

# Undoing Chinese Privilege in Singapore through Reading with the Other

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## Abstract

Contemporary cultural studies in USA have seen the rise of whiteness studies that seek to understand the nature of white privilege and its conditions of possibility. Despite calls from several activists and academics to look at how this resonates and yet deviates from Chinese privilege in Singapore, they have not gained much traction in local discussions in and outside the academia. Thus in this paper, I come as a subject, conditioned by middle-class Chinese heteronormative patriarchal privilege in Singapore but yet belonging to what is perceived to be a western religion, Christianity, to engage with the question of 'Chinese Privilege' through a contrapuntal reading of a story from the Bible in the book of Daniel, chapter 1 with Alfian Sa'at's anthology, *Malay Sketches* (2012). The aim of this paper is to seek the undoing of my Chinese privilege while attempting to avoid the narcissism of navel-gazing in order to think deeper what it means following Gayatri Spivak, to 'learn to learn from below'. I achieve this through surfacing the struggle of hiddenness in the story of Daniel by inflecting it through experiences of Malay marginalisation so as to alienate a text that is often (mis)used to reinforce epistemologies of ignorance to Chinese privilege.

**Keywords** – Chinese Privilege, Critical Race Theory, Bible, Social Epistemology, Contrapuntal Reading.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary cultural studies in USA have seen the rise of whiteness studies that seek to understand the nature of White privilege and its conditions of possibility. Despite calls from several activists and academics to look at how this resonates and yet deviates from Chinese privilege in Singapore (which I discuss later), they have not gained much traction in local discussions in and outside the academia. Thus in this paper I focus on the intersection between epistemology, privilege and intersubjectivity within the context of Singapore. Part of this endeavour implicates what Gayatri Spivak had previously talked about as 'unlearning of one's privilege' (Post-colonial Critic 42). While it is important to understand the conditions of possibility that enables the privilege one enjoys, Spivak later cautions strongly against the possibility of being overly indulgent in deconstructing it.<sup>1</sup> Rather she calls for moving away from what I see as the narcissism of navel-gazing to 'learning to learn from below' (Death of a Discipline 100). In

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/21> (last accessed 26 Nov 2017).

order to do so, I take another look<sup>2</sup> at the old story of Daniel and his friends training in the Babylonian courts found in chapter 1 of the book of Daniel in the Bible in the specific context of Singapore through a contrapuntal reading<sup>3</sup> with Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches* (2012). Maintaining a critically reflexive stance, I seek to understand how privilege operates to co-opt the Bible as part of its discursive power as well as to explore how it could be undone.

Needless to say, Chinese communities are not all the same. The particular Chinese community I belong to happens to be part of a religion that is a relative minority – Christianity. According to the last census in 2010, Christianity in Singapore accounts for 18.3% of the population (Singapore Department of Statistics 13). A study done in 2013 by Terence Chong and Yew Foong Hui found that majority of church-going Protestants surveyed are Chinese at 95.1% and most of them are either currently or emergent middle to upper class (38, 60-61). Incidentally, many Protestant Christians in Singapore would often call themselves 'evangelical'. One of the central tenets of Evangelicalism found by David Bebbington in Britain is 'biblicism' where the Bible occupies a high place of authority (3).<sup>4</sup> Being inheritors of British Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is little wonder that local Protestant Christianities have also inherited this emphasis (R. Goh 35-46).

<sup>2</sup> I have argued elsewhere for the need for transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge production about the Bible (Lim, The Impe(a)rative of Dialogue). There I argued the need to think about how our social locations condition the questions raised in the academia for research and how different locations engender different assumptions, values and inquiries. This paper seeks to develop an aspect of the argument I was unable to do there that is to explore more closely how subject positions in the Singapore context influences one's interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah brings into biblical studies what Edward Said proposed to be contrapuntal reading which is the need for 'texts from metropolitan centres and peripheries [to be] studied simultaneously' (16). Following Said, Sugirtharajah positions the Bible as the text of the metropolitan centre in the West and calls for comparative reading with relatively minority literature both in the margins of the West and the Third World itself. This is in order to limit the dominance of one text so as to allow for better dialogue among different texts.

<sup>4</sup> The other characteristics he lists are *conversionism* which is a high priority placed on recruiting new members into the church; *activism* which is how the gospel manifests itself as charity in society and; *crucicentrism* which is the central emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Bebbington 2-3).

For instance, Chong and Hui found that the most important reason that Christians attend mainline and independent churches is 'teachings are doctrinally sound' (66) and the second most important reason for independent and megachurches is the 'Word of God is lived out here' (ibid.). Thus what constitutes as a starting point in this essay to understand what it means to undo Chinese Privilege follows my membership in the majority Chinese, Protestant Christian communities who value the Bible as its central symbol.

Nonetheless, the Bible would seem counter-intuitive to a discussion on contemporary culture that tends to see itself as 'secular'. However, the line between culture and religion, all the more outside the Global North, has always been difficult to draw. Furthermore, I wish to argue here that the English Bible is an ambivalent object of study and it is precisely its very liminal nature that would deepen the inquiry into racialisation of the gaze. The ambivalence of the English Bible is first and foremost that it is not originally an English work. Rather it is written in ancient languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. This leads to the second characteristic of the text which is that it is composed and redacted over a long period of time many centuries ago at a time where the distinction between religion and culture was not clearly drawn. The third is its distinctiveness as 'world literature'. David Damrosch in his landmark work, *What is World Literature?* defines world literature as 'encompass[ing] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or their original language' (4). In this regard, it could be said, for good and bad reasons, the Bible, in the history of ancient literature, is the most widely translated, and circulated text in the world today. These points of difference constitute, what some scholars have argued to be the scandalous nature of the text (Carroll 1-5; Pyper 1-8). This is not to say that I am making a confessionalist move that obfuscates the many problems in the text. Rather it is to point out that the alien-ness of the biblical text can be used strategically to understand the reading frames of its readers.

Therefore, using the Bible as the site that converges various actors in the construction of meaning that unsurprisingly reflect the dynamics between East and West in Singapore, I first explore at the epistemological level how white and Chinese privilege relate. This is before I look at the reading of the story in the Bible by Gordon Wong, a pastor-cum-biblical scholar who shares many of the social identities I obtain to elucidate how Chinese privilege operates in a particular setting. This is done not only in relation to how Chinese privilege is structured locally but also in contrast to western readers of the text. In the hope of moving the discussions on privilege and epistemology in a different direction, I seek to recover relatively marginalised perspectives from local Malay playwright and poet, Alfian Sa'at's provocative book, *Malay Sketches* (2012) to see how it can raise further questions about my privilege but more importantly, what new questions I need to bring to the text and by extension to the context where it is read.

It is important to state that this engagement is a critically reflexive move that not only exposes my subject position but also interrogates it. It is as Gayatri Spivak aptly describes that I am 'folded together' with the structure of power within my context (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason 361). In this light, I

situate myself as a Chinese, heterosexual bourgeois man who on the one hand occupies the ranks of privilege in Singapore. On the other hand, I reside in the margins in the West and struggle with unmaking and remaking my religion, Christianity from its colonial white male bases to one that is faithfully contextual. The chief concern here is how epistemology and privilege intersect to construct the way I see and think. While it is tempting to romanticise my position as 'Other' as typical of nativist discourses, I want to veer off this trajectory and think about the (blasphemous) word, privilege. It is here that I begin this essay in the notions of Chineseness that have gained dominant discursive power in Singapore.

## II. CHINESE PRIVILEGE IN SINGAPORE

Discussions about privilege in Singapore in mainstream social institutions could be said to be at best sparse. In the specific area of what social activist Sangeetha Thanapal coins as 'Chinese privilege', such discussions are mostly found in social media rather than the hallowed halls of local universities (Koh; Saharudin; Thanapal). The idea of majority race privilege bleeding into our epistemologies that govern much of knowledge production in the academy has only recently come into being in the mode of whiteness studies in USA with little salience elsewhere in the West.<sup>5</sup> It is little wonder that more authoritarian states with tighter monitoring of knowledge production would barely see any such discussions in established institutions. Nonetheless, there have been discussions that look at how Chinese dominance is constructed in Singapore which will prove useful in understanding the socio-historical background of Chinese privilege. It is to these discussions I first turn.

Based on the last population census in 2010, those who self-identify as Chinese account for 74.1% (Singapore Department of Statistics viii). However, the category of Chinese has never been a stable one. As Daniel Goh demonstrates, Chineseness before the 1970s was a heavily contested identity (57-60). It was largely because of its association with communism and anti-colonialism. What gave Chineseness stability was the establishment of an independent state in 1965 with an emerging political party which consisted mainly of Chinese that consolidated its rule in the 1970s. As it is already well documented, one of the first policies managing multiculturalism issued out at that time was the official definitions of racial categories of Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others (CMIO) (Chua, *Communitarian Ideology* 110; Hill and Lian 103-107). With respect to the Chinese, the state sought to homogenise them so as to consolidate cultural power. Among the most prominent of its strategies were Speak Mandarin campaigns that sought to root out Chinese dialects, religious education in schools pioneered by the late Goh Keng Swee with the (lesser known) aim of propagating Confucianism and setting up of Special Assistance Programme schools that taught mandarin as the first language in 1979 which was meant to facilitate training of 'transnational elites' who could connect with Confucian high culture of China (D. Goh 61-62). Furthermore, Chua has argued how CMIO has been mobilised

<sup>5</sup> The UK, for instance, has only started its first master's programme in black studies beginning its enrolment in September 2017 (Andrews).

as a form of 'political culturalism' through enforcing proportional racial representations in politics, racialising self-help organizations and mobilising cultural identities to combat western liberal values so as to insure Chinese majority rule with little contestation (Political Culturalism). For the purposes of this essay, I follow Daniel Goh's analysis that outlines the development of the dominant form of Chineseness in Singapore.

Daniel Goh traces closely how Confucianist ideas have been adapted to the dominant discourse (60-67). He points out two areas specifically: the first is how Confucianism was able to negotiate a place within a multicultural and multi-religious context of Singapore and second the positioning of the ruling elite in relation to this increasingly salient discourse.

With regards to the first, Weiming Tu who is based in Harvard University was the chief architect of a group of eight 'experts' on Confucianism that the state consulted. According to Daniel Goh, Tu argues that Confucianism is not primarily 'Chinese' but rather a 'universal system of ethics and a universal way of life' (63). What he emphasises in his analysis is how Confucianism was presented as a transcultural system clothed in 'universal humanist values' (D. Goh 64). More precisely, they are primarily the values of transforming the mind and communitarian based ethics. Such a synthesis would produce the technocratic leader par excellence who is highly competent in the sciences and yet ably conversant in the arts. The vision given to Singapore is a form of 'non-ethnocentric "Chineseness"' that facilitates the 'participation of the elite in inter-racial and inter-religious dialogue in the formation of a common set of national values' (D. Goh 64). The central figure is exemplified in Confucian conceptions of *junzi* or loosely translated as the 'gentleman'. Much of this identity is entangled with capitalist modes of production or more banally put, economic work which I explore later. Therefore in this synthesis, Confucian ideal of the *junzi* is coopted as a means to not only instill within the population the need for hard work, submission to authority and the upholding of the present order, but also to inculcate a form of consensus that those who have the right to rule need to be given the necessary power to do so.

Here I would like to suggest several factors that facilitated this and draw from critical white studies to see if additional insights may be found. First, there is the need to think of this neo-Confucianist ideal as *race-free*. As Shannon Sullivan argues throughout her book, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habit of Racial Privilege* (2006), the self-understanding of the white male episteme is that at its very essential core, it is race-less and sex-free. Sara Ahmed points out that whiteness is inscribed in physical spaces and even exported throughout the world (150). In the case of Singapore, it is not unusual to find buildings in Singapore that bear uncanny resemblances to those found in the West such as the Singapore flyer that seem to mimic the London Eye or National Gallery Singapore bearing the same name of an analogous building in London. What is important here for my purposes is how whiteness needs to be invisibilised in order to be exported. The importing of Confucianist discourses arguably requires a similar mechanism of universalisation. Nonetheless, there is a distinct difference since Confucianism did not have the luxury of previous centuries of colonisation to naturalise itself as part

of the environment outside its point of origin.<sup>6</sup> Terence Chong argues that it is the very economic success of the Asian Tigers which includes Singapore that granted Confucian ideals greater acceptance as a universal ethic since Asian peoples tend to be more results oriented. This serves to consolidate the elective affinity between de-essentialised Confucianist ideas and capitalist logic as explained by Weber to produce what he calls '*de facto* national ethic' (Chong 402). I would also like to add that beyond that, the promise of economic success is its association with harmony, stability and security which are what people living in the immediate postwar era and arguably even until now yearn for.

This leads to the second point. There is a need to believe that the most qualified person to attain such a universalist ideal is the one who is able to transcend one's positionality. According to feminist standpoint theorist, Sandra Harding, white male objectivity is the claim that divesting one's subjectivity can achieve the rational detachment necessary to attain knowledge that is applicable beyond the confines of one's context (132). Of course, the construction of Chinese privilege, unlike its white forebears, was not able to wipe the canvas clean so as to implant itself. These desires are then inflected in a different way.

In analysing how Lee Kuan Yew's autobiography, *The Singapore Story* (1990) writes the national narrative, Philip Holden points out several continuities between colonial rule and the People's Action Party government which has been in power since self-rule in 1959 (411-416). Apart from inheriting and perpetuating racial categorisation of CMIO as mentioned earlier from British colonial rule, he draws important connections between colonial and oriental conceptions of masculinity in Lee's synthesis. In Holden's view, Lee's image of the *junzi* resonates with British valourisation of the emotionally detached, completely rational male subject that is predicated upon the feminisation of Oriental subjects as people given over to their passions and appetites (414-416). Yet the important deviation from white conceptions is Lee's disapproval of the failure to *discipline* those who are deemed as these feminised subjects which seem to be embodied in the lower class and minority races. Therefore, Chinese privilege in Singapore does not only give better access to those who identify as Chinese to the universal ideal, but also gives them right to discipline those deemed to possess 'inferior' bodies.

That being said, the dilemma remains on how different ethnicities and religions are to be aligned with a universalised, de-essentialised Confucian ethic discussed above but yet maintain at the very least an appearance of multiculturalism. In studies on whiteness, Charles Mills argues that

*[w]hiteness is originally coextensive with full humanity, so that the nonwhite Other is grasped through a historic array of*

<sup>6</sup> Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano argues about what he calls the coloniality of power which is how western epistemologies have been propagated throughout the world since the 15th century CE. It began with 'repression' of local knowledge systems which was then followed by 'seduction' where European ways of knowing and understanding the world having replaced indigenous ones now present themselves as the ideal for all to follow (Quijano 168-170).

*concepts whose common denominator is their subjects' location on a lower ontological and moral rung (26).*

In other words, whiteness represents the core essence of what it means to be human through which people of colour being inferior are required to build their identities upon. While such an assumption has been systematically and politically curtailed in Singapore, the epistemological move is arguably replicated. One instance this is seen is the rationale behind the White Paper on Shared Values. The key impetus for the White Paper was the perception of the government that 'traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society' (Singapore Parliament 1) are being eroded by 'a more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life' (ibid.). Therefore, in order for the different ethnicities and religions to relate to one another while fending off western individualism, there is need to 'identify a few key values which are common to all the major groups in Singapore, and which draw on the essence of each of these heritages' (Singapore Parliament 3). Here I claim that it begins with the preconception that harmony or unity is built on valourising sameness and downplaying difference. The result of this move is to create as it were, an analogous template in the Singaporean context. This is seen in its concrete form in the White Paper on Shared Values which concludes with the following formulation:

- Nation before community, and society above self;
- Family as the basic unit of society;
- Regard and community support for the individual;
- Consensus instead of contention;
- Racial and religious harmony (Singapore Parliament 10).

It is important to note that the White Paper on Shared Values does address allegations that this is a subterfuge for Chinese values (Singapore Parliament 8). This is refuted on the basis that only the essential notions of Confucianism are mobilised such as 'placing society above self' (Singapore Parliament 8) and 'concept of government by honourable men' (ibid.). It makes a claim that these abstract values 'must be shared by all communities' as these Confucian ideas are sanitised of its Chineseness by being 'brought up-to-date and reconciled with other ideas which are also essential parts of our [Singapore's] ethos' (ibid.). Chong observes that the rendering of Confucianism as a universal ethic is through denuding it of its political ideologies to transcend its localness (402). This seems to me that such universalising gestures reflect western desires but act in a subversive manner. On the surface, there is a claim to Asian-ness over against western-ness so as to deny the relevance of western liberal values to the Singaporean context. As it will be seen in the final section, Malays are often called to 'integrate' into the state's ethos because it is assumed to be the 'shared' template discussed earlier that we build our identities on. In this regard, what perhaps stands out for me is that while it is claimed that Shared Values is not 'Confucianism by another name' (Singapore Parliament 8), there is no clear indication how the values of other minority

communities have been considered in its conception.<sup>7</sup> In short, while part of the Shared Values is to ensure that Asian-ness is not eroded by the universalist discourse of western liberal values, what it has done is to reproduce another universal framework to replace it by reconstructing a relatively one dimensional understanding of Asian-ness. The greater problem I see is like discourses in whiteness, it avoids the harder work of negotiating across difference which requires getting an extensive spectrum of actors in politics and civil society together in dialogue by simply opting to eliminate difference in the name of unity.

In sum, what this preliminary sketch of Chinese privilege in Singapore shows is how certain Confucianist ideas of *junzi* have been used to inculcate values of loyalty to the nation-state especially where the citizenry is expected to give the maximum (and perhaps more!) benefit of the doubt to the leadership; to uphold meritocracy predicated on nation-building based on technocratic rule and; to maintain a cool form of detached objectivity towards public life. What undergirds the legitimacy of such a demand on the citizens are first, the economic success that this has brought; second, de-essentialising (and de-politicising) of Confucianism so as to rework it as the universalist framework of governmentality and; finally, facilitating its hold on the common ground of negotiation among the different ethnic communities that relativises the need to talk about difference.

### III. DANIEL IN SINGAPORE

While the preceding narrative paints for us the historical moments that created the conditions of possibility for Chinese dominance, it cannot fully account for how it would translate into the main interest of this paper, that is, the episteme. It is here I turn to a reading of the story of Daniel chapter 1 in the Bible. The concern I have is to trace how Chinese privilege manifests in interpretation – that is, how it influences the assumptions made and the questions asked. Such hermeneutical moves would be made apparent not only through the points of the earlier discussion, but also through comparing and contrasting with various other standpoints including those who have also applied themselves to the text in question. In all likelihood, much of this is subconscious to the interlocutor I engage with in this section. Nor do I wish to claim that there is any explicit ill intent on his part. Rather it seems to me that one of the key reasons why privilege goes unnoticed among those who enjoy it is the (often unsubstantiated) belief in its own benevolence. But before I go further, allow me to first tell the story.

The book of Daniel in the Bible opens with the story of Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah who are Jews being brought into exile in Babylon. As the opening lines set for us, King Nebuchadnezzar who is mostly vilified in the canon of the Hebrew Bible lays siege and conquers Jerusalem. In colonial-like fashion, he chooses the best Jews to be trained as Babylonian court officials. Thus we

<sup>7</sup> This is other than a passing mention of the Malay tradition of 'gotong royong' or mutual help where Malays help one another in times of need which seems to be mirroring what Chinese clan associations are also doing (Singapore Parliament 7).

find our protagonists in school where they are given the best education learning the language and literature of the Babylonians and choice food and wine from the king's royal rations. The first order of the day that signifies their new birth into the empire is when their Babylonian masters give them new Babylonian names – Daniel is called Belteshazzar; Hananiah, Shadrach; Mishael, Meshach and; Azariah, Abednego. The dilemma our heroes find themselves is that they cannot eat the royal rations given to them for it is to them a source of defilement. So Daniel negotiates with the palace master who then refuses to accede to his request for he fears the king might have his head for not feeding them well. Daniel goes on to ask the guard whom the palace master has placed over them. This time he asks that the guard tests them for ten days and compare their appearances to the rest who eat the royal rations before deciding whether this should be on a more permanent basis. The guard agrees and behold, he finds at the end of ten days that Daniel and his friends look even healthier than their peers. As a result of this, God bestows on Daniel and his three friends 'knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom' and 'insight into all visions and dreams' (Dan. 1:17, New Revised Standard Version [henceforth NRSV]). At the end of their training, they come before the king and he finds them to be 'ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom' (Dan. 1:20, NRSV).

It is here I turn to a commentary on the story of Daniel by Gordon Wong who is a Chinese Methodist pastor and biblical scholar in his book, *Faithful to the End: The Message of Daniel for Life in the Real World* (2006). Wong's reading of the story centres on the idea of excellence. He engages with the main debate in western biblical scholarship as to why eating the food and wine of the king would be considered defiling. Having concluded that there is no compelling historical reason to explain this, he argues that the central message of the story is 'not food, but faithfulness' (Wong 1-4). By 'faithfulness', he refers to the ability of Daniel and his three friends to accomplish high standards in the education system they are placed in. This is in spite of the fact that they are minorities in a foreign land of Babylon. Their attaining of the highest honours in education 'made them distinctive and brought glory to God' (Wong 10). They are now well positioned to perform the role of the Babylonian court official that would prosper the empire and honour the God they serve at the same time.

The trope of excellence which constitutes the core of his reading is of great relevance to the discussion of privilege. Here I explore how he appropriated the example of Daniel to see if there are resonances with the ideal of *junzi* discussed earlier. Further to that, I look at how he interprets empire and the relationship of Christians to it.

One key focus of Wong's reading is how Daniel and his friends 'conform to certain social demands' (7). In the text at hand, there are two instances. One is what is perceived as full acceptance of Babylonian names and two, acceding to being taken in as royal officials in training in the empire that subjugated them. Wong readily interprets the 'quiet compliance' (8) as suggestive that '[f]aithfulness to God does not demand an absolute rejection of secular society and secular conventions' (9). Therefore the 'climax' of the story, for him, has to be how 'impressed' the king was with Daniel and his

three friends' performance. In this light, it could be said that impressing the sovereign takes centre stage in his reading and becomes the endorsement of God's blessing upon the decisions they have made.

It seems to me that Daniel uncannily resembles the Singaporean version of *junzi* discussed earlier – one who achieves meritocratic excellence and receives approval by the authorities of the state. In other words, Daniel is read in the image of the 'cultured technocrat' (D. Goh 65). He is able to excel in the literature and language of the Babylonians and competent in the equivalent of what we think of science and technology today. In fact, he is the very embodiment of the meritocratic system who is able to outdo his peers even in an educational environment that does not favour him.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Wong opens the reading by asserting that the point of the story is not about Daniel's refusal to partake of the food and wine. It is a curious claim given that the setting up of the backdrop to Daniel's and his friends' resistance occupies the first third of the narrative which is about how the Jews were subjugated, their temple looted and their city destroyed before being exiled as captives to Babylon. This is not to mention that the manoeuvres they undertake their abstinence takes up a little more than a third of the story. Moreover, John Goldingay, a USA-based biblical scholar, points out that structurally, the chiasmus of the text centres on the resistance of Daniel and his three friends (8-12). In fact, as I have shown elsewhere, the main preoccupation of western biblical scholarship has been with the meaning behind the refusal of Daniel and his three friends which could be summed up into two camps (Lim, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics* 137-141). On the one hand, relatively more conservative scholarship tends to think of defilement as ritual impurity (Barton 154-155; Collins 142, 145; Goldingay 8, 18-20). On the other hand, scholars who opt for a more political reading would see defilement as the tyranny of an evil empire (Davies 90-91; Smith-Christopher 40-42). While one does not necessarily have to agree with what biblical scholars in the West are doing with the text, this contrast of emphasis suggests how the elements of resisting empire becomes disarmed in Wong's reading.

This is complemented by repeated moves to reinforce that Babylon is not hostile ground. It is simply a 'non-Christian environment' or more widely spoken of as 'an unbelieving and pluralistic world' (Wong 5). As noted earlier, the transporting of articles from the Jerusalem temple into the Babylonian treasury is narrated as a violent act of conquest. While Wong acknowledges that this act represents the superiority of the Babylonians to the Jews through a symbolic act of subjugating

<sup>8</sup> This lies in contrast to my reading of the text with Confucius where I read inter-textually with the life-story of Confucius as recorded by ancient historian Sima Qian. That led me to conclude that while Confucius would applaud the efforts of Daniel and his three friends to observe propriety as they perceive it, there are distinct compromises in the story that would make him uncomfortable. The first would be unconditional acceptance of their change of names and the second, the willingness to serve a king who destroyed their home and temple (Lim, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics* 141-145). This further shows how Wong's reading of Daniel is closer to Singaporean conceptions of Confucianist ideals.

their gods, it is rendered apolitical as it is compared to working in a modern environment like Singapore outside the church (4-5). This is seen in the examples he gives which shows how Christians become 'distinctive' in their different places of work such as being diligent at the office while being 'fair, courteous and kind to [their] colleagues' (Wong 11) and being a dutiful housewife that keeps the household in order (ibid.). While it is true that Wong attempts to confer dignity to otherwise mundane lifestyles of Christians and possibly people in general in Singapore, it is hard not to notice that the royal courts of Babylon charged with political intrigue seem to be reduced to the banality of the everyday.

As mentioned earlier, such depoliticising moves concerning religious texts have been observed by Chong who notes how the political ideology of Confucianism has been omitted in the process of appropriation to the Singaporean context (402). In a similar fashion, the narrative is defanged and re-interpreted as support for living harmoniously in Singapore society. Where western readings of the text either gravitate between tolerance towards empire and active resistance against it, the empire in Wong's reading is thought of as no more than a testing ground to prove that Christians can achieve publicly recognisable success more than their non-Christians counterparts.

The discursive effect of such a reading produces the ideal citizen who to a great degree embodies the Shared Values discussed earlier. Serving as excellent court officials in the Babylonian courts who are faithful and non-complaining, this could translate into putting the (foreign) nation above oneself and working towards its prosperity. By taking the emphasis off the act of refusal and taming the depiction of empire, it allows the story to take on the tropes of 'consensus instead of contention' which upholds 'racial and religious harmony'. It is likely facilitated by the access that most Christians, being Chinese, have in an environment that favours their Chineseness where the logic of harmony overshadows issues of racialisation present in our society today. Therefore it should not be surprising that the environment of Babylon is seen in a more meritocratic light than it most probably is where the political and economic dimensions of living as a minority in an authoritarian empire become obfuscated.

Yet at the same time, I do not wish to ignore the fact that it is true that there is no overt resistance on the Jews' part to the majority Babylonian environment. At least on the surface, it does appear that they are complying with and playing by the rules of their newfound masters. It is here I engage in contrapuntal reading with the literature of minorities in the midst of Singapore to see if there is a way to read the text without capitulating to the logic of Chinese privilege.

#### IV. DE-SINICISING DANIEL

Referring again to the latest census in 2010, Malays comprise the biggest minority in Singapore at 13.4% of the population with more than 90% being Muslim (Singapore Department of Statistics 13). Rizwana Abdul Azeez in her recent book, *Negotiating Malay Identities in Singapore: The Role of Modern Islam* (2016) traces the negotiation of Malay identity in the light of an initiative by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong called Singapore Malay Identity (SMI) in 2002. The project aimed to socially engineer a Malay Muslim

identity that is compatible with the state. Her book is a dense ethnographic research that bears more points of discussion which exceeds the capacity of this essay. What I wish to draw from her work is the problematic gaze of the state on the Malays (Abdul Azeez 25-37).

Abdul Azeez asserts that what is problematic of SMI is that it both subscribes to certain generalisations of the Malay community and valorises the Chinese communities as role models of being successfully modernised (25-37). The Malay community in the state's 'gaze' as she calls it can be summed up in what the mainstream media names the 'Malay Problem' which is the perception that Malay communities have been too slow in integrating into Singaporean life proven by their inability to produce the results the state is looking for (Kamaludeen 309-312; Suratman 1-16). One particular area of relevance to the case study at hand is education. Abdul Azeez discusses among other things, the controversy in 1999 about compulsory primary school education in public schools threatening the survival of *madrasahs* and the tudung (Islamic headdress) controversy in 2002 where several Malay primary school girls were prohibited from going to school because their parents insisted on them wearing the tudung (30-33). Abdul Azeez argues that these are reminders to Malays that they have to be 'loyal to the state, and to be good citizens by adopting pluralism and respecting the state's secular nature' (32) which also implies that Malay signs of religiosity are a hindrance to the state's modernising vision.

Such negotiations are explored sensitively in two stories I have selected from Alfian Sa'at's anthology, *Malay Sketches* (2012). In the first story, 'Shallow Focus' (Sa'at 72-75), the unnamed (Malay) protagonist is dragged by his mother to a professional photoshoot as he has graduated from university with an Engineering degree. There his family encounters his secondary school classmate, Min Heng. This seemingly banal account of a graduate fulfilling his rites of passage with the customary photoshoot that adorns many households in Singapore uncovers tensions between race and success. There are three identifiable contact zones. First, the entire ritual of photo taking is claimed by the protagonist that 'only Chinese people do this kind of thing' (Sa'at 73). Second, the accidental meeting with Min Heng invokes memories of previous rivalries in school where it would seem to the protagonist that the mother is gloating over the fact that he is more 'successful' than him. This eventually provokes a retort from the protagonist who exclaims 'Does that mean I've become more Chinese than him?' (Sa'at 75) Third, the author raises an interesting question of desire. How happy is the protagonist pursuing his degree in Engineering? Is it just following 'whatever the Chinese students do' (ibid.)?

The second story, 'The Drawer' (Sa'at 156-159), I have elected to look at brings together notions of religiosity and success. The story is told through the perspective of the mother. Her daughter Maria is frantically looking for her tudung as she is rushing for a job interview. She cries out to her mother for help who tries to persuade her not to wear it. Finally, she finds one and rushes off to the interview. Later in the day, the mother laments with her sister how 'this had become their country and one had to play by their rules' (Sa'at 159). As she boards the taxi blaring Chinese music on the way

home, she hears from her daughter that she has gotten the job. Then she summons the courage to ask the taxi driver to change the music station. The mother's perception in this story is vital for this conversation. In her powerlessness to help her daughter find a job, she takes the initiative to hide the tudung so as to urge her to forsake visible shows of religiosity which in her mind is the primary reason for her unemployment. Yet the seemingly satisfactory ending to the story is that her daughter did find work despite having worn the tudung to the interview.

So like Daniel and his three friends, the two Malays in these two stories achieve recognisable success in their respective contexts. The difference, of course, is the degree to which it has been attained. What this connection raises regarding the story in Daniel is the relationship of their minority status to the success they have achieved. The perception is that in order to succeed in Singapore, one has to become like the majority race. Similarly, Daniel and his three friends accept being part of Babylon. They adopt Babylonian names. They embrace Babylonian education. Yet there is a struggle to maintain one's ethnic minority identity – the constant suspicion of becoming like the majority race and the need to hold on to religious markers of identity. This is brought to the fore, as I have argued elsewhere, when one notices how this struggle of Daniel and his three friends is *hidden* (Lim, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics* 145-150). Instead of outwardly defying the palace master's refusal of their request, they negotiate a deal with the guard instead that *no* one would be able to tell that they have not taken the king's royal rations and wine. Seen through the eyes of the Malay protagonists of these stories, the success of Daniel and his three friends is not without significant negotiations with their environment. It is often balanced with the need to survive by staying hidden.

This reminds me that the story of Daniel and his three friends ultimately does not belong to me because in all likelihood I am more like the palace master and guard. It brings to the surface the reality that I do not have ready access from my own lived experiences to understand the struggle of Daniel and his three friends trying to flourish in a foreign environment hostile to their ways of life and understanding of the world. Perhaps what is more disconcerting is that while my Chinese privilege has conditioned me to tend towards disapproving covert and subversive acts of minority peoples, the story which is part of the canon that supposedly forms my religious identity seems, at the very least, to bless it.

#### V. CONCLUSION: UNDOING CHINESE PRIVILEGE

The concluding thoughts for this essay begin with my folding together with those who have access to Chinese privilege like Gordon Wong. I am ethnically Chinese who attained middle-class status because I was able to follow the education system (with 6 years of Chinese school) until I graduated and worked as a medical doctor. This is despite my diasporic status as a Malaysian Chinese coming to Singapore at the age of seven where I was disadvantaged because my parents did not learn Mandarin being brought up through Malaysian education. Furthermore, perhaps as a Christian, I may have suffered some form of silencing as I am constantly reminded of the consequences of talking about my faith in the public square. However such disadvantages pale in comparison

to the privilege I have access to. The ability to speak in the abstract and voice the questions I have about the way I am taught was given to me because the terms of the conversation favoured me. It was not until I spent the last five years in London learning a different set of vocabulary to understand silences and absences that I realise why certain questions never came to me. Like Wong, I would ask what it means to read the story of Daniel for the contemporary world that does not call into question my social identities of being a Chinese bourgeois man in Singapore. The process only began when I was conscientised to these realities through the work of courageous minority writers in their respective contexts, who in all likelihood are more like the original writers of the Bible in their minority status under a 'foreign' rule. I attained new courage to face the difficult questions about the biblical text that I have relied so heavily upon for my privilege. In this respect, Gayatri Spivak calls for a 'learning to learn from below' (Death of a Discipline 100). What this means for me is that it has compelled me to face head on that Daniel does not act like the Confucian *junzi* I have been accustomed to think as the proper heroic portrayal. Of course, this is only a start which I have attempted elsewhere further reconceptualising of resistance through the eyes of the subaltern (Lim, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics* 137-152).

In terms of privilege, while social scientific work that probes the conditions of possibility are vital and indispensable to undo Chinese privilege, deconstruction does not necessarily lead to a (re)solution. Being aware of how marginal standpoints are systematically subalternised should not absolve us of the much needed work in cultural studies to understand and reappropriate these perspectives. What I have done here is to look at a piece of ancient literature that has long been assimilated into dominant Chinese consciousness within Christian circles in Singapore. It would not be possible to defamiliarise this over-familiar text without the help of standpoints external and marginal to mine. At the same time, what makes the Bible an ideal site to begin subverting privilege is that it is in itself not a product of Chinese privilege having been written by different communities many centuries ago but yet has discursive currency in certain Chinese majority Christian circles in Singapore. It is here I wonder aloud if such hermeneutical moves to undo privilege can be similarly applied to literature that comprises the canon of different factions of Chinese communities. In so doing, it may pluralise our consciousness and perhaps (and here I would admit possibly naivety on my part) transformations in the right direction would increasingly manifest themselves.

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