of residents, while the Malay and Indian communities constitute about 13.7 percent and 8.9 percent of the overall population, respectively (Singstat 2021). Those classified as Others—races and nationalities apart from the three main groups—stand at 3.2 percent. It is unambiguous that the state's formulaic management of race—and its people as essentially different, racialized citizens—is in tandem with the racial harmony policy (Frost 2021) or what Goh and Holden (2009) call "racial governmentality." As a result, these numbers have not deviated significantly since the emergence of Singapore as an independent nation.

As one of the many legacies of the British empire's colonial ventures, the CMIO framework today is both an organizing principle of governance for the state, and a central ideology for Singaporeans when thinking along the lines of identity—what PuruShotam (1997, 33) observes as "a commonly used aspect of Everyday Life knowledge." There has been little imagination of race beyond CMIO. The state discourse has consistently been that it is in their best interest to guarantee equal rights and treatment for the different racial groups in multiracial Singapore, and to maintain the relative population of each racial portion of CMIO (Yeoh and Chang 2001, 73; Poon 2009, 73). Parliamentary (Parliament of Singapore 1989; see also Frost 2021, 3742) and public debates have challenged the usefulness of the CMIO framework (see Chua 2021 for an example), echoing academic discussions that critique Singapore's brand of multiracialism as "one of the nation's founding myths" (Benjamin 1976, 116; see also Rocha and Yeoh 2021). Defending the CMIO system, Law and Home Affairs Minister Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam argued in 2019 that the "CMIO classification—by being frank, honest, direct and recognizing that we are different—has actually helped build trust" (Tay 2019); the government continues to uphold CMIO as a classificatory tool that maintains harmonious relations between the

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races, despite recent racial disputes that have brought into question its potency. This has been discussed by Pak (2023) in a detailed case study concerning the 2019 brownface controversy over a government-sanctioned advertisement (Lee 2019) and the subsequent rearticulation of an antiracist rap video as racist (Jaipragas 2019). The backlash became a serious concern, and the state faced calls for intervention to pacify its citizens and to stronghold its racial governmentality. In his response to the rap video about racism in Singapore, Shanmugam lobbed the following accusation in 2019: "If everyone starts discussing race and religion the way they did it, then you will in fact get more racism, not less. That is our key concern. They have used the language of resistance in America, but we thankfully are in a very different situation."[1] Notwithstanding his ideological assumption that race talk is symptomatic and productive of racism, his metapragmatic observation—that a rap video about racism constitutes "the language of resistance in America"—evinces at least two threads about race in Singapore: (1) that the antiracist goals of hip hop culture have flowed from American shores to Singaporean ones; and (2) that the Singaporean government explicitly rejects such flows. Antiracist discourse in Singapore that is inspired by US race politics is thought to result in "more racism, not less" and is thus construed by the Singaporean state as racist in itself (Pak 2023).

At this juncture, we make clear the theoretical thrust and focus of this article: we are invested in these antiracist flows—embraced by some and refused by others—as evidence of how ideas about language, race, (anti)racism, and racialization have accrued cultural value in their travels and how their materializations in postcolonial Singapore carry in them logics of race-language conaturalization emanating from centers of White-settler colonial thought. In other words, it is becoming increasingly clear that construals of race are inextricable from the colonial logics that structured and continue to structure race in North American and European societies. The retention of such logics in postcolonial Singapore is not exclusive to state-ordained laws and policies but is also, and perhaps more pertinently, located in the (anti)racist praxis of Singaporeans that cannot seem to escape the categorizing imperative of White-settler race thought. In Shanmugam's quote above, we become privy to the ways in which Singaporeans have looked to and drawn from a contingently American context to counter racism in a society with no colonial links to the United States, and to how the Singapore government warns against such a practice while emblematizing the domestic model of race management as a situation to be thankful

1. Channel News Asia interview with Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam, August 4, 2019.

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for. In many ways, the race-language link—what Rosa and Flores (2017) call "raciolinguistic ideologies"—is naturalized and reproduced across space and time, buttressed by colonial logics that continue to govern the modes in which we think of and relate to ideologies of race. This essay treats the persistent, naturalized coupling of race and language as the focal point of its intervention. The crux of Rosa and Flores's (2017, 622) work is concerned with "the continued rearticulation of colonial distinctions between Europeanness and non-Europeanness—and, by extension, whiteness and nonwhiteness"; in our own project, we are equally interested in the legacies and permutations of coloniality that persist in geographies outside of White-settler centers. Despite Singapore's status as a British postcolony, its activists demonstrably draw from and refract US-centric race politics in their articulations of antiracism, inviting local politicians to warn against the influence of American culture on Singaporean race talk (Ang 2020). Inescapable are the colonial logics that insist and thrive on racial categorization as a mode of governance, at the level of both the state and its people. Following this introduction, we offer insight into Singapore's history with race and race management before analyzing selected social media examples that invoke Chinese privilege (for more local issues, see Lazar [2022]). We then discuss and conclude our findings by explicitly theorizing sticky raciolinguistics.

Chinese Privilege as (Anti)racist Talk

We are concerned, in this article, with the traces of coloniality extant in a recent development of Singaporean race politics—colloquially recognized as "Chinese privilege"—and its genealogy as a hermeneutics of racial hierarchy in Singapore. Chinese privilege is generally considered to be the societal privileges that benefit the *C* of the CMIO framework over those of other races. Sangeetha Thanapal, a Singaporean social critic who is credited with coining the expression, states the following in an interview: "By virtue of being Chinese in Singapore, you start life at a higher place compared to minorities" (Tan 2017). The term was used by activists as a concept that sought to explain the discriminatory experiences of minority races and call out the advantages enjoyed by those racialized as Chinese. These include microaggressions, overt racism, preferences for Mandarin-speaking employees, and educational policies that favored English-Mandarin bilingualism (Sai 2021). Shortly after Thanapal became outspoken about the idea of Chinese privilege, she took it further by averring on her social media platforms that Singapore was a "Chinese supremacist state" and received a stern warning from the Singapore police for "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion or race" under the racial and

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religious harmony law (Yan 2019). We therefore understand Chinese privilege in this article as continuous from the concept of White privilege (McIntosh 1989), and our intervention lies in disambiguating the multifarious materializations of Chinese privilege as a locally developed sign with accruing meanings and value associations; it is recognizable as an extension of ideas on racial power dynamics found in colonial White-settler contexts. Moreover, we argue that explicating the robust nature of Chinese privilege owes to the Bakhtinian conceptualization of dialogical function of language, suggesting that Chinese privilege only makes sense as a sign used in discursive practices within contemporary Singaporean society.

In most cases, the (counter)sentiment regarding Chinese dominance is wielded as an antiracist tool; Chinese privilege is invoked in interpersonal and national conversations on race that surround the dominance of the Chinese race over the minoritized Malay and Indian populations, often spotlighting the advantages and assets that accompany those racialized as Chinese. If such an observation seems familiar, it probably is—McIntosh's (1989) highly influential essay has identified a nonexhaustive list of effects of being White in the United States that arguably could be repurposed in the context of Singapore. Glimmers of Western ideologies on race present in interpretations of Chinese privilege are apparent, even if it is understood and deployed differently from White privilege; Chineseness in Singapore is not understood as an assumable subject position that can be occupied by non-Chinese individuals, while Whiteness is locatable within a hierarchy of privilege.[2] We therefore draw on what critical theorist Sara Ahmed (2004b) calls *stickiness*—"*an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*" (90)—to suggest the notion of *sticky raciolinguistics* to theorize the reproduction of racialization and racial categorization in the deployment of Chinese privilege in discourses of race. By trying to understand the complex internal mechanisms of Chinese privilege beyond local epistemologies of race, we discuss a semiotics of racial governmentality and its distortions. As a complete sign on its own, Chinese privilege carries with it preceding meanings and ideologies that have made impressions on it; its usage precisely hinges on already established ideas on racial hierarchization in the West. This is what makes raciolinguistic ideologies in Singapore sticky—they refuse, and are unable, to shed the imperatives of racial categorization from colonial societies before, enacting discursive practices in "emotional publics" (Ahmed 2004b, 19) that are "simultaneously constituted

2. We thank Joshua Babcock for this insight.

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discursively, materially, and affectively" (Bucholtz 2019, 488). Even if its intentions are originally antiracist, it currently stands as an ineffective tool of antiracism that must racialize and categorise. Charges of someone having Chinese privilege must hence first presume that privilege resides in "Chinese" bodies, that there is an ontology to being Chinese, before it can serve its antiracist purpose. Evidently, then, this teleological perspective on Chinese privilege necessitates a degree of racialization that would be antithetical to its intention as a critique of racial hierarchization. By examining invocations of Chinese privilege in Singaporean race talk on social media, we want to make sense of the local reconfigurations of Western ideas on racialized power in a postcolonial society like Singapore, and consider how Chinese privilege, while intended as antiracist critique, ultimately maintains the processes of racialization and racial categorization that are cognized in colonial logics.

The academic work on Chinese privilege specifically as a concept is, at present, limited to two articles that are in conversation with each other. Zainal and Abdullah (2021) first sought to examine how Chinese privilege can be used to analyze Singaporean politics and parliamentary activity, arguing that Singapore's dominant People's Action Party (PAP) does sustain race-based privilege in its operations. A rejoinder was then published by Goh and Chong (2022, 631) that was critical of Zainal and Abdullah's deployment of the "under-specified and decontextualised" concept. Despite their points of contention, both articles converge on the (non)existence and the (non)utility of Chinese privilege in academic discussions—this discourse is similarly observed in online spheres mainly deliberated by the general public. We do not seek to further this debate. As Babcock (2022, 333) observes, this brand of privilege "does not emanate from ethno-racial personhood, nor from demographic majority-status, but rather coconstitutes both as conditions of and justification for privilege"; we are invested in demystifying the assumption that Chinese privilege has an organic origin in bodies racialized as Chinese. Our critique also does not take aim at the existence of the disadvantages and racism that accompany the experiences of racial minorities in Singapore; neither are we debating the ways in which those racialized as Chinese can and do benefit from belonging to the majority. Rather, our article is concerned with the uncritical understanding of Chinese privilege as a value-laden sign that not only reproduces the processes of racialization and racial categorization in its deployment but also fails to effectively serve as an antiracist tool. The latter, in particular, can be observed in the distracting national debates on its existence and efficacy that occlude the crux of its original message—that multiracial Singapore has a race problem.

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Sticky Affect as Signs

Affect as a scholarly concept has been widely discussed in the humanities and social sciences, especially in philosophy. Contemporary analyses of affect have been theorized in a range of fields, including psychology, neuroscience, literary studies, gender studies, medicine, and communications, to account for people's emotional experiences surrounding their mental well-being, attitudes, or mindsets. As demonstrated in Besnier's (1990) comprehensive survey, the conception of affect has long been integrated in linguistic anthropology. In fact, the mid 1990s became a pivotal point of the study of affect as a number of scholars in the social sciences and humanities set off to investigate affect as a way of apprehending various human experiences (e.g., Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Massumi 1996). This movement is known as the affective turn (see Pratt 2023), which was further followed by Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) who introduced the idea of affective economies. Ahmed states that affective value circulates through social relations, and that affect flows together with certain cultural figures or stereotypes; affect toward such cultural stereotypes or figures can be influenced by an individual's worldview. Today, sociopolitical research in linguistic anthropology as well as sociolinguistics are also employing affect as a framework to discuss how certain discursive practices are materialized by (emotional) publics.[3]

We have discussed how processes of racial categorization not only are at work at the state level but also permeate the everyday practices and behaviors of the citizens. This observable "stickiness"—the semiotic ability to pick up and carry meanings and value—is delineated in Ahmed's (2004b) work on affect, where she discusses sign making in hate speech: "signs become sticky through repetition; if a word is used in a certain way, again and again, then that 'use' *becomes* intrinsic" (91). Here, repetitions occur in the discursive practices of Singaporeans, where the various invocations of Chinese privilege carry in them differing understandings of race that are ultimately premised on racialization and racial categorization. In particular, we are interested in understanding what kinds of ideologies accompany the invocation of Chinese privilege as a sticky sign, which not only evinces the underlying racial tension among citizens but also evokes negative emotions. Chinese privilege has earned a reputation as disruptive discourse against the racial harmony ideal mandated by the state, and it is certainly not accepted within state discourse. Beyond the state's response to the aforementioned rap video in 2019 are other ministerial statements that

3. See, e.g., Wee (2016); Wong (2016); Borba (2019); Bucholtz (2019); Motschenbacher (2020); Kosse (2022).

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commit to safeguarding racial management, including Finance Minister Lawrence Wong's speech on multiracialism, highlighting that "the Chinese community in Singapore is not monolithic" and that Chinese Singaporeans do not necessarily feel privileged, although "there may well be biases or blind spots that the Chinese community should become aware of and to rectify" (Yuen 2021). The state repeatedly utilizes public speeches to unstick the negative affective and discursive connections between the CMIO framework and racial harmony. This can be understood as the state's institutionalized response toward any hint of transgression when it comes to racial matters, which is inherently (already) "sticky" given the racial tensions in the past. While the state's treatment of Chinese privilege seems rather uniform and steady, institutional logics wherein public voices are located are rather complicated, or sticky, as the forms of resistance against Chinese privilege are not straightforward.

Returning to Ahmed's point, she elaborates that meanings attributed to a particular sign can be further connected to another "sign through past forms of association. . . . The association between words that generates meanings is concealed: it is this concealment of such associations that allows signs to accumulate value" (Ahmed 2004b, 92). This suggests then that CMIO ideologies have a sticky affect, since their representative meanings allow for a layering of other interpretations based on different cultural discourses, proving that there exists a powerful core of Chinese-centric essentialism being reproduced in racial discourse. Ahmed (2004b, 91) also states that "stickiness involves a form of relationality, or a 'withness,' in which the elements that are 'with' get bound together." In line with this rationale, signs like the CMIO categories can become sticky; the idea of "withness" is contingent on individuals' orientations to specific objects/ideas, such as the racial categories associated with their affective history and experience. In this article, drawing on the data taken from publicly available online sources, we treat the idea of Chinese privilege as a discursive object, and consider it as a sticky sign. For Ahmed, objects become sticky *in* and *with* time, as they become affect laden through picking up traces of layers of meaning-making processes through repetition. Building on Ahmed's ideas of stickiness, Keating (2021, 76) argues that the "stickiness of the affect depends on the non-neutral histories of the proximate subjects," meaning that power relationships in history and human experience come into picture through their cultural sense-making frameworks.

Analysis

We present data taken from publicly available social media content with the search expression "Chinese privilege." With selected representative examples

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of the conaturalization of race and language in Singapore, we illustrate how invocations of Chinese privilege embodies the aforenoted sticky affects when presented as a sign in the dialogical (and discursive) practices of various publics.

It is useful to note that there is a local cultural sense-making framework that is germane to understanding the conaturalization of race and language—namely, the state's bilingual policy. In addition to English, the state's bilingual policy, commonly known as the Mother Tongue Language Policy, mandates Mandarin language education for Chinese, Malay for Malay, and Tamil for Indian Singaporean children (see Sim 2019; Starr and Hiramoto 2019; Starr and Kapoor 2021). Likewise, all of these languages are recognized as official languages by the state.

Chinese Privilege as Censure

By censure, we mean invocations of Chinese privilege that are intended to criticize or call out behaviors and practices of Singaporeans that may be codified as racist or discriminatory, as well as instances where certain Singaporeans enjoy advantages not accorded to others. In both groups, these Singaporeans tend to be racialized as Chinese. Those who deliver the censure, however, can belong to any racial category, though this is not significant in our analysis. Consider a tweet that criticizes the use of Mandarin in the workplace (fig. 1); note that all identifying data are redacted in this article. The tweet poses a rhetorical question that challenges the use of Mandarin by Chinese Singaporeans at workplaces that are coded as linguistically neutral, where the lingua franca—what the author also calls an "office language"—must be English. Singaporean workplaces must be multicultural and multiracial but seemingly cannot be multilingual. As the designated working language, English serves not only as a common language



Figure 1. Tweet censuring the use of Mandarin in the workplace (July 25, 2016)

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that is assumed to be intelligible by all interlocutors in any given Singaporean workspace but also as a sign that is not yoked to any racial category. In other words, it functions as a "neutral" language precisely because it is spoken by all Singaporeans and does not carry with it any cultural value. In his investigation of the semiotics of language ideologies in Singapore, Wee (2006) examines the use of the conduit metaphor in national language campaigns, where it "conceptualizes communication as the transmission of linguistic forms . . . understood as containers for ideas" (350). He argues that in ministerial speeches for the Speak Mandarin Campaigns, using the conduit metaphor has implications for how the mother tongue languages—Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil—are perceived as carriers of the cultural values associated with each racial category. Framing Mandarin with the conduit metaphor (Reddy 1993) necessarily presumes a raciolinguistic relationship; for a language to convey values of a particular culture, it must first be naturalized with its assigned race (see also Bokhorst-Heng 1999). In the case of Singapore, the bilingual language policy was instantiated precisely to ensure that Singaporeans, while benefiting from being able to communicate in English as a globalized language of commerce, will remain close to their cultural roots as racialized citizens. Starr and Hiramoto (2019, 3) critically observe that one's mother tongue is "linked to some aspect of [the citizens'] own racial or ethnic identity." In order for this language ideology to hold true, race and language must first be coupled.

Returning to the use of Mandarin in Singaporean workplaces, we see how its perception as "rude and exclusionary" (fig. 1), and therefore an instance of Chinese privilege, becomes meaningful as censure through two assumptions: first, that Mandarin, as a language associated with the dominant race, must bear hegemonic status in relation to the other two mother tongues; second, that those not racialized as Chinese are concomitantly incapable of understanding Mandarin. It becomes observable in this example how Chinese privilege as censure reifies the same logics of racialization and racial categorization adopted by the state in the Speak Mandarin Campaigns. At both the state and personal level, race and language are treated as co-constitutive elements that inform each other. The issue is then further complicated by the racial hierarchization of language, where the oblivious use of Mandarin in Singaporean workplaces is interpreted as a form of privilege accorded to those who can speak and understand the language. Even if it is entirely possible for some of those belonging to Malay or Indian communities to be able to communicate in Mandarin, such exceptions have to be suspended for accusations of having Chinese privilege to work as censure. The Chinese-Mandarin coupling is then emblematized as the core of Chinese privilege, and is inextricable. We see similar logics in the post shown in figure 2.

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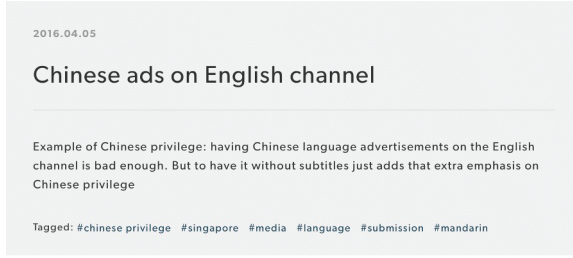


Figure 2. Tumblr post censuring the airing of Mandarin ads on English TV channels under the subthread "This is Singaporean Chinese Privilege" (April 5, 2016).

Free-to-air television channels have been catering to a multiracial and multilingual public, with Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil language channels alongside several English-language ones. As of 2022, there are two English and Mandarin language channels for free-to-air television and one Malay and one Tamil language channel. The author of this post cites the airing of Mandarin advertisements on English language channels as an instance of Chinese privilege, which is then exacerbated when these advertisements are not subtitled. Here, non-English television channels are treated as repositories of monolingualism that speak to specific races in silo, rather than the freely accessible mediums of multilingualism and multiculturalism that they are. Instead, English language channels are defended as linguistically neutral arenas that cannot be encroached upon by other racialized languages; doing so, especially by a hegemon like Mandarin, becomes an issue of racialized privilege.[4] Unintelligible telecommunicability is therefore cited as an example of Chinese privilege, even in the absence of racialized interlocutors. Such invocations of Chinese privilege as censure rests on the compulsory and circular coupling of race and language—that Mandarin is privileged because of the dominant Chinese community, and the Chinese community is privileged because Mandarin is given special treatment—which renders them inextricable from each other.

The final example of Chinese privilege being invoked to/as censure arrives as a response to a scholarship programme offered by the Ministry of Education to students at the secondary school level. The Regional Studies Programme (RSP) is an extracurricular option for exceptional secondary school students who wish

4. We note here that despite Singapore's bilingual language policy, the specific permutation of languages that one speaks is still deeply entwined with one's racial category, so much so that it resembles an aggrandisement of monolingualism. That is, one's racialized, non-English mother tongue is fiercely defended as belonging only to its assigned racial category.

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to learn Malay (Bahasa Melayu) or Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia),[5] with the requirement that it must be their third language (see https://www.moe.gov.sg/financial-matters/awards-scholarships/programme-scholarships). No further specifications are listed, which means eligible students may belong to any racial category as long as they have no prior knowledge of Malay or Indonesian. This program was consequently the target of the tweet depicted in figure 3. The view of language as possessing cultural capital has long been identified by Bourdieu (1991) and others,[6] where certain (varieties of) languages can accrue value in the linguistic marketplace and thereby become resources to tap on to engage in a form of linguistic commerce. Wee (2003) fashions such a line of thought into what he calls *linguistic instrumentalism*—using language to succeed economically—that draws attention to the ways in which language policies can elevate the status of certain languages and, consequently, devalue others. The RSP, presumably named and designed to reflect the growing need to learn about the countries geopolitically proximal to Singapore, would thus seem to value the promotion of Malay as a crucial point of entry to such an academic project. Rather than celebrating the introduction of the RSP, the author of the tweet took issue with the treatment of the Malay language in such a way, censuring the programme as using the Malay language as an "accessory." The metaphor understands language as an accessory that one can wear or remove when desired, underscoring its utility as cultural capital rather than communicative resource. The shared meanings between the accessory metaphor and the valuation of languages are not lost on us; it is entirely possible to treat certain languages as carrying some form of aesthetic value that can "beautify" someone. To be beautiful, then, is to be multilingual, but even this beauty is contingent on the racialized body that inhabits it. At its core, the valuation of language is purely ideological, and can be typified into sociocultural categories (language as beauty, as mobility, as intelligence). Yet the invocation of Chinese privilege in this example is demonstrably raciolinguistic—the author immediately draws links between the dominant Chinese population and the instituting of the RSP, even if the program is generally targeted at students who do not speak Malay. In the tweet, the personal deictics *our* and *your* recruit and racialize the speaker as Malay and the addressee of the censure as Chinese, despite no mention of Mandarin or the Chinese population in the RSP brief. Again, for this invocation of Chinese privilege to work as censure, it must racialize and categorize Singaporeans and assign

5. Malay and Indonesian are closely related languages belonging to the Austronesian language family. While they are said to be largely mutually intelligible, the main distinctions are drawn by the geopolitical divisions.

6. See, e.g., Heller (1992); Cameron (2000); Baynham and Prinsloo (2001); Park (2009).

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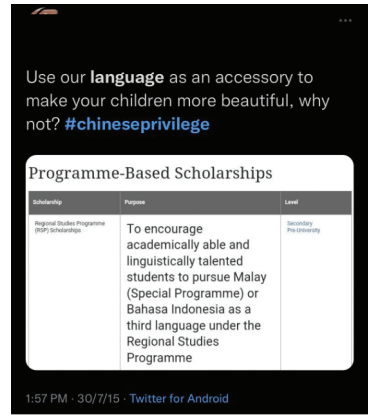


Figure 3. Tweet censuring the Regional Studies Programme (July 30, 2015)

them their designated languages. Any deviation invites censure. Racialized privilege, in this case, is being rewarded academically and financially for picking up the Malay language, while existing speakers of Malay are not, except that the beneficiary of the RSP is automatically assumed to be, and racialized as, Chinese.

Chinese Privilege as Confessional

We begin this section by asking Ahmed's (2006, 107) question: "What does it mean for a subject or institution to posit itself as being racist?" Invocations of Chinese privilege arrive, in most part, as censure, but they can also materialize as confessionals (Goh and Chong 2022). Whether Chinese privilege is invoked as censure or confessional is dependent on who the speaker is; we have shown in the previous section that censures are most likely to be produced by non-Chinese individuals, but confessionals—as admissions of guilt, complicity, and privilege—are uttered by those racialized as Chinese. Ahmed's (2006) inquiry stems from her examination of institutional speech acts that position the speaker as being in acknowledgment of the existence of racism yet ultimately fails to be in service of antiracism. Therein lies the failure of such speech acts—what Ahmed (2006) calls "nonperformatives"—in such admissions: they "do not do what they say: they do not, as it were, commit a person, organization, or state to an action" (104). Observable in Singaporean race talk are such confessionals that attempt to deploy Chinese privilege as a sign of antiracism. Singaporeans belonging to the Chinese population confess, and are asked to confess, their privilege in enjoying the advantages accorded to them. Figure 4 illustrates this.

Many debates surrounding Chinese privilege regrettably do not incise the workings of its operations; rather, race talk is encumbered by arguing whether

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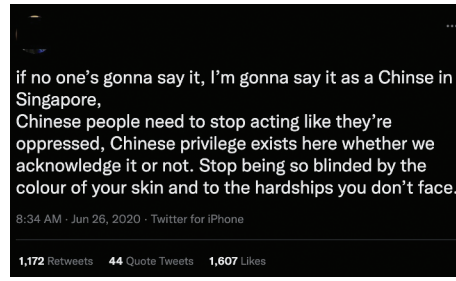


Figure 4. Tweet confessing Chinese privilege (June 26, 2020)

or not Chinese privilege exists in Singapore. A significant aspect of Chinese privilege confessionals, then, is the requirement of an admission that it is present in Singaporean society. In figure 4, the author, who self-identifies as "a [Chinese] in Singapore," calls out other Chinese Singaporeans for "acting like they're oppressed" and for not acknowledging that Chinese privilege "exists here." The tweet is made recognizable as a confessional through the author's metapragmatic use of "say it," which codes the following statement as unsayable prior to their confessional. It demands a racialization of the confessor as Chinese before such a confessional can materialize and work as an attempt to signal antiracism. In other words, the confessor's racialization of the self is a prerequisite in invocations of Chinese privilege as confessionals. Such confessionals are evidently celebrated precisely because they position the confessor—racialized as Chinese by the very confessional itself—as antiracist. While we do not view the confessing of Chinese privilege as equal to an admission of racism,[7] our observation finds similarities with Ahmed's examinations of institutional admissions of racism in that both position the speaker as seemingly being in service of antiracism. Not only does the confessional fail to enact any kind of antiracist commitment, it also reifies particular subject positions (confessor as racially Chinese, listener as non-Chinese public that celebrates antiracist commitments) that rests on extant categories of race. If the goal of invoking Chinese privilege as confessional is antiracism, then doing so is an exercise in antiracist posturing, a semiotic gesture.

The "checking" of one's privilege—a phrase that has entered everyday parlance in recent years—might have begun with McIntosh's (1989) seminal essay, though she does not employ the same verb in her discussion of White and male privilege. To check one's privilege is to become aware of the privileges one might

7. Conflations of Chinese privilege and racism are observable in certain invocations of Chinese privilege not discussed in this article. These invocations view Chinese privilege as, for instance, the rejection of non-Chinese tenants in housing rental applications. We are clear on codifying these examples as racist acts but do not agree that they constitute what is generally understood as Chinese privilege.

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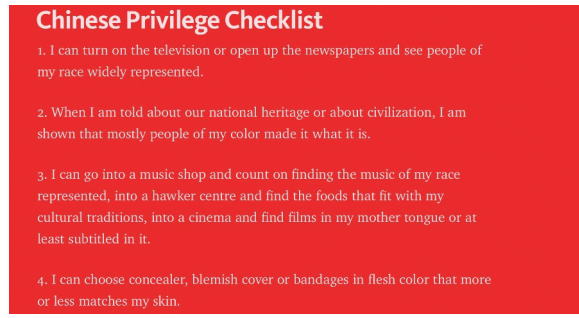


Figure 5. Sangeetha Thanapal's Chinese Privilege checklist reproduced by Rachel Juay (January 27, 2017).

enjoy; however, the deployment of the phrase demands more than awareness. It requires a degree of contrite reflection from the privileged individual to acknowledge that they have had an easier path than others, even if the path was paved for them by structures and institutions that value some social groups over others. McIntosh (1989) includes a substantial list of benefits, conditions, and advantages that she enjoys as a White woman in the United States—a checklist with items that one can tick off of to qualify and quantify one's privilege. A similar list, specific to Chinese privilege in Singapore, is shown in figure 5.[8]

Privilege checklists such as these involve a set of behaviors and practices that the privileged individual can absentmindedly enact, which supports the argument that privilege is often blind to those who have it and so needs to be "checked." In other words, it serves as a surfacing of invisible advantages. We see how items on the Chinese privilege checklist can be read as individual confessionals: the declarative "I am/I can" constructions mark them as speech acts and code these behaviors and practices as personalized admissions of culpability in racial inequality. What such confessionals do in the process of making salient these privileges, however, is a requisite accentuation of the discrete racial categories that first allowed for the privileging of certain races. This is not to say that items on the Chinese privilege checklist are unfounded in any way; rather, it is the stylization of the invocation of Chinese privilege as confessionals that must necessitate a form of racial categorization. Take, for example, any item on the checklist. Without the specification of any races, the individual who reads it—and assumes themselves as the referent of the personal deictic *I*—becomes aligned with the particular practice and the race assigned to it. The formulation goes:

8. Retrieved from https://theoctant.org/edition/vi-1/allposts/opinion/coming-terms-chinese-privilege/attachment/16357603_10202716680034494_1781653361_o/.

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I (the reader) am reading the checklist, and I can engage in the identified practice of privilege. My race is Chinese. I therefore have Chinese Privilege.

In the third item, cultural signs (*the music of my race*; *foods that fit with my cultural traditions*; *films in my mother tongue*; *my color*) are invoked as markers of privilege only belonging to the Chinese race. These signs are posited as indexing a Chineseness interior to those racialized as Chinese, yet they are simultaneously arbitrary in their recognisability as "Chinese" signs—what constitutes the music of the Chinese? What colors are the Chinese? The same questions can be posed for any other racial category. Our inquiries do not bring into question the hegemonic nature of Chinese culture in Singapore. Rather, we want to draw attention to compulsory processes of racialization and racial categorization that mimic colonial logics when such confessionals are uttered to invoke the notion of Chinese privilege.

Let us consider the inverse. What happens when one refuses to confess Chinese privilege? At the National Day Rally in 2021, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong delivered his speech in three languages: English, Mandarin, and Malay. Present only in the Mandarin speech was a direct addressing of the notion of Chinese privilege (*huaren tequan* 华人特权) and how it would be unfounded to say that it exists in Singapore. He substantiated his comments by pointing out how, among other concessions, English was chosen as the lingua franca during independence, which placed many Chinese Singaporeans who only spoke Chinese languages at a disadvantage. Unsurprising was the backlash that ensued after his refusal to confess (fig. 6). Netizens swiftly pointed out the optics of the prime minister's take on Chinese privilege: he was racialized as an immensely powerful Chinese Singaporean who predictably repudiated "claims of Chinese



Figure 6. Backlash against refusal to confess Chinese privilege (August 29, 2021)

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privilege in Singapore," since his expansive privilege would precisely occlude any awareness of it. The tweet on the right of figure 6 is a rhetorical prompt that highlights the risibility of the prime minister's comments by drawing links between the sociopolitical dynamics of privilege in Singapore and in the Global North—that nonconfessionals of Chinese privilege in Singapore are motivated by the same factors that engender denials of White privilege among White individuals. There is an inability to divest from race as an organizing principle, an ideological logic that began with White-settler thought. In no way do we suggest that the prime minister's comments were justified; to say that Chinese privilege is absent because the Chinese population was linguistically disenfranchised is fallacious at best. The state has also been instrumental in and responsible for securing the CMIO ideology as an essential mode of living in Singapore, which renders racial categorization an inescapable logic. Yet this example would evince how antiracist discourse, arriving in the form of what we now call Chinese privilege, falls back onto racialization and racial categorization in order to operate. In many ways, the tweets in figure 6 may serve as a form of censure, except the censuring is now targeted at refusals of Chinese privilege confessionals. Even in nonconfessionals of Chinese privilege, the speaker is racialized by those who cannot imagine race outside of the categories conjured by the colonial British empire and maintained by the Singaporean postcolonial government.

Invocations of Chinese privilege as censure and confessional have evinced the inexorable imperatives of racialization and racial categorization. In both forms of invocations, Chinese privilege has repeatedly shown up as an ideology that, while intentioned as a hermeneutics to parse the permutations of racial power and inequality in a multiracial society, relies on the very processes that bind individuals to their assigned race, language, culture, and practices. Why do we keep turning to such logics despite wanting to imagine and materialize a more racially equitable Singapore? We now discuss this difficulty in extricating the praxis of antiracism from the racializing and categorizing imperative of White-settler thought by considering the *stickiness of raciolinguistics*.

Discussion and Conclusion: (Un)sticking Race and Language

There is a particular endurance to the psychic life of the conaturalization of race and language—*psychic*, because the sociogenetic logic seems to be interior to (post)colonial subjects (see Fanon 1952), and *life*, because it is reproductive in nature. Like Rosa and Flores (2017) have pointed out, raciolinguistic ideologies are ultimately a matter of coloniality, and they have existed far beyond the recent memories of modern society. We have tried to respond to the phenomenon of

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Chinese privilege by first examining its genealogy as a concept continuous from White privilege and then exploring how it refracts logics of coloniality by reproducing processes of racialization and racial categorization, despite its design as antiracist critique. At the start of this essay, we suggested that *Chinese privilege*—as a term and a sense-making framework—has accrued myriad meanings and valuations as a sign and is now recognizable to Singaporeans as metonymic of racism, systemic inequality, and other forms of race-based discrimination. How has this accrual occurred, and how do we make sense of it? In her work on the affect of disgust, Ahmed (2004b) theorizes how words, phrases, and terms that perform disgust come to be. The quality of these signs, she argues, is *stickiness*: "an effect of surfacing, *as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*" (90). For Ahmed, a sign comes in contact with other objects as it travels and circulates, and these objects leave impressions on the surface of the sign. The impressions are not neutral, and over time they change the way the sign is understood and "call into question its integrity as an object" (91). To be sticky, then, is to have the ability to pick up meanings, values, and even other signs and objects along the way. Repeated usage of a sign can contribute to its stickiness, not in terms of how sticky it is, but how it now carries with it accumulated meanings from previous instances of contact with other signs and objects. For linguistic materializations of hate and disgust, we see how considering the stickiness of a sign can be particularly productive in understanding their injurious force (Butler 1997). Yet stickiness is also observable in our discussions of the persistent imperative to couple race and language in the invocations of Chinese privilege in Singapore. This persistence is perhaps the result of a *sticky raciolinguistics*: the refusal and inability to abandon the colonial logics that cemented the conaturalization of race and language as the only way to make sense of racial and linguistic categories.

We are chiefly concerned about the way raciolinguistic ideologies, as sticky signs, have traveled across spacetimes to appear in the (anti)racial discourses of citizens in a Southeast Asian postcolony. Racialization and racial categorization as processes have constantly surfaced in both statal and citizen narratives, with the former materializing as the governing framework of CMIO, and the latter as the introduction of Chinese privilege. In particular, the arrival of Chinese privilege—and its myriad interpretations and understandings—is evidence for how raciolinguistic ideologies have made contact with and picked up other objects and meanings along its history of travel to become a contextual sign on its own in Singapore. Chinese privilege exists, as an idea, because there is little imagination of racial power and hierarchization beyond what the Global North

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supplies. This is not to say that Singaporeans are doomed to only draw from Western epistemologies of race with no alternative; we must accept that there exist entities that benefit from refracting Anglo-colonial imaginations of race, Whiteness, and language in Singapore.[9] Predictably, these ideas must reproduce racialization and racial categorization in its deployment, since these processes have stuck, even through efforts to decolonize racial organization in Singapore. As the term is repetitively deployed by activists, netizens, politicians, and the media, it continues to pick up other ideas and meanings as it is subject to uptake by different people with different experiences of race. And just as raciolinguistics is sticky, so are race and language as signs of their own; they become inextricable in their deployments and cannot be discussed separate from the other.

We are not interested to advance arguments about the existence and utility of Chinese privilege. Rather, our intervention is at once a linguistic and an anthropological one—we want to parse one of the many lives of raciolinguistic ideologies and make clear the perils of adopting Chinese privilege as a hermeneutics to interpret race in Singapore. Chinese privilege has succeeded in igniting national conversations on racial inequality, especially when the nation has long emblematized racial "harmony"—curiously, a musical term that refers to an ideal stratification of separate sounds—as the hallmark of its multiracial philosophy. It has allowed racialized minorities to articulate their affective experiences as nondominant social actors in a country where there are few to no devastating racial fissure lines. Yet for those who find themselves sticking to Chinese privilege as an idea, there must be an acknowledgment of its slippages; it now carries a range of meanings and values that, at its core, is grounded in the racialization and racial categorization of all actors involved, privileged or otherwise. This is the catch of being sticky.

We have sought to lay bare how a nascent conceptualization of racial hierarchy in postcolonial Singapore has roots in colonial thought. By examining the concept of Chinese privilege and its invocations as censure and confessional, we have drawn focus away from existing debates on its existence and utility and addressed the reproductive semiotics of raciolinguistics by arguing that Chinese privilege is ultimately culpable in the reproduction of processes of racialization and racial categorization. When Chinese privilege is used to/as censure, it presumes a raciolinguistic relationship between its target (those racialized as Chinese) and the target's object (Mandarin). Authors of (non)confessionals of Chinese privilege must also self-racialize—or be racialized—for the

9. We thank Jay Ke-Schutte for this insight.

https://doi.org/10.1086/722622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

confessionals to succeed. There seems to be little way out of this sticky mess. Yet as Ahmed (2004b, 90) reminds us, there is nothing particularly repulsive about stickiness: "stickiness becomes disgusting *only when the skin surface is at stake such that what is sticky threatens to stick to us*." Whose skin surface is at stake when Chinese privilege is invoked? If we accept that Chinese privilege is now as sticky as raciolinguistic ideologies are—that it is nearly impossible to invoke Chinese privilege without simultaneously recruiting, racializing, and categorizing an interlocutor—then perhaps all of our skins are compromised.

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