Paradox of Superdiversity: Contesting Racism and “Chinese Privilege” in Singapore

Abstract

Large-scale immigration has turned Singapore into a highly diverse setting, where migrants and local-born Singaporeans encounter one another on a daily basis. In the past decade, the city-state has seen rising debates and contestations over racism, despite being known as a racially harmonious society. This article situates the public discourse on racism and “Chinese privilege” in the context of superdiversity and examines its wider implications for theorization and policy. Approaching the paradox of superdiversity from a political economy perspective, we investigate how three sets of factors have contributed to the rising public discourse on racism not only between migrants and locals but also among local-born Singaporeans: i) immigration regime and the strategy toward a knowledge economy, ii) new patterns of electoral politics, and iii) the impacts of China’s growing influences in Southeast Asia. This article offers

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two broader theoretical implications for the scholarship on migration and race relations in a context of superdiversity. First, the paradoxical co-existence of superdiversity and racism obtains not only between migrants and natives, as many studies have shown, but also between native races in the host society. Second, diversifications and new forms of contestations and racism are not only a result of the immigration regime and domestic politics of the host country, but are also shaped by the international political economy, as evidenced by the way in which the rise of China has intensified contestations on race relations in Singapore.

**Keywords**

superdiversity – racism – Chinese privilege – political economy – migration – Singapore

**Abstract**

Large-scale migration has made Singapore a multicultural and multiracial society, with Chinese, Malays, Indians, and others having lived in harmony since the nation’s independence in 1965. The ruling party, the People’s Action Party (PAP), promotes multiculturalism and multiracialism as key national values, while designing an array of policies to foster racial integration and harmony (Chua 2017). For example, the Ethnic Integration Policy proportionally mixes the four main races in public housing in order to prevent geographical segregation by race. The Singapore government launched the Racial Harmony Day in 1997 to celebrate a harmonious

1 **Introduction**

Singapore is a multiracial society, where Chinese, Malays, Indians, and others have lived largely in peace since the nation’s independence in 1965. The ruling party, the People’s Action Party (PAP), promotes multiculturalism and multiracialism as key national values, while designing an array of policies to foster racial integration and harmony (Chua 2017). For example, the Ethnic Integration Policy proportionally mixes the four main races in public housing in order to prevent geographical segregation by race. The Singapore government launched the Racial Harmony Day in 1997 to celebrate a harmonious
society. Paradoxically, in a social and political environment where racial harmony assumes paramount importance, the discussions on race, particularly racial grievances and tensions, were considered “sensitive issues” that ought not be publicly debated (Chua 2003; Goh 2013).

Over the past decade or so, however, public debates and contestations over race in Singapore have been rising. The contestations started with the backlash against immigration since the late 2000s, with some native Singaporeans expressing racist attitudes toward migrants. This was followed by the growing public debates on race relations among the locals. Alternative views have emerged to counter the official narrative by highlighting “un-harmonious” race relations, such as racial inequalities and racism (Ang and Chew 2021; Holman and Arunachalam 2015). The recent debate on “Chinese privilege” is a case in point. The debate centers around the question whether the Chinese, the majority race, enjoy social and institutionalized power and privilege over minorities (Goh and Chong 2020; Zainal and Abdullah 2021).

This essay introduces the term paradox of superdiversity to capture the puzzling rise of public discourse over racism in Singapore. The concept of superdiversity not only describes increasing diversities in terms of ethnicity and other parameters but also provides a useful lens through which to examine “power, politics and policy” (Meissner and Vertovec 2015). We will demonstrate how the new political economy, both as a cause and effect of diversifications, has interacted with multidimensional race relations in Singapore, fueling debates and contestations over racism and Chinese privilege. We focus on three sets of political economic factors: i) the strategy to build a knowledge-intensive economy, which requires the recruitment of foreign professionals and the constant skill-upgrading of the local labor force; ii) new patterns of electoral politics in the context of an immigration backlash; iii) the rise of China and its impacts for Singapore. These factors, furthermore, are either drivers or consequences of diversifications.

Most studies on superdiversity focus on the experiences in the West where diverse immigrant groups from the global South have transformed the White-dominant societies (Foner, Duyvendak and Kasinitz 2019). Asia has witnessed the fastest growth in international migration in the past two decades (McAuliffe, Bauloz, Nguyen and Qu 2019). Asian metropolitan centers such as Singapore have received large numbers of migrants, who mainly come from within Asia. Race relations in these cities are different from those in Western societies, where relations between Whites and non-Whites constitute the focus of research (Raghuram 2022). While a few scholars have employed the term of superdiversity to describe the changes in Singapore (Goh 2019; Vertovec 2015), there is a need to further investigate how diversifications interact with race relations, particularly in the context of the rising public discourse on racism.
Our inquiry focuses not only on national politics but also extends the scope of research to the international political economy, which has been largely neglected in the literature on migration.

Data for this study are drawn from government documents, local newspapers, online postings, and local survey reports. Government documents include policy compilations, ministers’ speeches, and parliamentary debate records. We selected three major local newspapers that represent three main languages (English, Chinese, and Malay) in Singapore. We also employ materials from online blogs and discussion forums to understand opinions in cyber space, but these data are triangulated with other sources to ensure accuracy. These data have been supplemented by the authors’ participatory observations by way of taking part in various social and cultural functions involving the multi-ethnic population in the country.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section Two reviews the literature on the impacts of super-diversification on racism and race relations. Section Three documents how Singapore has been transformed into a society of superdiversity, followed by an overview of the public discourse on racism and “Chinese privilege.” Section Four examines how the nation's new political economy has interacted with diversifications. Section Five analyses the new dynamics of state-society relations and its effects on the public discourse on racism. The article concludes with theoretical and policy implications.

2 Superdiversity and Racism: Paradoxical Co-existence

Since the 1990s increasingly complex patterns of global migration flows and settlement have emerged. The concept of superdiversity describes the heterogeneity of urban societies resulting from multidimensional diversifications due to immigration. These dimensions include, but are not limited to, country of origin, legal status, gender, age, religion, language, human capital, and diverse local responses (Meissner and Vertovec 2015; Vertovec 2007; 2019).

Vertovec, who coined the concept, does not suggest that superdiversity would reduce racism or inequality. He argues instead that superdiversity would lead to new patterns of inequality and prejudice including racism. However, he also notes that the “presence and everyday interaction of people from the world” may give rise to new cosmopolitan orientations and attitudes, which possibly yield positive benefits for intergroup relations (Vertovec 2007: 1045–6). The subsequent studies have found both positive and negative effects of superdiversity on race relations.

Examining the lived experience of localized social relationships in London, Wessendorf (2014) argues that the experience of diversity has become so
ordinary that there is no direct hostility or conflict between different racial and ethnic groups, at least in public and semi-public places. Tran (2019) finds that young people who grow up in more diverse communities, such as in New York City, are more comfortable with diversity when they transition into adulthood. Padilla, Azevedo and Olmos-Alcaraz (2015: 632) demonstrate that people could get along well in a super-diverse context, where “heterogeneity is common and experienced on a daily basis, such that ‘difference/otherness’ is internalized and may be transformed into a quotidian positive feature.” Other studies find that the presence of superdiversity does not necessarily mitigate intergroup tensions and would even give rise to new forms of racism. Mepschen (2019) shows that in the Netherlands diversifications give rise to a common notion that Dutch culture is threatened by outsiders. Research also reveals that superdiversity does not significantly alter the dominance of the mainstream groups in the host society and that racial inequalities and power imbalances are often reproduced in super-diverse settings (Alba and Duyvendak, 2019; Foner et al. 2019).

Back and Sinha (2016) highlight the paradoxical co-existence of racism and multi-culture. On the one hand, in the super-diverse setting young migrants are able to employ convivial tools to make “a liveable home in the micro-public space.” On the other, superdiversity does not do away with existing racism and even gives rise to new forms of racism. Thus, migrants must find a way to navigate “barriers and limits of racism” in the host society (2016: 530).

We introduce the theme of paradox of superdiversity to refer to the persistence of tense race relations and the emergence of new forms of racism in a super-diverse society. It is a paradox for at least two reasons. First, superdiversity literally suggests a positive development toward the co-existence of diverse racial and ethnic groups in a society, but the process of diversification is often accompanied by heightened inter-racial or inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts. Second, the quotidian and commonplace existence of difference and diversity in society, which increases the awareness and acceptance of others, stands in parallel with racial and group discriminations.

In the case of Singapore, decades of immigration and racial mixes in marriages and living space have produced super-diverse public spaces in the city-state (Vertovec 2015; Ye 2017). But the city-state has witnessed a strong backlash against immigration in the past two decades (Ang 2018; Gomes 2014; Liu 2014; Ortiga 2015; Yeoh and Lam 2016; Zhan and Zhou 2020). With growing anti-migrant sentiment and xenophobia, migrants are racialized and targeted in online forums, media reports, and daily interactions. This even takes place between co-ethnics, as local-born Chinese and Indians discriminate against co-ethnic migrants (Ho and Kathiravelu 2022; Liu 2014; Ortiga 2015).

The case of Singapore offers a unique opportunity to examine new forms of racism. The focus of the literature has so far been mainly on the relations
between natives and migrants. The rising contestations over racism among Singapore’s native races thus presents a puzzle and warrants the investigation of whether and how this is a result of diversifications. Furthermore, Singapore is the only nation-state outside China with a Chinese majority. This provides a distinct angle from which to examine the impact of an ascending China on race relations in a receiving country, filling a crucial gap in the scholarship of superdiversity and race relations.

3 Contestations over Racism and Chinese Privilege

3.1 Diversifications of the Host Society

Singapore’s population totaled 5.7 million in 2020, including 3.5 million citizens and 0.5 million permanent residents (PRs) and 1.7 million temporary migrants. The foreign-born population, including naturalized citizens, PRs and temporary migrants, accounted for 46 percent, which was among the highest in the world (DOS 2021a; United Nations 2019). Migrants in the city-state can be classified into two broad categories: foreign talent and foreign workers. Foreign talent refers to highly skilled professionals or middle-skilled workers, while foreign workers are low-wage transient workers who work in the sectors such as domestic service, construction, and marine shipyard. Within each category, migrants are differentiated and stratified based on salary, skill level, and occupation (Yang, Yang and Zhan 2017; Yeoh and Lam, 2016).

Migrants in Singapore come from a diverse range of source countries, mostly within Asia, with Malaysia, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, India, Japan, and South Korea among the largest sources (United Nations 2019). The city-state intends to maintain the racial composition of the resident population (citizens and PRs), with 74 percent Chinese, 13 percent Malays, 9 percent Indians, and 3 percent other races. Thus, permanent residents and naturalized citizens are admitted roughly in line with this composition. However, within each race, migrants come from different countries and have diverse cultural orientations, and they may not identify themselves as the same race/group. For example, Chinese migrants come from Malaysia, mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other countries or places. Malays come from Malaysia and Indonesia while Indians originate mainly in India, though they are also from overseas Indian diasporas, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Inter-racial and transnational marriages are another driving force of diversification. Interracial marriages refer to those in which spouses belong to different categories of race in terms of official classification. Transnational marriage means that a Singaporean citizen marries a person of another nationality. Currently, one in five marriages in Singapore is between two different races.
and nearly two in five marriages involve a foreign spouse (Strategy Group 2020; Yeoh, Chee, Anant and Lam 2021). These ratios are among the highest in the world. Interracial and transnational marriages have increased the proportion of mixed races, which fall outside the official CMIO categorization, i.e., Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (Chua 2021; Rocha and Yeoh 2021).

### 3.2 Contestations over Racism in Singapore

Attaching paramount importance to racial harmony, the Singapore state discourages public discussions of racism and racist behavior as it believes that this would harm race relations. There were several racial incidents in the 1990s and 2000s, but the authority quickly intervened and punished the perpetrators to prevent prolonged public discussions. The state also uses the Sedition Act to penalize those whose actions “promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes” (Neo 2011).

Nevertheless, the issues of race and racism were taken to the center of the public discourse in the course of the past decade, as evidenced by the frequency of racism as a topic in local newspaper articles and reports. We have searched for articles discussing racism in Singapore in three major local newspapers in three languages: English (The Straits Times, \textit{ST}), Chinese (Lianhe Zaobao) and Malay (Berita Harian and Berita Minggu).\footnote{We do not include the newspapers in Tamil as Singapore’s only Tamil language newspaper, Tamil Murasu, has a rather small circulation compared with the other three languages. \textit{Berita Minggu} is the Sunday edition of \textit{Berita Harian}.} The results show an upward trend, particularly since 2015. The rising trend is the most remarkable in the \textit{ST}, but it is also notable in the Chinese and Malay newspapers (Figure 1). In the \textit{ST}, the number of articles discussing racism in Singapore increased from fewer than 30 before 2011 to 54 in 2012, and further to 85 in 2017 and 111 in 2019. In 2020 and 2021, the discussion of racism experienced an even more rapid growth, with the article count reaching 264 in the first 10 months of 2021 (Figure 1).

The content analysis of newspaper articles reveals that the discourse of racism in the early 2010s was partly driven by an immigration backlash. The anti-migrant and xenophobic sentiments intensified after the 2008 financial crisis as migrants, particularly highly skilled ones, were blamed for taking jobs from locals. Local-born Singaporeans vented their frustration with and hatred of migrants in online forums, often in racist terms, and these sentiments also spread from online space to personal interactions (Gomes 2014; Zhan and Zhou 2020). The situation had become so serious that twelve civil society groups released a statement in 2014 to voice concerns about the nation’s surge in racism and xenophobia (Tai 2014).
The immigration backlash and racism against migrants has also been observed in other countries (Amin 2013). What makes the case of Singapore different is that the rising public discourse on racism is also about tensions between native races, especially after 2015. This appears puzzling because it seems that the immigration backlash has the effect of strengthening interracial solidarity and reducing tensions among natives. For example, Chinese Singaporeans tend to identify more with local Malays and Indians than with new Chinese migrants, even though they are of the same race as the latter (Liu 2014).

During the pandemic in 2020–21, the heated debate on racism and several race-related incidents compelled the authorities to acknowledge that Singapore might not have been racially as harmonious as previously thought. The growing discussions of racism led the ST to publish a long opinion piece in December 2020, reporting on interviews with officials and civil society leaders of minority races about their own experience of racism in Singapore (Chua 2020). Several race-related incidents in 2021 triggered a wave of heated debates. For instance, in early May, a 55-year-old Indian Singaporean woman was allegedly assaulted and subjected to racial slurs by a Chinese Singaporean man, for not wearing a mask while doing brisk walking (Menon 2021). Also in May, a Malay/Muslim couple accused the People’s Association (a government-sponsored grassroots
organization) of racism for using their wedding photograph without permission to create a standee for the celebration of Hari Raya Puasa, a religious holiday marking the end of Ramadan. The Association apologized but denied any racist intention (Ang 2021). K. Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Law, commented on a viral video showing a man making racist remarks at an interracial couple, “I used to believe that Singapore was moving in the right direction on racial tolerance and harmony. Based on recent events, I am not so sure anymore” (Leo 2021). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged the fragility of Singapore’s racial harmony in his National Day Rally speech in August 2021.4

3.3 Debating “Chinese Privilege”

The contestations over racism in Singapore center on how minority races such as Malays and Indians are subjected to racial inequality and discrimination. Sangeetha Thanapal, a social activist, coined the term “Chinese privilege” to suggest that Singaporean Chinese have enjoyed institutionalized power and privilege over minority races (Koh and Thanapal 2015). The term has triggered heated debates in media and among scholars for at least three reasons.

First, the term suggests the existence of systemic and structural racism in Singapore, which echoes the debate over Critical Race Theory in the United States (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). However, Singapore has a very different history and racial composition from that in America (Zhou and Liu 2016). During the colonial period, all four races in Singapore were colonial subjects under British rule. After the nation’s independence, the ruling PAP implemented policies designed to restrict Chinese culture and Chinese-language schools in the name of preventing Chinese chauvinism in the 1960s and 1970s (Lim 2021). In addition, the use of English as the working language and the transition to an export-oriented economy had rendered the Chinese-speaking population disadvantaged in education and the labor market. By 2015, nearly 20 percent of Chinese (aged 15 and over) could still speak only Mandarin or one or more Chinese dialect (DOS 2016: 17). This group of Chinese, mostly in their 50s and above, have to work in low-wage jobs due to language limitations. They are contrasted with English-speaking Chinese, who have been well positioned in Singapore’s globalized economy since the 1970s.

Second, the notion of Chinese privilege challenges the ideology of meritocracy, which the state promotes as a national value. Studies find that there is a strong popular belief in meritocracy in Singapore (Chua 2017: 134–135; Mathews 2016). Advocates of the notion of Chinese privilege contend that the system often reproduces the power and privilege of Chinese and perpetuates

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4 The speech can be found at: https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2021-English.
racial inequalities between Chinese and minority races. This is against the principle of meritocracy (Zainal and Abdullah 2021).

Third, the concept of Chinese privilege challenges the state’s ideology and policy of racial harmony. Through the lens of Chinese privilege, policies that were previously designed to promote racial harmony and racial integration might be viewed as measures to preserve Chinese privilege. For instance, the Ethnic Integration Policy regulates that the four official races must be proportionally mixed in public housing. Currently the maximum proportions in each neighborhood and each block are 84 and 87 percent for Chinese, 22 and 25 percent for Malays, and 12 and 15 percent for Indians and Others. Critics argue that the policy ensures a majority of Chinese in every neighborhood/block, so that minority races are in the minority in all neighborhoods (Neo 2017). In addition, the racial quotas have negatively affected minority property owners, as they might find it harder to sell their flats or be forced to sell below the market price due to policy restrictions (Lee 2021).

3.4 Rising Public Discourse on Racism

On 9 June 2021, Lianhe Zaobao, the most-widely circulated Chinese-language newspaper in Singapore, published an editorial suggesting three reasons for the intense contestations on race and racism (Lianhe Zaobao 2021). First, the Covid-19 pandemic puts a great stress on life and livelihood, which makes people look inward and become less tolerant of others. Second, social media provide the space for extreme views on race and racism, which often exaggerate interracial tensions. Third, foreign ideas such as Critical Race Theory have been imported into Singapore, and the use of terms such as “Chinese privilege” exacerbates anxiety regarding race relations. The editorial caused a backlash from scholars in Singapore and overseas, 271 of whom signed an open letter to the newspaper asserting that the editorial ignores structural racism and the history of racial stereotyping in Singapore. The letter read: “We believe that the pandemic and social media have simply revealed long-standing fissures and the everyday discrimination experienced by racial minorities in Singapore.”

Social media played an important role in driving the discourse of race and racism. Our examination of race-related incidents since 2011 shows that more than 90 percent of these incidents first attracted public attention in social media. Some incidents started with racist online postings while others drew public attention when videos or accounts of offline racist incidents were posted on social media. It is also likely that social media has simply provided

6 For a list of these racist incidents, see https://www.visakanv.com/sg/examples-of-racism/.
Paradox of Superdiversity

The editorial and the open letter both note how livelihood issues, including everyday stress, employment, and housing, have driven the discourse on race and racism. However, both sides limit their focus to the race-livelihood dynamics among native races. This overlooks how race relations and livelihood issues in Singapore have been profoundly transformed by immigration and the integration of the economy into the global economy. The paradox of superdiversity, which draws attention to new forms of racism due to immigration, and the political economy behind this paradox, will broaden our understanding of race-livelihood dynamics and contestations over racism. The next two sections examine how the new political economy, interacting with diversifications, has transformed state-society relations in Singapore, leading to rising contestations over racism.

4 The New Political Economy

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of a new political economy in Singapore, characterized by three significant changes: the efforts to build a knowledge-based economy; competitive electoral politics; and the impacts of China’s ascendance. While the forces behind these changes date to the 1990s, it was not until the 2010s that they had coalesced and given rise to notable new patterns of political economy.

4.1 Building a Knowledge Economy and the Immigration Backlash

Singapore achieved rapid economic growth after 1965, rising to become one of the four Asian Tiger economies by the 1980s. After that, the country strove to move up the global value chains by concentrating greater effort on high value-added sectors. In the 1990s, particularly after the 1997 financial crisis, the government decided to build a knowledge-intensive economy, which entailed a policy to attract highly skilled migrants from abroad.

The declining fertility rate also contributed to the new immigration policy. In 2001, the total fertility rate decreased to 1.4, much lower than the replacement level of 2.1. Before the new millennium, Singapore had imported low-skilled and high-skilled migrants to fill job vacancies. The policy to attract foreign talent in the 2000s was different in that it encouraged the settlement of highly skilled migrants to replenish the population (Yeoh and Lam, 2016).
While the city-state wanted to maintain the racial composition of the permanent population (including citizens and PRs), co-ethnic natives and migrants differentiate themselves on the basis of their place of origin, language, culture, and other parameters.

Immigration and the diversifications of the host society have caused a backlash from natives. From 2000 to 2010, Singapore's total population grew from 4.0 to 5.1 million, largely due to immigration (DOS 2021a). Natives complained of migrants stealing jobs, driving down wages, buying up properties, and putting a stress on public resources such as transportation and education. They also accused migrants of lacking loyalty or not being integrated into the host society, thus diluting Singapore's identity and culture. Most of these accusations targeted high-skilled rather than low-skilled migrants (Yeoh and Lam 2016; Zhan, Huang and Zhou, 2022). The backlash grew in intensity in the late 2000s. Due to widespread discontent regarding immigration, the PAP had only received 60.1 percent of the popular vote in the 2011 general election, the lowest in its history (Thompson 2014). In 2013, a population white paper released by the government, which envisioned an increase in the population to 6.9 million by 2030, caused the largest public protest since the 1970s.

In response to the immigration backlash, the state tightened the inflow of highly skilled migrants, while giving priority to local citizens in areas such as employment, education, health care, and housing (Zhan, Huang and Zhou, 2022). The Fair Consideration Framework was launched in 2013 to urge employers to hire Singaporeans first. Since then, the government has further restricted hiring foreign professionals. The measures include imposing employment quotas on hiring middle-skilled foreign workers, increasing salary thresholds for granting work passes, and monitoring employers’ hiring practices. Meanwhile, the state established the SkillsFuture Scheme to support the skills upgrading of Singaporean workers. Nevertheless, as the city-state's economy depends on a large migrant labor force, immigration continues to be a thorny issue in public debates and political campaigns.

4.2 Competitive Electoral Politics

The PAP has been the only ruling party in Singapore since 1965. From the 1960s to the 2000s, the party won majority votes and took almost all parliamentary seats in all elections, and opposition parties posed little or no threat. However, the political ground has been shifting in the past decade, characterized by increasingly competitive elections and the diminishing popular support for the PAP (Welsh and Chang 2019), largely due to the immigration backlash. Along with the PAP’s poor electoral performance in 2011, the Workers’ Party won six parliament seats, a landmark gain for an opposition party. In the
presidential election held in August of the same year, Tony Tan, former Deputy Prime Minister, seen “as the preferred candidate” of the PAP, won by a slim margin of 7,269 votes out of over two million votes cast.

The PAP won a victory of 69.9 percent of votes in the 2015 general election partly because the public mourned the recent passing of Singapore’s founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who co-founded the PAP (Tan and Boey 2017). Nevertheless, the Workers’ Party retained the six parliament seats it won in 2011. The 2020 general election, held amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, saw the PAP share of the popular votes decrease to 61.2 percent, with the Workers’ Party unprecedentedly winning 10 out of 93 parliament seats. Furthermore, three other constituencies, which carry 11 parliament seats, were closely contested by opposition parties. The new normal of competitive elections has undermined the dominance of the PAP on race and racism and opened up a space for public debates and contestations, which will be discussed in the next section.

4.3 Rise of China

Previous studies on racism in a super-diverse context mainly focus on the host country’s immigration regime and domestic dynamics. The case of Singapore, however, suggests that changes in the international political economy also shape race relations and the discourse on race. The rise of China is arguably the most important geopolitical event in contemporary Asia. Singapore has been greatly affected by China’s growing economic influence. Economic relations between the two countries developed rapidly after 2001 when China joined the WTO, and even more so with the launching of China’s Belt Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. China has become Singapore’s largest trade partner and the volumes of their bilateral trade have been steadily increasing since 2010 (Chiang 2019; Liu, Fan and Lim 2021). Singapore has been China’s largest foreign investor country since 2013. In 2018, there were 998 Singaporean investment projects in China, and 24,869 Singaporean firms operated in China, while about 7,500 mainland Chinese enterprises conducted business in Singapore (Xinhua Silk Road 2019).

The rise of China has multiple impacts on Singapore. First, mainland China has become the second largest source of immigration, accounting for 18 percent of the foreign-born population in Singapore, second only to Malaysia (United Nations 2019). Many Chinese diasporas in Singapore have acquired permanent residency and citizenship, and constitute an integral part of the host society. Second, the ballooning volumes of trade and investment between the two countries have created ample well-paid job opportunities for both native Singaporeans and Chinese diasporas. The state’s policy toward new Chinese immigrants is two-fold. It enacted policies to facilitate these immigrants’ integration into the country’s multiracial and multicultural society and
develop Singaporean identity, which should be above their ethnic identity. Meanwhile, the state engages the immigrants and their associations to expand business networks with China (Liu 2021). In addition, Singaporean Chinese are encouraged to learn Mandarin and Chinese culture so that they have the necessary skills to conduct business in China or work for China-related businesses in Singapore. Third, Singapore has served as a springboard for Chinese enterprises to expand their businesses in the Southeast Asian region. The 7,500 Singapore-based Chinese enterprises established their regional headquarters, R&D, or manufacturing centers in the city-state (Lin 2018). This has not only amplified China’s economic influence in the region but has also created business and employment opportunities for both local-born Singaporeans and new Chinese immigrants. However, economic opportunities deriving from China’s impacts are not equally shared among all ethnic members of Singaporean society, and this has constituted a new source of inequality, as discussed below.

5 Beyond Diversity: Changing Dynamics of State-Society Relations

The peculiarity of the paradox of superdiversity in Singapore is that the coexistence of diversifications and racism not only manifests itself in native-migrant tensions but also takes place among native races. This section examines how three factors — livelihood pressure, new forms of inequality, and the politicization of racial discourse — have led to contestations over racism among native races. These factors are a result of the working of the new political economy, which has altered the dynamics of state-society relations in Singapore. In other words, it is not the diversity itself but the new political and economic forces that are responsible for new forms of racism and contestations over race.

5.1 Heightened Livelihood Pressure

The tightening of immigration since 2011 has not significantly reduced pressure on natives’ livelihood. This is because building a knowledge-intensive economy requires the recruitment of a sufficient number of highly skilled foreign professionals. Although the growth of the migrant population slowed after 2011, its proportion in the total population has remained around 45 percent (United Nations 2019). The skill training program for natives, though helpful, puts further stress on members of the local workforce by urging them to constantly upgrade their skills. The livelihood pressure has amplified tensions among native races, particularly between Chinese and minority races, for at least two reasons.
First, natives must compete with migrants and with each other to find and retain a decent job. The immense stress on livelihood and intense competition in the labor market have made minority races increasingly sensitive to real or perceived discrimination in the workplace. The Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore conducted a survey on race, religion, and language in 2013 and 2018, surveying approximately 4,000 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents each time (Mathews, Lim and Selvarajan 2019). A striking finding of the two surveys is that perceived work-related discrimination among Malays and Indians, the two main minority races, had increased over the five-year period, while their perceived discrimination in public spaces or in receiving public services remained largely unchanged (Table 1). Minority races also reported much more discrimination than Chinese. In 2018, Malay respondents who reported discrimination at work, when applying for a job, and when seeking a job promotion, accounted for 35, 52, and 51 percent, respectively. The figures for Indians were 32, 47, and 45 percent. By contrast, the figures for Chinese respondents were only between 10 and 14 percent (Table 1).

Our analysis of social media postings also reveals that perceived discrimination over work-related issues was frequently voiced by members of minority races. It was reported in April 2016 that a manager in a chain bakery made racist remarks toward a Malay female during a job interview. The job interviewee posted the discriminatory experience on social media, causing the bakery to

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<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Frequency of respondents’ perceiving discriminatory treatment in 2013 and 2018, percentage</th>
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<td>Malay</td>
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<td>Others</td>
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Note: the numbers in 2018 are presented in bold if they are higher than those in 2013.
SOURCE: MATHEWS ET AL. (2019: 35–36)
fire the manager subsequently (Ho and Wei 2016). Many online postings by members of minority races claim that they could not even get an interview after the hiring company learnt about their race or religion. It should be noted that the issues of race and religion are often intertwined. Nearly all Malays in Singapore are Muslims, and most Indians practice Hinduism or another religion that originated in South Asia.

Second, the discrimination against migrants may spill over and escalate tensions among native races. Many migrants in Singapore belong to the same racial categories of natives. The discrimination against migrants of minority races, particularly Indian migrants, sometimes spreads to native Indians. Due to its advancement in high-tech industries, India has been a major source of highly skilled migrants. According to the UN data, the number of Indian migrants in Singapore increased to 150,082 in 2015, a nearly ten-fold increase over 14,019 in 1990 (Yang et al. 2017). The jobs that Indian professional migrants take carry high salaries and social prestige, which are also desired by natives. This has become a cause for the tension, particularly during economic downturns.

In August 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, Singaporean netizens posted the LinkedIn profiles of Indian employees of top investment and financial companies including the Temasek Holdings, DBS Bank, and Standard Chartered, alluding to how these firms had hired Indian migrants over native Singaporeans. The Temasek Holdings, the nation’s sovereign wealth fund, accused these postings of being racist, divisive, and discriminatory. It also indicated that some of the targeted employees were Indian Singaporean citizens, though it was unclear whether they were local-born or foreign-born (Ng and Yong 2020). Another example is the controversy over the “Singapore-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA),” a bilateral free-trade agreement signed in June 2005. Some natives suspected that the agreement led to the inflow of too many Indian migrants, demonstrated by the notable presence in the IT and financial sectors of the latter (Chua, Koay and Zhang 2021). Minister Shanmugam argued that xenophobia against Indian migrants had exacerbated racism toward native Indians because not all could distinguish between Indians born in Singapore and those born overseas (Abdullah 2021).

It should be noted that discrimination against migrants has not spread to native Chinese or Malays. Xenophobia toward Chinese migrants, which has also been intense in the recent decade, has not affected native Chinese, as they are the majority race. In the case of Malays, although Malaysia is the largest source of the foreign-born population in Singapore, migrants from the country, including both Chinese and Malays, have been much less discriminated against than their counterparts from China and India. This is because
of cultural affinity and close people-to-people connections between Malaysia and Singapore, which were one country before Singapore’s separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965.

5.2 New Forms of Inequalities

The new political economy has created new inequalities, which may enlarge the gulfs among native races. Singapore has implemented a highly selective immigration policy, which only allows the highly skilled to apply for permanent residency and citizenship while excluding low-skilled migrants. As a result, permanent immigrants, including new citizens and PRs, usually have a higher income than the general population. Although no statistics on the income gap between native citizens and immigrants is available, popular sentiment regarding such inequality is palpable, as natives often complain about how immigrants have taken away high-wage jobs in the finance and high-tech sectors and reside in upscale real estate and neighborhoods (Yeoh and Lam 2016; Zhan and Zhou 2020). The recruitment and naturalization of high-income Chinese and Indian migrants might have perpetuated income inequality among native races. For historical reasons, Malays on average earned lower income than Chinese and Indians in Singapore (Lee 2004). Between 2010 and 2020, the income gap between Malay and Chinese households in Singapore slightly increased while the income gap between Malays and Indians grew even wider (DOS 2021b: 13).

The impact of a rising China may have also created new inequalities because economic relations with China have only advantaged certain ethnic groups in Singapore. For instance, fluency in Mandarin gives native Chinese an edge in looking for jobs that require interactions with Chinese clientele or that handle investment in China. Our examination of social media postings reveals that a frequent complaint from members of minority races is that they are not considered for jobs that require Mandarin fluency.

The language advantage of native Chinese has been linked to the controversy over the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools in the debate on “Chinese privilege.” Singapore implements a bilingual policy that requires students learning both English and the mother tongue: Chinese students learn Mandarin, Malay students learn Malay, while Indian students learn Tamil or another major Indian language. The rationale is that English will be used as the working language, while the mother tongue serves to preserve traditions and strengthen a person’s sense of cultural belonging. Singapore greatly increased the significance of the mother tongue in the education system in 1979 (Sim 2016). For Chinese, the SAP was introduced to preserve traditional Chinese values, and students must study both English and Chinese as the first languages in
such schools. The SAP schools have grown in significance with the strengthening of Sino-Singapore economic relations (Tan and Ng 2011), and these schools have received generous government support and are positioned to admit top students. However, minority races are practically excluded from admission due to the language barrier. This has become a key issue in the recent controversy over Chinese privilege (Zainal and Abdullah 2021).

Not all Singaporean Chinese benefit from the economic relations with China or from the SAP schools. People who can speak both English and Chinese may find it easier to get a job that requires fluency in Mandarin, but those who only speak Chinese are severely disadvantaged in the labor market. This is because most jobs, including those in Chinese firms or Singaporean firms that conduct businesses with China, require English fluency. In addition, Chinese who only speak English do not benefit much from the rise of China in terms of linguistic skills. This group has been expanding as English has become the most spoken language at home in Singapore (Ong 2021; Toh and Liu 2021).

5.3 The Politicization of Racial Discourses

Competitive electoral politics between the PAP and opposition parties undermined the former’s dominance in the discourse over race. This has led to more political debates over race issues and the politicization of race. A search for the key words “racist” and “racism” in the database of Singapore’s parliamentary debates reveals an increasing trend of debates on race and racism over the past decade.7 Between 2011 and 2015, five parliamentary sessions discussed racist acts or racism, mainly in response to racism in online postings. Over the following five years (2016–2020), debates on racism occurred in eight parliamentary sessions. During these sessions, the opposition parties questioned whether the PAP’s laws and policies were effective for dealing with racial discrimination, whereas the PAP stressed the importance of using laws to counter racism. In 2021, the debates on racism intensified, with twenty parliamentary sessions on racism from January to October. The most contentious debates centered around foreign-talent policy and racism. The opposition parties argued that the government’s immigration policy reduced job opportunities for native Singaporeans, while the PAP accused members of the opposition of stirring xenophobia and racism. The heated debates in these parliamentary sessions suggest that the issue of race has been politicized in the context of competitive electoral politics, and race and racism are now openly debated in the political sphere, leading to contestations over racism in society at large.

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7 The database is accessible at https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/home.
The race-based government policies, which the PAP argues are efforts to preserve a multi-culture and promote racial harmony, are also increasingly questioned and debated. An example is the CMIO framework and policies built on the framework. As noted earlier, there have been more and more calls for the state to revise the rigid model due to immigration and interracial marriages. Race-based policies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy are also subject to debates and even criticisms, forcing the PAP to clarify its stance on these issues. The PAP felt compelled to accommodate some popular demands from minority races for the purpose of winning electoral support (Abdullah 2016). The issue of the hijab is a case in point. The hijab is both a racial and a religious matter in Singapore, as almost all Malays are Muslims. The state disallowed hijab wearing by children in schools and employees in some uniformed public services, such as nursing, the police force, and the army. In the past decade, however, the PAP has softened its stance, and in 2021 it permitted female Muslim staff in public health care to wear the hijab at work (Low 2021).

6 Conclusion

Large-scale immigration has given rise to a society of superdiversity in Singapore. Despite frequent racial interactions and an emphasis on racial harmony, new forms of racism and contestations over racism have been rising in the course of the past decade. We have analyzed how this is related to the emergence of a new political economy in the city-state. The strategy toward a knowledge economy since the late 1990s has led Singapore to import large numbers of migrants. The immigration and settlement of migrants, particularly those who are highly skilled, caused a strong backlash from native citizens, giving rise to new forms of racism against migrants. Meanwhile, the immigration backlash eroded popular support for the PAP, which must now face competitive elections. This opens up public space for discussions and debates on race relations. The rise of China and the deepening of Sino-Singapore economic relations have advantaged some groups of native Chinese, which might have contributed to new forms of inequalities and further intensified the debate on Chinese privilege. These political economic factors, both as a cause and effect of the transition to a superdiverse society, have exposed existing fissures among native races, fueling the debates on race.

This paper offers two broader theoretical implications for the scholarship on migration and race relations in a context of superdiversity. First, the paradoxical co-existence of superdiversity and racism obtains not only between migrants and natives, as many studies have shown, but also between native
races in the host society. Second, diversifications and new forms of contestations and racism are not only a result of the immigration regime and domestic politics of the host country, but are also shaped by the international political economy, as evidenced by the way in which the rise of China has intensified contestations on race relations in Singapore.

Our findings have policy implications. First, new forms of racism against migrants, despite having the effect of uniting native residents, may exacerbate racial problems and spread tensions widely in the host society, as diversifications have blurred the boundaries between migrants and natives. Thus, policy makers should make further interventions to mitigate racism against migrants. Second, immigration as a strategy of economic development or a demographic solution is likely to create new inequalities due either to the selectivity of migration policy or to changing international relations. Policy makers should be attentive to these new inequalities and implement measures to narrow the gaps in areas such as income, employment, and education.

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