

# Navigating Diversity: A Retrospective Analysis of Policies to Mitigate Ethnic and Religious Tensions in Singapore

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## ABSTRACT

Singapore is a country made up of many different ethnic groups, including Chinese, Indians, Malays and minorities of Europeans and Japanese. This paper examines Singapore's approach to managing ethnic and religious diversity, a critical challenge in a nation with a complex demographic makeup. This research explores the effectiveness of Singapore's multifaceted policies aimed at mitigating ethnic and religious tensions, focusing on areas such as education, housing, cultural integration, and economic development. Utilizing a retrospective analysis, the study draws on secondary data sources, case studies, and policy reviews to evaluate the impact of these policies on social cohesion and harmony. The findings reveal that Singapore's strong governmental leadership and comprehensive policy framework have been instrumental in fostering racial harmony and social stability. The study concludes that while Singapore's model is effective, ongoing efforts are required to address emerging challenges, particularly in maintaining equity across all ethnic groups and ensuring inclusive representation in decision-making processes. This research offers valuable insights into how multicultural societies can be managed effectively, with potential lessons applicable to other nations facing similar challenges.

## KEYWORDS

Cultural Diversity; Ethnic Group; Multifaceted Policy; Social Integration; Language Education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore, with its complex ethnic and religious landscape, has long been a subject of interest in studies on multicultural governance. Current research highlights Singapore's success in maintaining social harmony through carefully crafted policies in education, housing, and economic development. However, gaps remain in understanding the long-term sustainability of these policies and their adaptability to emerging social dynamics. This paper seeks to address these gaps by examining the evolution and effectiveness of Singapore's strategies in managing ethnic and religious diversity.

This research focuses on analyzing Singapore's multifaceted policy approach, particularly in how these policies have reduced tensions and promoted integration among different ethnic and religious groups. Specific questions explored include: How have Singapore's education and housing policies contributed to social cohesion? What role has economic policy played in balancing interests among various ethnic groups? What challenges do these policies face in the current socio-political climate?

This study employs a retrospective analysis using secondary data sources, case studies, and policy evaluations. The significance of this research lies in its potential to provide insights for policymakers in other multicultural societies, predicting future challenges Singapore may face and offering suggestions for policy adjustments to ensure continued harmony and inclusiveness in a rapidly changing world.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

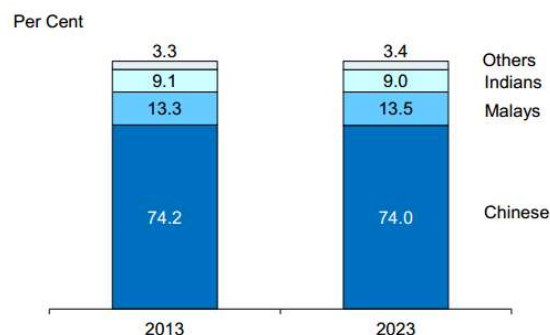
Singapore's multi-ethnic society, shaped by its colonial history, presents a unique case for studying ethnic relations and governance. British colonization in 1824 and Japanese occupation in 1942 significantly influenced Singapore's demographic structure [1] (Leasor, 2001, p.10). The influx of Chinese, Indian, and Malay populations during these periods laid the groundwork for the complex ethnic landscape seen today. Scholars have extensively analyzed Singapore's ethnic policies, particularly its bilingual education system, housing quotas, and electoral strategies, which have contributed to social stability [2,3] (Chan, 2017; Chua, 1991).

However, existing studies often focus on the successes of these policies, with limited exploration of their long-term sustainability and potential socio-political challenges. For instance, while the language policy is praised for fostering a common national identity, its impact on preserving minority languages and cultures remains underexplored [4] (Jain & Wee, 2019). Similarly, Singapore's housing policies are lauded for promoting ethnic integration, yet there is insufficient analysis of how these policies might affect social cohesion in the face of rising economic inequalities [5] (Phang & Helble, 2016).

This paper seeks to address these gaps by critically examining the effectiveness of Singapore's multi-ethnic policies in a changing social and economic landscape. It will explore how these policies have managed ethnic tensions historically and whether they are equipped to handle future challenges such as globalization, economic disparities, and evolving national identities. The study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of Singapore's approach to ethnic governance, offering potential innovations and strategies for other multicultural societies. By identifying and addressing the limitations of current policies, this paper hopes to contribute to the ongoing discourse on sustainable ethnic harmony and social resilience.

## 3. MULTIFACETED POLICY ANALYSIS

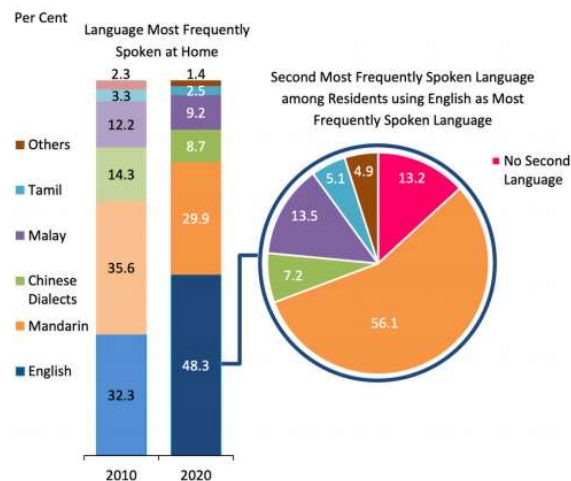
By 2023, the proportion of Chinese residents in Singapore's permanent population will be the highest, followed by Malaysians, Indians, and other ethnic groups. The proportion of each race did not change significantly between 2013 and 2023, as shown in Fig. 1 [6] (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2023). In order to maintain harmony among different races and promote the same development of the entire country, Singapore has formulated policies that are suitable for the multi-ethnic situation from the perspectives of education, housing, culture and society, economic development, and the rule of law. Through the formulation of these policies, Singapore has been able to continuously develop and grow. Next, we will introduce these policies separately and explain the effects they bring through data citation.



**Fig.1** Ethnic Composition of Resident Population

### 3.1. Language and Education Policy

Different races have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In order to enhance the common consciousness of the people and maintain harmony among various groups, Singapore's social development needs, combined with the actual situation of each ethnic group, adopt a language policy mainly based on English, supplemented by four languages: Malay, Chinese, Hindi, and Tamil [4] (Jain and Wee,2019). Singapore's language policy is a political means for the country to seek survival and development. At the beginning of its independence from the Federation of Malaya, Singapore faced the challenge of balancing the relationship between the Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups. The cleverness lies in granting political equality to the mother tongue of each ethnic group. The actual common language is English, which is the official written language, working language, and school teaching language. English, as a neutral language, established the historical foundation of lingua franca during the colonial period and allowed every Singaporean to compete through neutral media. Fig. 2 shows the proportion of languages used at home among permanent residents aged 5 and above in Singapore [7] (Department of Statistics Singapore,2020). It can be seen that as time goes on, the proportion of people using the four languages is gradually decreasing, while the proportion of people using English is gradually increasing.



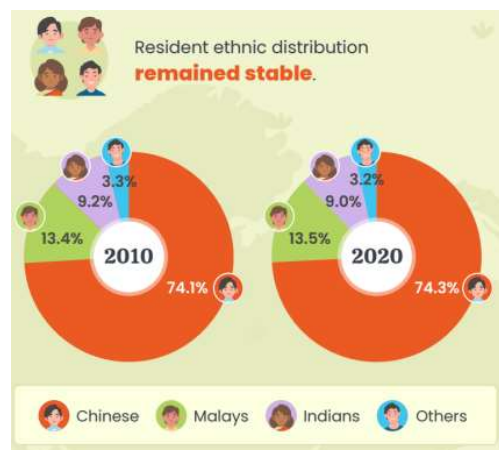
**Fig.2** The proportion of language use among permanent residents aged 5 and above

During the colonial period, Singapore established English schools, mainly catering to elite groups such as Eurasians and Strait English speaking Chinese [8] (Afandi and Baildon,2010). Various ethnic groups raise funds to solve the education problems of most ordinary family children, teaching in their mother tongues, thus forming two systems: English schools and folk language schools [8] (Afandi and Baildon,2010). This brings two problems: firstly, English school students are too Westernized, resulting in serious loss of their mother tongue and ethnic culture; Secondly, most ethnic minority schools are run by elites of various ethnic groups, and the ethnic nationalism accepted by young people is not conducive to the shaping of national consciousness. Nowadays, Singapore adheres to a bilingual teaching approach of "English+Mother Tongue" in language education. The bilingual education system based on mixed schools is another successful implementation of the multi-ethnic policy in the overall form of the country. It breaks the single ethnic group education system, and children learn to accept diverse societies and systems from an early age. It fundamentally ensures that students of all ethnic groups can enjoy equal educational resources while learning their mother tongue and culture, so that the "diversity" of culture does not lose its roots.

### 3.2. Ethnic Housing Quota Policy

The housing system in Singapore is one of the most fundamental and influential systems on ethnic relations [5] (Phang and Helble,2016). This policy is a significant measure of Singapore's multi-ethnic consultative cooperation structure from the elite level to the general public level, enabling multi-ethnicism to truly be implemented from the top-level design to the daily living space of ordinary people. The residential housing in Singapore is mainly divided into two types: the first type is the government housing bureau's construction of public housing, which is a type of affordable housing constructed by the National Housing Bureau (HDB) and accounts for more than 80% of the national housing construction [5] (Phang and Helble,2016). The second type is private housing, built by developers and priced three times higher than public housing [5] (Phang and Helble,2016). While successfully suppressing housing prices, the government can allocate housing by setting eligibility conditions for applicants. This distribution system can basically determine the residential area of each household, thereby achieving effective social control.

In 1989, Singapore introduced the Ethnic Integration Policy, which was implemented with the widespread promotion of public housing in Singapore [3] (Chua,1991). According to the Ethnic Integration Policy, the application and allocation of public housing units follow the principle of "The Neighborhood Social Limits", which means that residents of public housing units must allocate housing quotas according to ethnic proportions [9] (Di Mauro,2018). When the proportion of a certain ethnic group in a community exceeds the prescribed quota, the vacant houses in the community are no longer allocated to that ethnic group, but to other ethnic groups. Even if there are no applicants from other ethnic groups temporarily, they will not be allocated to the ethnic groups whose quota has been saturated. Between 2010 and 2020, there was no significant change in the number of housing quotas for different ethnic groups in the public housing quota regulations formulated based on ethnic integration policies, as shown in Figure 3 [7] (Department of Statistics Singapore,2020).



**Fig.3** Comparison of housing quota proportion

The restrictions on the allocation of public housing according to ethnic proportions have directly changed the ethnic living pattern in Singapore, breaking the traditional Malay community where Chinese people have the same surname and community, and deconstructing the traditional Malay community of surrounding temples [10] (Wong,2013). The expansion of the scattered and mixed living pattern of ethnic groups throughout the island has truly realized the spatialization of rights. The sharing of space provides a basic field for ethnic contact. The disintegration of traditional settlement models and the expansion of common living spaces have increased understanding, communication, and dialogue between ethnic groups. This policy has formed a default chain demonstration effect in Singapore's social life. Space socialization has made every Singaporean accustomed to coexisting in

multicultural public spaces. In the field of social public services, it is also natural to consider the needs of diverse ethnic groups.

### 3.3. Cultural and Social Integration Initiatives

In Singapore, a multicultural and mixed environment, Singaporeans establish a shared identity while preserving their respective fine traditional cultures and customs. Multiple races have achieved harmonious coexistence on a limited territory. However, Singapore's multicultural integration and social harmony are not achieved overnight, but rather the result of the government's efforts in various aspects. Firstly, it is widely known as the Royal Harmony Day in Singapore, which falls on July 21st every year. This date comes from a racial conflict event in Singapore's history: on July 21, 1964, Muslims held a parade commemorating the birth of Prophet Muhammad, which sparked a racial conflict event [11] (Geetha,2016). At that time, a total of 23 people died in this riot, 454 were injured, and passersby and bystanders who were beaten suffered heavy casualties [11] (Geetha,2016). Race Harmony Day came from this. On the day of the festival, everyone wears traditional clothing of their own race and learns about the culture and characteristics of other races. For example, in school, there will be performances of Malay martial arts such as Silat and Chinese martial arts, as well as drum music performances of the Indian, Chinese, and Malay ethnic groups.

### 3.4. Economic Policy

**Table 1.** Monthly Household Income from Work by Ethnic Group of Household

	2010 (\$)	2020 (\$)	Annualised Change (Per Cent)	
			Nominal	Real <sup>1/</sup>
<b>Average Household Income from Work</b>				
Total	7,812	10,608	3.1	1.7
Chinese	7,926	10,812	3.2	1.8
Malays	5,109	6,851	3.0	1.6
Indians	8,271	11,688	3.5	2.2
<b>Median Household Income from Work</b>				
Total	5,600	7,744	3.3	1.9
Chinese	5,691	7,972	3.4	2.1
Malays	4,328	5,704	2.8	1.4
Indians	6,000	8,500	3.5	2.2
<b>Average Household Income from Work Per Household Member</b>				
Total	2,425	3,488	3.7	2.3
Chinese	2,478	3,615	3.8	2.5
Malays	1,304	2,003	4.4	3.0
Indians	2,533	3,584	3.5	2.2
<b>Median Household Income from Work Per Household Member</b>				
Total	1,638	2,463	4.2	2.8
Chinese	1,718	2,603	4.2	2.9
Malays	1,043	1,594	4.3	3.0
Indians	1,721	2,521	3.9	2.5

For multi-ethnic countries, even if different ethnic groups achieve fundamental consistency of interests within the national framework, they often generate diverse interest demands due to heterogeneity in political participation, economic life, cultural traditions, and other aspects, triggering tension in different fields and levels [12] (Connor,1978). If different ethnic groups experience uneven development due to historical and practical reasons, such as some ethnic groups having strong economic strength in the upper echelons and some ethnic groups having more impoverished

populations in the lower echelons, then the widening wealth gap between ethnic groups will correspondingly increase the tension between ethnic groups and the country.

Singapore has made many efforts to maintain a balance of economic interests among various ethnic groups. The Malay ethnic group consistently ranks lower in the monthly household income in Singapore, as shown in Table 1 for monthly household work income by ethnic group [13] (Strait Times Singapore,2021). Therefore, in order to improve this phenomenon, it was promulgated in 2021 Dian@M3 project. The project aims to provide comprehensive support and assistance to Malay families in public rental apartments in Singapore through national and community initiatives, providing them with a range of assistance in education, employment, and social support [13] (Strait Times Singapore,2021). This project provides more support in the following areas: firstly, optimizing intergenerational mobility and focusing on families with children living in rental apartments. Secondly, it is to help families renting apartments improve employment and stabilize income, assist in purchasing public housing, provide them with career counseling programs, and encourage women to participate in work. Finally, provide social support and cultivate a positive family environment. Support the family life, maternal and child health, and child development of newlyweds through projects such as Bersamamu and Project ARIF [13] (Strait Times Singapore,2021).

### **3.5. Rule of Law Related to Multiple Ethnic Groups and Religions**

The formulation of legal policies in Singapore, which is diverse in ethnicity and religion, always adheres to the concept of respecting the diverse traditions and realities of race and religion, while firmly integrating them under Singapore's national identity and legal regulations. The harmony of multiple ethnic groups cannot be separated from Singapore's long-standing principles of racial equality, religious freedom, and separation of religion and politics. The majority of Singapore's population is Chinese, but from the constitution to subordinate laws, great attention is paid to preventing "Chinese chauvinism" [14] (Lim,2021). In the fields of politics, law, economy, etc., reasonable adjustments are made based on the proportion of racial population, and the needs of different races are comprehensively considered. Based on the reality of religious diversity in Singapore's society, various types of legislation pursue respect for various religious traditions and cultures from the perspectives of equality, tolerance, and non-discrimination, emphasizing religious harmony and prioritizing social and public order stability. Singapore has achieved harmonious coexistence of race and religion through years of government guidance, social participation, and rule of law construction.

## **4. CASE STUDIES**

### **4.1. The Success of Diverse Ethnic Groups in Political Governance**

Ethnic political differences have created an independent Singapore. This has made the Singapore government realize that in order to achieve good leadership among diverse ethnic groups, it is necessary to seek a political model that balances the rights and interests of all ethnic groups. A multi-ethnic society must establish a sense of community, shape the civic consciousness and national beliefs of Singaporeans, and enable people of all ethnic groups in Singapore to unite and attach themselves to this land. Therefore, the People's Action Party has become a political party with diverse ethnic groups participating in political consultations [15] (Rodan,2013). The proportion of members from the minority Malays and Indians was slightly higher. The Central Executive Committee of the highest core leadership group within the party is also an outstanding representative of elites who absorb various ethnic groups based on the proportion of population and ethnicity. In addition to the core leadership, the proportion of each ethnic group among branch members also corresponds to the population proportion, and is basically distributed according to the population proportion at that time. The candidates elected within the party also demonstrate the representativeness of diverse ethnic

groups, and the ratio of candidates to legislators is close to the population ratio of that year. It can be seen that the Singapore government adjusts the ethnic proportion within the party by restricting or absorbing elite representatives from different ethnic groups, and strives to coordinate with the national population proportion as much as possible to achieve a situation of ethnic political consultation.

## **4.2. The Intensification of Racial Discrimination During the Pandemic**

In 2021, the world will be affected by the COVID-19 epidemic to varying degrees, and Singapore is no exception. With the arrival of viruses beyond people's normal cognitive range, it has also intensified people's anxiety, thereby exacerbating discrimination among different ethnic groups in Singapore. In April 2021, a Chinese woman insulted Malays on the subway [16] (Chong and Zaini,2022). In May, an Indian woman was insulted by a Chinese man using discriminatory language and was also beaten and injured [16] (Chong and Zaini,2022). In 2021, there were numerous incidents of racial discrimination in Singapore, which attracted attention from all sectors. Racism still exists in Singapore. Similar events before the epidemic may also occur, but they are not as frequent and may not necessarily spread throughout the island. But the epidemic has put pressure on society, and there are more occurrences of such events than in the past. Coupled with the development of social media, it is easy to expose and have a negative impact. In a multi-ethnic society, ethnic minorities always face discrimination and difficulties that the majority does not face. The turbulence of the social environment has further raised the challenge of ethnic discrimination governance. Although Singapore has made many efforts and achieved many results in promoting harmonious coexistence among multiple ethnic groups, it needs to make greater efforts to eliminate discrimination against people of all ethnic groups in the face of various unstable factors in society.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

Like Singapore, the United States is a multicultural country with many different ethnicities and races, each with its own cultural traditions. But Singapore and the United States have adopted different approaches in dealing with multicultural societies. Singapore has adopted an approach that emphasizes social harmony, shared identity, and shared values. The government cultivates values of mutual respect and inclusiveness through the diversification of the education system and the integration of housing, and promotes communication and interaction between various ethnic groups and religions through various mechanisms. In contrast, the United States has adopted a more liberal and diverse model, emphasizing individual freedom and rights. The United States encourages individuals to maintain their cultural identity and religious beliefs, and to protect their rights. However, this diversification may also lead to differences and conflicts between different ethnic groups and religions, thus requiring more efforts to achieve social harmony.

Currently, Singapore's society is relatively stable, and the relationships between various ethnic groups are relatively harmonious. The strong leadership of the government and clear policy objectives are one of the key factors for its success.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Through the above analysis, it is found that Singapore's successful management of a multi-ethnic and multi religious country is mainly due to the following nodes: firstly, policy-making under multiculturalism. Singapore incorporates the concept of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity into its constitutional principles, ensuring equal treatment of all ethnic groups in terms of power, obligations, education, and work. Through the implementation of relevant policies, Singapore has coordinated ethnic relations in multiple fields such as politics, economy, society, and culture, promoting ethnic harmony. Secondly, the strong leadership and clear policy objectives of the Singapore government

are also key factors for success. The government has taken active measures to ensure equal opportunities and benefits for all ethnic and religious groups in resource allocation and social support. Finally, Singapore's society is relatively stable and the relationships between various ethnic groups are relatively harmonious. The government cultivates values of mutual respect and inclusiveness through mechanisms such as multicultural education systems and housing integration, promoting communication and interaction among ethnic and religious groups. Finally, in terms of culture and society, Singapore has achieved relative social stability and harmonious relationships among various ethnic groups. Cultivate values of mutual respect and inclusiveness through mechanisms such as multicultural education systems and housing integration, and promote communication and interaction among ethnic and religious groups.

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