Singaporean First: Challenging the Concept of Transnational Malay Masculinity

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Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the People's Action Party's (henceforth the PAP) management of ethnicity and potential ethnic conflict has depended on a strategy that emphasizes selected 'race' identities. Under a policy of multiracialism, all Singaporeans fall into one of four official race categories - Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others. This policy, known as 'CMIO multiracialism', goes much further than simply providing an environment in which cultural and religious practices are observed and upheld. It downplays diversity within racial categories and emphasizes shared cultural and linguistic heritages within racial groups. In the process, race becomes an important way of labelling the population and individuals are encouraged to think about themselves using these racial categories. CMIO multiracialism relies for its legitimacy upon the imagery of an ever-present threat to national stability from inter-ethnic conflict. It is thus promoted as a pragmatic solution to the realities of nation building. The policy was developed in a context of concern about the promotion of Malay privilege under the leadership of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), in the short-lived Federation of Malaysia of which Singapore was a part from 1963 to 1965. During this period, the PAP promoted the concept of a 'Malaysian Malaysia' in which all races were given equal rights, against a 'Malay Malaysia' in which Malays (as bumiputera, literally 'sons of the soil') would be privileged above other ethnic groups (Lian and Rajah 2002). In contrast to UMNO's policies, the PAP sought to 'correct the imbalance in economic and social development' between the Malay and non-Malay communities through a focus on education (Lee Kuan Yew, cited in Bedlington 1981: 248-9). This view of racial equality continued after Singapore was ousted from the Federation and formed the basis of the idea of a 'Singaporean Singapore'.

However, in reality, not all races are equally valued for their contribution to the Singaporean national identity. The rhetoric of a 'Singaporean Singapore' contains an implicit, frequently aggressive, program of assimilation of racial minorities into a Chinese-dominated society. Singapore's economic success in the post-independence period is routinely attributed to aspects of Chinese culture, often presented under the rubric of 'Asian values', such as thrift, hard work, and a desire for education. Members of minority races are expected to maintain a sense of racial/cultural separateness, as expressed through markers such as diet, dress,
religion and language, while jettisoning those aspects of culture that do not meet the desired attributes of the national identity (Barr and Low 2005: 167). Within this framework, Malays are encouraged to assimilate into Singaporean society in public, while reserving their Malay, and especially Muslim, identities for the private sphere. Significantly, the state's rendering of a homogenous Malay racial category serves not only to set them apart from the Chinese majority population, and by implication, a Chinese-determined national identity, but also to identify their cultural inferiority. In contrast to the Chinese, Malays are said to lack the key cultural attributes that would enable them to succeed in the modem global economy (Rahim 1998). This cultural deficit is used to explain the Malay community's continuing economic and social disadvantage when compared to other racial groups (see Kamaludeen 2007; Li 1989; Rahim 1998).

When stereotypes about Malay cultural inferiority are combined with widespread concerns about the existence of a Pan-Malay (read Muslim) brotherhood, the Malay community's loyalty to the Singapore nation may sometimes be questioned. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew articulated these sentiments in 1987 when he referred to concerns about Malay/Muslim loyalty: 'Are we sure that in a moment of crisis, when the heat is on, we are all together, heart to heart?' (Siddique 1989: 570). These concerns imply the innate perception amongst prominent politicians that there exists a trans-national cultural/religious identity shared by Singaporean Malays, Malaysian Malays and Indonesians that overshadows a sense of Singaporean nationalism - sentiments summed up by then Second Minister of Defence (and current Prime Minister) Lee Hsien Loong during a constituency tour in 1987:

> If there is a conflict, we don't want to put any of our soldiers in a difficult position where his emotions for the nation may be in conflict with his emotions for his religion ... We don't want to put anybody in that position where he feels he is not fighting a just cause, and perhaps worse, maybe his side is not the right side (The Straits Times 1987).

Fears concerning Singaporean Malays’ divided loyalties have become even more apparent in the post-9/11 environment. During the 1980s, the state, Malay civil society groups, and Muslim organizations actively promoted Islam as a means to counter a range of social problems facing the Malay community. In the post-9/11 period, however, the value of Islam as a form of 'cultural ballast' has come under intense scrutiny. Instead, it has been positioned as a potential threat to nationalism. In January 2003, the government issued a White Paper, 'The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism' that included an examination of a 'home-grown' terrorist threat. In both parliamentary and public debates about the White Paper, the broader issue of threats posed by international terrorism to Singapore has been sidelined by a focus on race relations and a concern that Southeast Asian Muslims in general, and Singaporean Malays in particular, are susceptible to a radical view of Islam terrorism that places religion above national loyalty (Ismail and Shaw 2006; Kadir 2006). This focus on Islam as a marker of potential disloyalty points to the ongoing conflation of racial and religious identities, as evident in the collective term 'Malay-Muslim' commonly used as a racial category by the government, community leaders and the press.
This chapter calls into question ideas about the existence of a transnational Malay-Muslim identity by examining the ways in which Malay men understand and perform their masculinity vis-a-vis men in the neighbouring countries of Malaysia and Indonesia. It starts from the premise that issues of ethnic (and religious) 'loyalty' are questions that rest on primordial notions of 'self' and 'other' attributed to ethnicity and religion. We argue that, in the context of Singapore, concepts of ethnic and national identity are shaped by two significant forces: the presence of the Chinese majority population, and the PAP's stance on Singapore's location in a Malay/Muslim archipelago (Brown 1994; Hill and Lian 1995). The Chinese majority population and the Chinese dominated parliament and bureaucracy play a critical role in shaping Malay identity not through a process of hybridisation that arises through direct contact and interaction, but through a state-led policy of comparison that requires the Malay community to constantly position itself in relation to the majority (Li 1989: 136). At the same time, given the heterogeneity of the Malay community (a fact eluded to in public statements about 'Malay loyalty'), any investigation into the meaning of a shared Malay identity also needs to consider to what extent 'Malayness' is constituted as 'a Singaporean experience, and to what extent this experience has itself been conditioned by geographical proximity to Malaysia and cultural affinities with other related communities in Malaysia, the Riau archipelago, and Indonesia' (Lian and Rajah 2002: 232). By examining how Singaporean Malay men negotiate and construct their identities, this paper both problematises the notion of a homogenous Malay identity in Singapore and seeks to subvert commonly held understandings about the presence of a transnational Malay masculinity in the region.

In the first part of this study, we explore these men's accounts of Malay marginalisation and issues of racial discrimination. The second part of the study will discuss cross-border travel and the construction of masculinities across borders. We argue that the ways in which young professional Malay men understand and respond to racial discrimination reflects their internalisation of a set of state-sponsored values commonly ascribed to the Chinese community, but which are also increasingly defined as essential elements of Singapore's national identity. These values come into sharper focus in the way that these men talk about their experiences of travel to Indonesia and Malaysia. In their accounts of 'Malaysian-Malay backwardness' and 'Indonesian corruption', the men assert their own national superiority as Singaporeans, and downplay any sense of shared ethnic identity. In a global context where Muslim masculinity has been positioned as inherently threatening, and in a local context where Malay (Muslim) masculinity is always already problematic, our analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the ways class and ethnicity intersect in shaping Singaporean Malay men's sense of identity.

Our discussion draws on data collected in interviews with Singaporean Malay men in the middle- and lower-income brackets over a four-year period to 2008. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study on the construction of national and ethnic identity in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle. For the purposes of this paper we concentrate primarily on our interviews with professional men aged between 25 and 34. It is important to note that the ways in which these Malay men talk about their identities is coloured by the lens of class. These men are experiencing rapid social mobility in Singapore and the majority espouse a distinctly 'middle-income' outlook in terms of their aspirations and
perceptions of their social and economic opportunities. At the same time, it is not possible to describe their class position solely as 'middle-income', since this label obscures the complex nature of inter-generational differences in education and income levels within Singaporean households. Their parents are employed in the service and manufacturing sectors, but these men have benefited from higher levels of education (including access to university) and subsequently higher wages. However, like most unmarried Singaporeans, they continue to live with their parents and siblings until they are married. Household income and residential structure are thus poor measures of their class location. Although these men represent less than 8 per cent of the Malay population of Singapore (Leow 2001), their status as potential community leaders makes them a significant group in the eyes of the state. By focusing on middle-income professional men, we can also explore the nexus between class and ethnicity in the construction of Malay masculinities.

**Understanding Malay marginality**

Malay marginality is a constant trope in the narratives that the Malay men in this study construct about what it means to 'be a man' in contemporary Singapore. These narratives draw on state-sponsored research that highlights the Malay community's disadvantage when compared to other racial groups. This relative disadvantage is measured in economic and social terms. Chinese households consistently out-perform Malay households in relation to household income and the margin has continued to grow. In 1980, the average Malay household income was 73 per cent of the Chinese household income, but by 2000, had dropped to only 60 per cent of the Chinese household income (Lee 2004: 32). Importantly, these figures do not take into consideration significant class differences within the Chinese community and the presence of significant numbers of Chinese households on low incomes. Thus the focus on 'Malay marginality' serves to obscure class divisions within Singapore, and forefronts race as a causal factor in economic and social disadvantage. Attention is primarily placed on Malays as a homogenous racial category in opposition to an undifferentiated, homogeneous 'Chinese' community.

This form of analysis is supported by data that highlights broad racial differences in socio-economic performance. According to the 2000 Census, over 30 per cent of working Malays were found in the manufacturing sector and were over-represented in manufacturing, transportation, business and social services industries compared with Indians and Chinese (Lee 2004: 33). By contrast, the Chinese dominate in professional, managerial and technical occupations. Educational differences play an important role in creating these occupational disparities between the Chinese and other ethnic groups (Rahim 1998)7 In comparison with the Chinese and Indian populations, Malays also experience higher divorce rates, larger numbers of single parents, larger family sizes, and are over-represented in drug offences, truancy, and un-wed teenage pregnancies (Mutalib 2005). These 'social problems' attract considerable government and public attention and serve to reinforce a series of negative stereotypes about the Malay community. In an attempt to redress these problems, the government supports a number of 'social uplifting' initiatives. Many of these programs are run through the Malay/Muslim community self-help organizations that provide education and
training support for Malay children and lower-income workers, as well as life-skills and marriage preparation workshops.

The PAP has always been careful to assert that Malays occupy a special status within Singapore as the indigenous people of the island nation. This special status is officially recognized in Article 89 of the Singapore Constitution:

The government shall exercise its functions in such a manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, economic, social and cultural identity and the Malay language (cited in Mutalib 2005: 57-8).

Among the 'privileges' granted to Malays was the recognition of Malay as the 'national' language (with Mandarin, Tamil and English identified as the other three 'official' languages); free education from primary school to university; the provision of a mosque in every HDB estate; and the appointment of Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs in the Cabinet. These constitutional provisions are mainly symbolic. In practical terms, the symbolism of Malays' special status means little in the face of the Malay community's marginality vis-a-vis other groups, particularly since Singapore Malays no longer enjoy the special quotas and other forms of governmental support originally identified at the time of Independence (Mutalib 2005: 70). For example, Malay and Muslim families contribute to Mendaki programs that support a range of activities, including the payment of tertiary educational fees. Consequently, while tertiary education remains symbolically free for the community as a whole, it is not automatically a right for individual students and their families.

The PAP government recognizes that the Malay community still lags behind other ethnic groups on a range of key socio-economic indicators, but asserts that a state-sponsored policy of meritocracy ensures that anyone can succeed based on merit and not racial background (Mutalib 2005). While these claims are certainly supported by countless examples of working class individuals who 'work hard' and succeed, such statements overlook the extent to which hard work is frequently culturally inscribed. Writing in the 1980s, Tania Li (1989: 167) observed that:

the image of Malays as perennially backward, or reified cultural explanations for Malay backwardness, cannot be dismissed as merely false. The image of backwardness and its supposed cultural causes have themselves become part of the cultural fabric of Malay and Singapore society, and they have real practical effects as they are incorporated into the daily lives of ordinary Singaporeans and into national political processes.

Although Tania Murray Li's study is now several decades old, it provides one of the few detailed ethnographic accounts of the Malay community. Her comments are thus important for historicising the formation of 'marginality' as both a policy imperative and a socially inscribed trait. Lily Rahim's (1998) study of Malay marginality, published a decade after Li's book, is also insightful in its demonstration of the way that the discourse of backwardness has been taken up at the policy level. These and other studies show that Malay marginalization is
attributed by both the state and community members themselves to entrenched cultural values which hold Malays back from taking advantage of the education and employment opportunities provided under PAP rule. Malay men are said to lack intellectual capacity and motivation, and to be better with their hands (physical and technical skills) and less capable in academic areas (Rahim 1998). This is combined with a cultural propensity to be 'laid back' and not interested in hard work, which echoes the 'lazy native' thesis proposed by colonial authorities, who described Malay men as effeminate and unsuited to waged labour (Crinis 2004).³

These stereotypes reflect a widely held view in the non-Malay community that Malay men lack the key cultural and biological attributes that would enable them to succeed in the modern Singaporean economy (Li 1998). In his study of youth in the army, Leong Choon Cheong notes that Chinese national servicemen describe Malay men as 'lazy, unintelligent, unhygienic, and aggressive' (cited in Rahim 1998: 57-8), while laziness and drug taking also emerge as common stereotypes of Malay male youth in contemporary studies of popular culture (see Liew and Fu 2006). There has been little scholarly attention, however, to the continued salience of these stereotypes and the complexities surrounding 'Malay identity' over the last three decades, particularly in the context of growing class diversity amongst Malays. There has also been little examination of the implicit gendering of these accounts. Common racial stereotypes of 'Malays' rarely make gender distinctions, with the exception of accounts regarding teenage pregnancies that focus on the promiscuous behaviour of Malay girls. For this reason, our study sought to examine the ways in which young professional men themselves understand the continued relevance of the common stereotypes that circulate about Malay men.

When asked how they thought Malay men were perceived by the non-Malay Singaporean community, the men we interviewed responded with terms and phrases like 'slacker', 'relaxed', 'sitting in void decks', 'soccer players', 'doing technical work', 'artists', or 'not professionals'. Another man, Abdullah, a 28 year-old entrepreneur, described the traits commonly ascribed to Malays as pre-colonial:

> The Malays are easily content, laidback. We managed to survive the British invasion in that way. Can you imagine what would have happened if the Temenggong had not sold our island? Got some money, happy already!

For the men we interviewed, the marginality of Malay masculinity is reinforced in these stereotypes. Acutely aware of how their own life choices and experiences are shaped by expectations of Malay cultural inferiority, these men actively construct their own masculinities in contradistinction to these images.

The ‘level’ playing field

Ambitious young Malay men's decisions not to act out the 'typical Malay' trope are complicated by state and community structures that reinforce Malays' subordinate positionality. The claim that Singapore operates on a 'level playing field' (i.e., meritocracy) obscures the myriad ways in which Singaporeans from all racial groups are encouraged to assimilate into PAP-promoted values. The education system is an important site for this
process of 'social engineering'. For example, Barr and Low's (2005) study of kindergartens demonstrates the ways in which education policy and the policy of educational 'streaming' tie future success to academic learning. These practices impact negatively on many children in low-income households of all racial groups, who often lack positive role models in school and find it difficult to study and receive support in their home environments. Rahim (1998) argues that active discrimination and stereotyping also occurs in schools - Malay children are streamed into technical areas and rarely encouraged to pursue academic subjects. When educational streaming is combined with racial stereotyping, it can have a profound impact on future education and employment opportunities.

These processes are further reinforced by the strong segregation that occurs within schools, in which children (and teachers) tend to mix with members of their own ethnic group (see Lee et al. 2004; Li 1989; Rahim 1998). For Malay children this is enhanced by a strong cultural imperative not to be a 'loner'. This pressure is exemplified in the following conversation amongst three young professional Malay men in their late 20s. The three men met during secondary school.

Zainul: I didn’t play soccer until secondary school. When I see Malay guys playing soccer […] I have this perception that these are the real Malay guys […] because they play soccer, they speak Malay. [As a consequence] I feel pressure to play soccer.

Musa: You feel isolated.

Zainul: Pressure to play. So I started to learn, but after a while you grow up and feel more confident to try other things. But at elementary and high school soccer is more central.

Interviewer: Pressure from other Malay boys?

Zainul: They feel that you must or otherwise you are not [a real Malay].

Iqbal: We pressure ourselves. Not to be seen as an isolated individual.

For Zainul, a 26 year-old civil servant, playing soccer became a means of being accepted within his Malay peer group. In the process, he became 'a real Malay guy' who spoke Malay and could perform a culturally acceptable form of Malay masculinity. The transcript presented above does not portray the reactions of Iqbal (a 26-year-old civil servant) and Musa (a 27-year-old teacher) to Zainul’s opening statement. When Zainul said 'I didn't play soccer until secondary school', Musa immediately responded by shouting out: 'But good!' [meaning: He played well] followed by laughter from Iqbal and Musa and a wry smile from Zainul as he continued to speak. When he said 'I feel pressured to play soccer' there was further laughter. The laughter and jibe about Zainul's soccer skills served to reinforce the centrality of the soccer identity for all the men. Soccer is a means of establishing group identity for Malay
men despite their recognition that peer pressure to be a 'real Malay guy' by playing soccer served to re-inscribe racial stereotyping.10

**Positive racism**

Although the men we spoke to were able to provide detailed descriptions of the stereotypes that circulate about Malay men, they were uncomfortable describing these as instances of racism or prejudice. Where a stereotype is linked to a positive portrayal of skill (as in the example of soccer or Malays being good singers), it is difficult to identify those stereotypes as discriminatory. Jamal, a 27 year-old therapist, related how in secondary school non-Malays always assumed he would be good at soccer: 'Even if they haven't seen you play, they automatically think you are going to be good and call you up to play on their team'. As the men asserted, 'We really are good soccer players.'

Racist notions of minority men's masculine physicality are common in other cultural and national settings (cf. Majors 1998; Messner 1989). The men were cognisant of the parallels between their situation and that of minority men in other countries, as demonstrated in the following exchange that preceded the discussion of soccer playing outlined above:

Zainul: At university, they know I am Malay, they want me to play soccer.

Musa: They perceive us to be better at technical aspects, soccer, sports, that kind of thing. I think in terms of education they don’t know us, because the numbers of us in university are so small.

Iqbal: Similar with African Americans and all.

Positive portrayals of minority men's 'innate' physical attributes and sporting prowess act as a source of community pride, and also serve to channel boys and young men into naturalized roles in commodified sports cultures that in turn reinforce 'positive' racism (Hokowhitu 2004: 262). In a similar way, for the young men in our study, the dominance of Malay players in the national soccer league is both a reminder of ethnic stereotyping and a source of ethnic pride.

Another common image that the men found difficult to critique is the emphasis on the Malays' suitability as entertainers given their 'innate' artistic abilities. Musa asserted: 'We are considered to be good artists because two Singapore Idols are Malays.' Similarly, the men could see little harm in the comic role commonly played by Malay men in English and Chinese sit-coms. Zainul stated: 'I think the Malay man in the mass media is portrayed not as a negative. They may portray [him] as a buffoon but not negative. In a comedy setting it is very funny.' Stereotypes in film and television serve as a convenient form of shorthand to convey information about characters. In the case of comedy, such stereotypes help to establish instantly recognizable character types (King 2002). Exaggerated portrayals of racial traits can be a form of parody, and thus a strategy of subversion of racial norms. Distinguishing between satire and the reproduction of racism is fraught. Scholars of race have argued that trying to differentiate between racism and 'harmless' racial jokes obscures the normalising function of racial stereotypes. For example, writing about the United States, Park
et al. (2006) assert that although comedies starring racial minorities facilitate racial tolerance, including the acceptance of Asian men, they rely on an explicit, and often normalized, representation of racial hierarchy. One of the consequences of this is the naturalization of racial stereotypes. The association of Malays with technical, sporting or artistic skills and Chinese with entrepreneurial ability is reinforced in a local Chinese joke, which serves to entrench a widely held belief that the Chinese excel in business and other racial groups do not:

Q: Why don't the Chinese play soccer?
A: Because as soon as we get a corner, we open a shop.

The men's discussion of stereotypes and their reluctance to identify these as instances of racism may reflect a widespread unwillingness by Singaporeans to discuss race issues publicly (Lai 1995). Openly voicing opinions about racial discrimination can lead to public (and criminal) charges of being a 'racial chauvinist'. At the same time, however, these views must also be read against the men's own understanding of the saliency of such stereotypes - as in this conversation with Salleh, a 27 year-old engineer:

Salleh: I think sometimes you can’t blame them [non-Malays]. Like Malays take drugs and all. And I also feel that Malays are lazy.

Interviewer: Why?

Salleh: They are easily content with life. They have a short objective in life. To get a car. Even if they cannot afford also they must buy one car, must buy one big house, but their kids education they don’t care also. I have some stories from my friends lah. They can’t afford their kids poly[technic] education or university education but they can afford one big car and everything else lah. They like to show off. And they are full of debts.

The men contrasted their own achievements, including their tertiary education and professional employment, with those of the 'typical Malay'. Although they were familiar with the common stereotypes used to describe Malays, they either excluded themselves from these descriptions or admitted to limited, and less problematic, 'slippages'. A common example was the men's descriptions of their own study habits in contrast to those of their Chinese classmates. A number of the men admitted that unlike their Chinese peers, they did not study as hard, but rather were satisfied with achieving a pass grade in their tertiary studies. They described this character fault - laziness - as a product of their Malayness and simultaneously painted an unproblematic portrait of all their Chinese classmates as hardworking, high achievers. Although the men did not measure up to an idealized vision of hegemonic Chinese masculinity, they nonetheless aspired to it and strived to achieve what they described as a 'normal' way of 'being a man'. When asked to talk about Chinese masculinity, Zulfikar, a 30 year-old flight attendant, responded: 'I guess Chinese guys are like normal. Stereotypical ... what we expect of normal society.'

The men in our study are caught in a double bind - they want to challenge the veracity of the many negative stereotypes used to label the Malay community, and particularly Malay men,
but they also rely on those same stereotypes to secure their own 'exceptional' status in relation to education and employment opportunities, as well as achievements, within the Malay community. When they fail to measure up to their own, and society's, definition of a 'normal man', they attribute their personal failings to an inherited cultural inferiority. The men's entry into the middle class is thus always fragile and premised on their ability to internalize and demonstrate the 'superior' values of industry and thrift. Tania Li (1989) observed that amongst middle-income Malay parents these insecurities are manifested in the decision to move their families out of lower-income housing estates and to encourage their children to socialize with non-Malay friends. While the majority of men in our study were unmarried, they exhibited a similar desire to demarcate the boundaries between themselves and other Malays whom they described as members of the 'lower class'.

**Masculinity across borders**

During the discussions that were held with the interviewees about non-Singaporean Malay men, the internalization of the middle-income attributes of thrift and hard work by professional Singapore Malay men became even more apparent. In asserting a claim about the 'foreignness' of non-Singaporean Malays, the men drew on their direct experiences of travel to Indonesia and Malaysia. All of the interviewees had travelled to Malaysia for short holidays, and sometimes on business. Two-thirds of them had travelled to Indonesia, primarily Jakarta, for similar reasons. Their accounts of these 'other Malays' drew on their travel experiences as well as common Singaporean stereotypes of Malaysian Malays and Indonesians. The men were all sensitive to the national significance of the discourse of a 'Singaporean Singapore', in opposition to a 'Malay Malaysia', and were familiar with the issue of loyalty that hung over the Malay community. However, they were adamant that the concept of a shared cross-border identity with other Malays made little sense.

In their accounts of their trips abroad, shared culture, language and religion emerged as important factors in facilitating ease of travel. While many of the men described the enjoyment they obtained from eating Malaysian and Indonesian food when they travelled, some also expressed relief that they did not have to worry about dietary restrictions. As Musa observed in relation to the presence halal food: The moment I reach Malaysia or Indonesia the first thing that hits my mind is that I can eat almost everything.’ Musa's comment suggests that for Malay Muslims living in Singapore, restrictions associated with food taboos cannot be underestimated. A wide variety of halal food is available in Singapore, and most large businesses and schools which provide canteens also supply separate eating utensils for halal food stalls. When eating in unfamiliar places many Muslims may err on the side of caution by only ordering drinks or fruit. Many Singaporean Muslims also acknowledge that non-Muslims are not always aware of the issues associated with food taboos, and do not appear to understand that many Muslims feel awkward if their Chinese friends and colleagues order pork dishes and eat them at the same table. Food taboos become less important when travelling abroad to a predominantly Muslim country, and consequently the men felt a sense of ease in relation to their dietary habits.

For those men who had travelled to Indonesia or Malaysia as part of a racially mixed group of friends or colleagues, language was an important source of cultural capital in the groups'
interactions with Indonesian or Malay service providers, including hotel and restaurant staff and taxi drivers. Their ability to communicate in Bahasa Melayu or Bahasa Indonesia immediately made them indispensable to their Chinese friends and colleagues. Their ethnicity was thus a positive rather than a negative attribute. They explained that in Singapore, Malay language abilities are not highly valued when compared to Mandarin. They argued that Chinese employers frequently discriminate against Malays in job advertisements by using the phrase 'Bilingual in English and Mandarin' as a required or desirable skill. When travelling to Malaysia and Indonesia, Malay men's ability to act as language brokers for non-Malay speaking Singaporeans not only improved their status within their peer group, but also inevitably allowed them to adopt the position of cultural broker in interactions between their peer group, and between themselves and Indonesians or Malaysian Malays. Language ability thus became an important source of power.

At a personal level, shared language is a means to ease the stress that often accompanies travel. The majority of the men are effectively bilingual in English and Malay, and professed to feeling comfortable travelling anywhere these languages are spoken. Although their travels to Indonesia or Malaysia for work or leisure were not premised on language, it clearly facilitated the travel process. However, shared language is not an attribute that all of the men wanted to draw upon in their interactions with Malaysian Malays or Indonesians. For example, Zulfikar, an ambitious flight attendant with Singapore Airlines, chooses to distance himself by deliberately using English as a marker of his Singaporean nationality:

I choose to let them know that I'm Singaporean because ... because I know we are much more superior than them ... I choose not to be mistaken as being like Malaysian or an Indonesian. Although I can do a Malaysian-Malay accent or an Indonesian accent. That kind of thing. But I choose strategically not to be assimilated. But ... if there's trouble or that kind of thing and I know that being local counts, I guess I can ... I have to do it. But otherwise, to show my superiority [I speak in English] I guess.

Differences in purchasing power are another area for the demonstration of Singaporean Malay superiority. This sense of superiority is most clearly expressed in a comment by Iskandar, a 32 year-old journalist, who said: 'When realising that you are Singaporean, they like kowtow to you a bit and, okay, make a deal. We have better bargaining power nowadays.' The greater bargaining power experienced by Iskandar is a product of Singapore's rapid economic development, which has produced higher standards of living and significant income disparities between Singaporeans and their regional neighbours.

The men stated that as a consequence of Singapore's economic development there has been a distinct divide between their lives and those of their regional neighbours. Despite the benefits that accrue from shared language and cultural and religious practices, all of the men felt alien when they travelled to Indonesia and Malaysia. In our conversations, the men frequently distanced themselves from the backwardness of Indonesian or Malaysian cultures by emphasising their Singaporean-ness. They claimed that although they shared language and religious and cultural traits with Indonesians and Malaysian Malays, they identified more closely with Chinese and Indian Singaporeans. According to Salleh,
When in Malaysia, I feel proud to be a Singaporean because at least I can tell the Malaysian guys that I stand on the same page as the other races in my home country. Because I met some Malaysians who kept telling me that that Malays in Singapore don't know their rights. What they are saying is that Singapore belongs to the Malays [as indigenous peoples]. I think Singapore belongs to no one. It's a meritocracy.

While the divide is most easily measured by English language ability and income differentials, it also manifests itself in the outlook and behaviour of Malaysian Malays and Indonesians.

When I was there [Malaysia] I felt that we are better off. Better level of education. Can speak English. More worldly. ... Because over there not many Malays are that well educated. And they don't really speak English. They work in the services sector ... And it doesn't help that some of them are really quite rude to you in a very bad way. Like a third world country mentality.

The 'third world mentality' that Zainul refers to was brought up by many other interviewees who described the perceived differences between Singaporean efficiency and Indonesian or Malaysian backwardness, inefficiency and corruption. The poor standard of living and lack of economic development in both countries were compared unfavourably to conditions experienced in Singapore. According to Iskandar,

I think the standard of living there is very low. Many of them would do anything just to get a dollar, they will just do anything, even cheat others. Even though I am a Muslim, he is a Muslim. I am from the same culture, they are from the same culture but they don't care about that. They would do anything just to get a dollar.

For the young men in our study, travel to Indonesia or Malaysia did not represent a trip back to some form of authentic Malay culture and identity. This is in contrast to older Malay men and women informants who described in some detail the joy they obtained from experiencing 'the real kampong lifestyle' and visiting places that were 'just like Singapore in the 1950s or 60s'. Rather, it served to strengthen the young Malay men's awareness of their middle-income achievements. In this way, inefficiency, corruption and deception are not only markers of national difference between Singapore and its neighbours. These traits distinguish backward non-Singaporean Malays from modern Singaporean Malays.

At the same time, the keen awareness that remnants of an inefficient Malay culture remain in Singapore, coupled with a culture that venerates the Chinese as hard working, results in a cultural hierarchy that positions other Malays below Singaporean Malays. According to Zulkifar,

Malaysian Malays see us as being much more snobby - snobbish. And, ah ... yeah, more like among the upper class. But I guess I deem them as much more inferior because of how their living standards are and how they grew up lah. I guess in a way they don't really have to work hard - they don't have to put in effort to survive. And there's no competitiveness in them. So they're much more - they're even more laid-back than us lah! And they really have bad English. So, they're inferior to us .... The Chinese deem the Malay group to be Ma-lazy. So, I guess in
a way we have to prove ourselves, that we can actually also do the job - even better than them. But of course, although the Singaporean Malays are deemed to be lazy, I guess you can really see that the Malaysian Malays are much lazier.

According to the men, their own personal difference from those they consider to be more 'Ma-lazy' stems from the opportunities that Singapore's advanced, meritocratic society has afforded them. As Mustafa, a 29 year-old IT worker, states: 'Singaporean Malays tend to be go-getters, we live in an environment where you have to work, don't laze around. Over there they don't work unless they really have to.' Although Mustafa describes all Singaporean Malays as 'go-getters', he acknowledges that he is really only referring to middle-income, educated Malays such as himself, who have taken advantage of the opportunities provided in a multiracial, meritocratic society, and adopted a 'Singaporean' identity.

Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) concept of the 'contact zone' provides a useful way of thinking about the nature of these Malay men's cross-border encounters. Pratt uses the term to emphasize 'how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other ... not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt 1992: 7). As we have shown here, middle-income Singaporean Malay men's experiences with the other Malays of Malaysia and Indonesia in the contact zone serves to reinforce their Singaporean-ness, not their shared cultural and religious heritages. It enables them to recast their marginality within Singapore by emphasizing the cultural capital afforded to them by being modern Malay men.

Conclusion

Our analysis calls attention to the complex intersections between ethnicity, class and nationality in shaping constructions of masculinity. However, it is also apparent that there is the need to understand the ways masculinities are shaped by temporal and geo-spatial shifts. These issues are clearly demonstrated in the interviewees' descriptions of their lower-class Singaporean Malay compatriots, as well as in their accounts of their travels to Indonesia and Malaysia. The interviewees' discussions of what it means to be a Malay man in Singapore today are shaped by their complex reading of their own location within an ethnic community that is the subject of constant criticism and the object of racial discrimination. They have been brought up in an environment that valorises hard work as a Chinese attribute. In contrast to the positive accounts of the Chinese community's entrepreneurial spirit and thrift, Malays are reprimanded for their indolence and questioned about their loyalty to the nation. The young professional Malay men in our study have responded to these issues by internalising a set of state-sponsored values that they describe as essential elements of Singapore's national identity. At home, amongst the Chinese majority, they work hard to distance themselves from other Singaporean Malays whom they depict as lazy and backward in their outlook.

These distancing strategies are also apparent in the men's accounts of their travel to Indonesia and Malaysia. They describe Malaysian Malays and Indonesians as backward, corrupt and inefficient and assert that these other Malays are even lazier than their lower-class Singaporean counterparts. When they travel abroad, the men's wealth, education and middle
class outlook serve as easily identifiable markers of their superiority when compared to subordinate Indonesian and Malaysian men. More significantly, the men actively use these attributes to lay claim to a 'Singaporean-ness' that they share with other middle-income Singaporeans. Rather than providing a shared sense of ethnic Pan-Malay identity, travel serves to assert the men's difference from Malays in the region. Paradoxically, then, the sense of superiority that these men experience when travelling to Indonesia and Malaysia reinscribes their marginality in Singapore. Rather than making them feel racial discrimination more keenly, their experience of travel to majority-Malay countries reinforces their satisfaction with the status quo. This view was summed up by Iqbal, who asserts that 'Although we are discriminated against ... we are all living happy lives here.'

It is this statement, perhaps more than any others, that sums up the complex nature of these men's subordinate masculinity vis-a-vis Chinese Singaporean men. The men seek to minimize the damaging implications of racial discrimination by distancing themselves not only from lower-class Malays within their own ethnic community, but from the Malay citizens of less developed countries in the region. Crossing the border affords them the opportunity to imagine a space in which they are no longer a marginalized ethnic minority, but a successful example of Malay masculinity built on hard work and disciplined effort. At home, however, they know that as much as they try, they will always be tinted by the discourse of cultural inferiority. As Iqbal's comment suggests, young middle-income Malay men manage this dilemma by entering into a bargain with the state - they decide to be 'Singaporean first', and in doing so accept cultural discrimination for the rewards of modernity.

References


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**Notes**

1 The term ‘race’ is used in Singapore to refer to official state ethnic categories. Its usage implies that ethnic groups are marked not only by cultural and linguistic difference, but also biological differences. For a discussion of the ways in which the term race is used in popular and state discourses in Singapore, see Lai (1995). We use the term ‘race’ throughout this article to reflect its common usage in Singapore.

2 Malays are a significant ethnic minority in Singapore, representing 14% of the total population. The Chinese are the dominant ethnic group (75%), with a smaller minority of Indians (9%), and Others, including Eurasians and Europeans (Singapore Department of Statistics 2007). The state defines Malays as ‘persons of Malay or Indonesian origin, such as Javanese, Boyanese, Bugis, etc.’ (Singapore Department of Statistics 2007).
Lee Hsien Loong's comments were made at a time when bi-lateral relations with Malaysia were particularly tense, and further sparked ongoing allegations by the Malaysian government that the PAP actively discriminated against Malays (see Leifer 2000).

For example, Lily Rahim (1999: 39) argues that the 'Malaysia card' has been 'periodically employed by the PAP leadership to maintain a collective psyche of insecurity among the predominantly Chinese populace who are acutely conscious of the island's resource limitations and geo-political locale in the heart of a Malay-Muslim region'. She notes that the 'Singapore card' has similarly been deployed on the Malaysian side of the causeway.

In seeking to problematise the notion of a homogenous Malay identity we are not suggesting that 'the Chinese' are a monolithic group. CMIO multiracialism obscures heterogeneity within all so-called official races (Lai 1995).

The research on which this paper is based was funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project grant In the Shadow of Singapore: The Limits of Transnationalism in Insular Riau (DP0557368) - see project website http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/research/intheshadow/. We particularly want to thank Mohamed Fairoz bin Ahmad for his assistance in conducting some of the interviews.

Differences in educational qualifications do not provide the only explanation for Malay marginalisation. The numerically superior Chinese erect a range of barriers to exclude Malays (and Indians) from higher paying occupations, including active discrimination in hiring practices and promotion practices, as well as more subtle barriers such as language requirements (Lee 2004).

Barr and Low (2005, 161) argue that CMIO multiracialism enjoys a 'truly symbiotic relationship' with the other key pillar of PAP rule - meritocracy - a policy that emphasises the fairness of the Singapore system and explains the subordinate role of minority races.

This view continued to be deployed by the new ruling elite in the early years of Independence. For example, Holden (2001: 420) argues that in former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoir, The Singapore Story (1999), Indian and Malay men are portrayed as 'effete, governed by emotion and appetite, and una...