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# Family Matters: Negotiating Intergenerational Mixed Identities among Eurasian Families in Singapore

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**Abstract**

This paper tracks and explores the generational changes in the dynamics of racial identity and identification of Eurasians in Singapore, as reflected in family life. Eurasians are a historic mixed-descent community originating in the mixing of European and Asian cultures in the region since the 16th century. By analysing the embodied enactment and negotiation of mixed identities intergenerationally in the spheres of marriage and language choices, the paper reveals how families express and construct what it means to be Eurasian in the Singaporean context. This study draws on 30 interviews with self-identified Eurasians over two generations, including six paired intra-family interviews, illustrating intergenerational identity shifts. While the boundedness of racial identification appeared to be the norm for earlier generations, a tempering of race as a boundary marker and an openness to changing familial rhythms have served to encourage a lowering of race consciousness among younger Eurasians in Singapore.

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## Introduction

Mixed racial and ethnic identities are common in many countries in Asia, reflecting the complexity and mixed nature of historical trends in the region. As research into mixedness around the world develops on an international scale, there has been increasing research in recent years that has ranged beyond the well-established American and British contexts, training the spotlight on less examined, but just as valuable, case studies from other parts of the world (see for example, Edwards et al., 2012; King-O'Riain et al., 2014; Rocha & Fozdar, 2017a). Research in Asia in particular has seen an efflorescence, highlighting the rich histories and contemporary diversities of the many types of mixedness in this region (Rocha and Fozdar, 2017b; Rocha et al., 2018; Teng, 2017).

Encompassing a vast range of communities, ethnicities, languages, political systems, and colonial histories, Asia is home to a plethora of mixed racial and ethnic identities. Importantly, mixing can have many meanings in the region, particularly given the continued salience of historical mixed identities and communities based around mixedness, such as the Anglo-Indians in India, the Indos in Indonesia, the Peranakans in Southeast Asia and the Eurasians in Malaysia and Singapore (Andrews, 2017; Hewett, 2017, 2018; Rocha, 2018; Rocha & Fozdar, 2017a; Tan, 1993; Yeoh et al., 2019). The more straightforward theoretical and social understanding of mixed race/ethnicity as the direct outcome of mixes between two separate groups certainly applies in Asia, particularly as contemporary migration flows intensify, group boundaries overlap, and population diversity increases. However, in many Asian countries, historically mixed communities, often resulting from colonial encounters and historical migratory paths, are equally, if not more, relevant to understanding mixed identities in current times (Rocha et al., 2018; Stoler, 1992). Such historically rooted identities illustrate how hybridity can develop into distinct and singular ethnic categorizations over time, as mixedness as an identity is passed down across generations. How the inheritance of mixed-descent identities is reflected, refracted, lived, expressed, changed, or denied within families and communities presents a key perspective in exploring mixedness.

This paper draws out the unique aspects of this type of mixed identity, and shows how mixedness is transmitted across generations among Singapore's Eurasians, a historic mixed-descent community stemming from the mixing of

European and Asian cultures in the region since the 16th century. In the Singapore context, Eurasian identity presents an interesting paradox, as both a mixed identity, and a singular ethnic group within Singapore's multiracial framework. The paper analyses the embodied enactment and negotiation of mixed identities in the intimate spaces of everyday life, revealing how the family expresses and constructs what it means to be Eurasian in the Singapore context, and how these expressions and negotiations have changed over time.

## Race, Family, and Historic Mixed-race Identities

Contemporary social, political, and academic discourses reject the concept of race as an anachronistic framework with which to analyze systemic sociopolitical inequalities. Race is avoided due to prevailing fears of reviving a biological deterministic view of racial differences, which has been used to perpetuate and validate colonial conquests and the corresponding social injustices (Alatas, 1977; Cowlishaw, 2000; Stoler, 1922). In pushing for a "post-racial" stance in thinking, Gilroy (1998, p. 842) argues for the need to abandon the limiting paradigm of "race" in order to open up a more productive space from which one can escape the "mythic morphology of racial difference." However, the idealization of racial-blindness and renunciation of race as a heuristic tool has also been critiqued as paradoxically enabling racism to go unchecked and unnoticed (Cowlishaw, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Warmington, 2009).

Scholars arguing for the redemption of "race" as a conceptual tool concur with post-racial thinkers that race is not a biological reality that is naturalized, but should rather be seen as a social construct. Rockquemore et al. (2009, p. 14) remind us that despite its social construction, race still "has real and measurable consequences" that need to be addressed. A radically post-racial stance that avoids racial identities and categories is problematic as it turns a blind eye to our social reality wherein "be[ing] raceless is akin to being genderless" (Winant, 2000, p. 184). In other words, as Cowlishaw (2000, p. 105) contends, "racial histories cannot be erased by refusing to recognize races, because racial categories, signalled by both social habits and skin colour, are such obviously active constituents of [. . .] people's lives."

In this debate, the study of historic mixed-race identities offers a lens through which race can be critically discussed as a social process and construct, whilst at the same time resisting falling into the trap of biological essentialism. Historically, the existence of mixed-race people has been a source of suspicion and fear for both the rulers and the ruled (Stoler, 1992). Blurring the neat distinctions between colonized and colonizer, mixed race calls into "question the distinctions of difference which maintained the neat

boundaries of colonial rule" (Ibid, 514). By straddling the middle-ground and *not* fitting neatly into racial categories, the experiences of mixed-race people highlight the social constructedness of race not only in terms of the latitude they have in "passing" from one racial identity to another (Ahmed, 1999; Williams, 1997) but also through the changing systemic racial identity options made available to them in census categories and official documents (Loveman et al., 2012; Morning, 2014; Rocha 2011). As Rockquemore et al. (2009, p. 29) remind us, when working with mixed-race populations, it becomes evident that "racial identity, racial identification, and racial category interact, overlap and contradict each other." In this paper, by focusing on the experiences of a historic mixed-race community across generations, the (re) negotiation of racial identities, identifications, and categories within families are made more evident as the broader context changes.

Historical accounts of the experiences of mixed race people have highlighted the contentious ways in which racial categories strategically included/excluded certain races and mixed-race progenies during colonial rule. Focusing on racial discourses and practices in French Indochina at the turn of the 20th century, Stoler (1992, p. 516) reflects on the attempts to control "métissage" or mixed marriages (and, concomitantly, the "métis" or mixed-race children of these unions). Mixed marriages are seen to be a "powerful trope for internal contamination," challenging the moral, political, and sexual values of the time. Racial management did not only involve ensuring that the colonizers and the colonized remained clearly designated and differentiated, but also forced mixed-race people into one single racial category despite the reality of belonging to two (or more). This resulted in mixed people being treated with double-edged ambiguity, where they were viewed as "either dangerous adversaries or effective partisans of the colonial state" (Ibid., p. 528). On the one hand, the legitimization of a mixed-race person's European ancestry could risk opening up the sharing of colonial power with their indigenous half. On the other hand, those of mixed race could also act as influential intermediaries, with affinal ties to both their European and indigenous social networks. In other words, colonial mixed-race categories were not coded as arbitrary or neutral, but politically embedded in discourses and practices of power and belonging in the colonies.

Under the colonial gaze, the family was not only "a crucial site in which future subjects and loyal citizens were to be made" (Stoler, 1992, p. 521) but also a social form from where the contamination presented by local indigenous women through mixed marriages had to be purified and regulated. A gendered double standard was applied to mixed marriages and progeny, where indigenous women consenting to live with European men were considered prostitutes or lacking in morality (Stoler, 1992, p. 526). The strong colonial

imperative to safeguard the assignment of European status for mixed race children led to stringent requirements where European filiation had to not just be proven by the possession of European blood or name but justified by the European-ness of the mixed race children's upbringing (as evidenced by language, education, culture, and religion). In a different context, Gaudry (2018) highlights the tensions between family genealogies and lived culture in a study of identity politics among the Métis, a historic mixed-race group, in western Canada. In a context where affiliation with the minority group confers institutional benefits and social advantages, the rise of self-identified "New Métis"—individuals who claim racial identities on the basis of genealogical relationships with long-dead distant Indigenous relatives while being strangers to Métis language, culture, and practice—raises questions about the authenticity of belonging and the meaning of familial ancestry (Gaudry, 2018, p. 180).

Also centered on family dynamics, scholars interested in processes of ethnic identification among mixed populations have focused on the significance of examining tensions and conflicts in the realm of family ethnic socialization, and the varying degrees of "attachment" to, and "estrangement" from, natal families among the second generation (Dee, 2017; Rogler et al., 1980; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2013). In Song and Gutierez's (2015) study on multiracial parents and their children in the United Kingdom, the anxiety that parents have about generational racial "dilution" is explored. Here, notions of dilution—expressed in terms of "reduced blood quantum and racial fractions"—are not only intertwined with the loss of cultural knowledge and practices, and the absence of physical markers of heritage, but also manifested in the diminishment of political racial consciousness. These first and second generation mixed-race parents find themselves caught up in the countervailing pressures of devising various strategies of "keeping the story alive" while also embracing cosmopolitan notions of diversity to align with the new globalizing ethos. These studies serve as a counterbalance to "mixed race" studies where the question of identity is addressed at the level of group dynamics "without necessarily situating it into the familial context" and where "the role of family is often assumed rather than probed" (Pang, 2018, p. 415). Instead, the two-fold role of families needs to be recognized: "on the one hand, it generates symbolic resources for children to negotiate racialized difference; on the other hand, it serves as a key site for the development of racial ideologies" (Pang, 2018, p. 414).

A related strand of the literature on family dynamics focuses on the crucial role that parents play in influencing awareness of racial and ethnic differences among children from mixed backgrounds, and shaping how cultural differences and a sense of belonging are negotiated within family life. Edwards et al. (2010, p. 951) observe the development of two distinct strands

in this literature: the first takes a "pro-race" position in recognizing "mixed race" as a legitimate racial identity and thus advocates for parents to recognize and nurture both or all of their children's heritages in order to inculcate a healthy identity, while the second "post-race position" regards "mixedness as disembedding notions of race" and promotes parenting styles that encourage mixed-race children to develop "a sense of self beyond race" (or what Johnston-Guerrero and Pecero (2016, p. 283) call a "color-blind" perspective). Their own work among British mixed families highlights the complexity and diversity of parenting styles resulting from "an interplay of issues including individual biography and family history, residential and class location, minority and majority status, and personal and cultural beliefs" (Edwards et al., 2010, p. 964). Similarly, in discussing Maori-European families in New Zealand, Kukutai (2007, p. 1159) concludes that the intergenerational transmission of ethnicity does not occur in a "predictable, linear fashion" but involves "a more complex set of dynamics in which both mainstream and minority parents participate."

Despite the theoretical and empirical significance of the family context as a primary site of mixed identity formation and racial socialization in Asia, there has been limited research on the intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity linked to "mixed-race" family formation and socialization in the Asian context. This lacuna stands in contrast to the large literature on changing ethnicities resulting from intermarriage among immigrants and hosts in Western countries, where early approaches often position "marital assimilation" as "the final stage of the structural assimilation of ethnic groups in mainstream society" (Hidalgo and Bankston, 2010, p. 282). While research on the role of the family in racial and ethnic identity development among mixed-race children has gathered momentum in Western contexts over the last two decades, little has been done on this topic in non-Western contexts, including Asia. In attempting to fill this research gap, we turn to the case of the Asian city-state of Singapore, where understanding the formation of mixed-race families and the intergenerational transmission of mixed-race identities needs to be situated within Singapore's colonial and postcolonial context.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of the history of Eurasians in Singapore, from their privileged status during colonial times, to their struggle to consolidate a Eurasian identity post-independence, against a background of globalization in contemporary multiracial Singapore. Next, we outline the methods used in this study before moving into a discussion of our findings in two sections. The findings will illustrate how racial identification does not just depend on national ideologies of race and place, but is also deeply implicated in personal family and generational relations. In the first section, we explore the changing discourse and

practices regarding marrying in and out of the Eurasian community vis-à-vis the changing marriage landscape in Singapore. In the second section, we consider Singapore's bilingual policy and the Speak Mandarin campaign in analyzing language politics within Eurasian families. In doing so, we foreground the negotiation of racial identities between parents and children, from one generation to the next.

## A Brief History of Eurasian Identity in Singapore

The Eurasian community in Singapore has a long history. Although European/Asian mixes have existed in the Asian region since the 1600s, the term Eurasian was first used by British colonial administrators in Singapore to describe the offspring of European and Asian parents in 1849 (Braga-Blake, 1992; Pereira, 1997). Eurasians from other parts of Asia were some of the earliest migrants to Singapore after 1819, and as neither European nor Asian, they were often positioned in-between the colonizer and the colonized: more privileged in terms of employment, education, and socio-economic status, and set apart due to their mixed ancestries and cultural practices (Braga-Blake 1992; Pereira, 1997; Rocha, 2016). This level of privilege was threatened in the late 19th century as the European population increased, and the boundaries between European and Eurasian were more strictly enforced (Pereira, 1997, p. 2006). As a result, the Eurasian population sought to form a more coherent and bounded community, based around racial, ethnic and cultural identity markers such as patrilineal European descent, Christianity, middle-class status, and the English language. The Eurasian Association (EA) was formed in 1919, providing an administrative center for the community, signaling a period of favorable status and identity consolidation for the diverse Eurasians in the country (Braga-Blake, 1992; Pereira, 1997; Yeoh et al., 2019). As a result of this consolidation, the tangible aspects of being Eurasian—the integration of European and Asian cultures, and being somewhat in-between as a result—became more visible and defined, in areas such as language, food, dress, and family life (Braga-Blake, 1992). Eurasian identity thus became marked by a diverse but distinct set of cultural practices, passed down across generations.

Following independence in 1965, Eurasian identity lost its privileged status, as being linked to the European population no longer conveyed prestige. The new Singapore state instead based its population management around the multiracial model of four "separate but equal" races—seeking to promote equality for the "founding races" of Chinese, Malay, and Indian, and including Eurasian under the ambiguous label of "Other" (Braga-Blake, 1992; Pereira, 1997; Yeoh et al., 2019). In this multiracial formula, the Eurasian

category that had been monitored in the census under British colonial rule did not become an official "founding race" and thus fell from prominence. Asserting a Eurasian identity was no longer easy or beneficial, particularly as earlier cultural practices were not seen as unique: markers such as Christianity and speaking English were no longer distinct to the Eurasian community. The community was thus marginalized in social and political life, and was largely excluded from dominant narratives of nation-building and belonging, not having easily defined cultural/racial markers such as those assigned to the Chinese, Malay, and Indian populations. What was understood as "mixed" Eurasian culture did not fit easily into the multiracial alignment of race with language and culture, and the patrilineally defined inheritance of race (Rocha, 2016; Pereira 1997, 2006).

Defining what it meant to be Eurasian thus became more difficult in independent Singapore. In contrast to the earlier generations under colonial rule, by the mid-1980s, younger Eurasians in Singapore were described as having "lost" their identities, knowing little about their cultures or their heritages (Pereira, 1997). In response, in the 1990s, parts of the Eurasian community, centered around the EA, worked to deliberately and publicly promote Eurasian identity: seeking to assert Eurasian distinctiveness within the multiracial framework, and create a sense of community and belonging (Rocha, 2016; Pereira, 1997, 2006). As certain cultural markers had become common in modern Singapore, other aspects of heritage and culture were instead emphasized, consolidating and inventing practices as "traditionally Eurasian", and borrowing heavily from Portuguese Eurasian cultural heritage. These included food such as devil's curry, speaking *Kristang* (a patois of Portuguese and Malay), and the *branyo* as a traditional dance. This selective emphasis meant that all Eurasians, with Portuguese heritage or not, were associated with these markers of reconstructed Eurasian identity (Pereira, 1997; Yeoh et al., 2019). Such community organization was eventually supported by the state, allowing the EA to act as a state-sanctioned social welfare group for the community, and officially recognizing the Eurasian community as a distinct ethnic group in national events and on identity cards (Rocha, 2011; Pereira, 2006).

Eurasian identity is thus unique in the Singaporean context: unlike other communities with mixed, colonial-era origins, the Eurasians are officially and socially recognized as a distinct group, separate from the Chinese, Malays, and Indians (Yeoh et al., 2019). However, the definition of who counts as Eurasian has been both complicated and simplified over the recent decades. The revitalization of Eurasian ethnicity in the 1990s focused on a single set of practices, drawn from one aspect of the community's diverse heritage, and resulted in a distillation of much difference into a singular, historically defined and recognizable Eurasian identity (Pereira, 1997, 2006). At the same time, as

a result of increased migration and intermarriage, Singapore has become home to many "new" Eurasians: individuals with one European and one Asian parent, who do not identify with this historic Eurasian culture. The EA has attempted to address these somewhat conflicting processes by promoting what has come to be seen as Eurasian culture and simultaneously including "new" Eurasians as members of the community (Eurasian Association, 2010). The definition of Eurasian has been broadened as a result, moving away from the patrilineal transmission of ethnicity, to also include as members those with a Eurasian mother and those who have one European and one Asian parent (Pereira, 1997).[1] This has meant that a vast array of families and cultural backgrounds now fall into the category of Eurasian, in contrast to the idea of a bounded Eurasian identity, transmitted across generations.

## Methods

The paper is based on a study of "changing ethnicities" among self-identified Eurasians over two generations, focusing primarily on the ways in which Eurasian identity is constructed and negotiated within public and private spaces through dynamic and changing practices, categories, and identifications. Interviewees were recruited through relevant community associations and further snowballing within personal networks of participants. As we were interested in generational change, the sample included the "older" generation (in their 40s–-80s) and the "younger" generation (in their 20s and 30s). Among the 30 participants, 19 interviewees fell in the "older generation" category, and 11 in the "younger generation" category. Given our interest in the contemporary family as a vehicle of ethnic and cultural identity transmission, we also ensured that we had paired interviews where both the "older" and the "younger" participants belonged to the same family—we managed to collect a total of six intergenerational paired interviews (12 individuals) while the remaining interviews were unpaired.

Open-ended biographical interviews of one to two hours were conducted during which participants, prompted by a broad schedule of topics, were invited to share relevant aspects of their life histories. By this we mean that the interviews usually started with participants being asked about their Eurasian lineage (who was Eurasian in the family and from where) and from there prompting them to share about their everyday life experiences and memories about growing up as Eurasian. In this sense, the everyday life experiences of the older and younger generation Eurasians were explored—from rituals and practices of the family during ordinary days and special occasions, experiences in school/work, dating life and marriage, to their religious beliefs and practices. Aside from this, open-ended questions on their

views of race, Eurasian-ness, and being Singaporean were also asked. The open-ended interview guide was constructed with the aim of exploring the relationality of the intimate orderings of racial identity within the family and participants' views on race, ethnicity, and citizenship. The interviews were all conducted in English, and were later transcribed and anonymized. A central theme that the interview questions aimed to explore revolved around the extent to which the historic hybrid identity was (or was not) significant to individuals and the circumstances under which identities have been assumed, maintained, reworked, or rejected at different points in individuals' lives. The interview materials were also complemented by participant observation at public community events (e.g. talks and tours at the EA), as well as archival research using newspaper sources.

In the next section, we examine the relationship between the practice of endogamy in the Eurasian culture and the socio-political changes in Singapore's marriage landscape.

## Singapore's Changing Marriage Landscape: Like Searching for "*Ikan Bilis* in the Ocean"

One striking finding in this study is how the desire for children to marry within the Eurasian community has become less pronounced from one generation to the next. Jane (53 years old) is a third-generation Eurasian who self-identifies as Eurasian because of an emotive connection ("it's a kind of feeling") to a "distinct" family genealogy of Eurasians ("my parents are Eurasians, my grandparents. . .. I believe all four of them are Eurasians") and a clear-cut awareness that she is "not Chinese, Malay, or Indian." When asked whether there were instances when she had to "fight against the odds" as a result of her Eurasian identity, Jane singled out the pathway she had to tread towards marriage to a non-Eurasian:

> When I was dating my [would be] husband, his parents did say [to him], 'We wish you would date a nice Chinese girl'. . .. And my parents were actually very suspicious of my husband when he was dating me because they wanted me to marry a nice Eurasian boy and I said to them, 'there are no nice Eurasian boys'. I felt that they were more protective of their Eurasian-ness than I was, and I think that was because of the generation. There was this big hurdle they had to get over: my parents, my sister, and even my cousins.

In relaying the difficulties Jane encountered in getting her family's approval of her decision to marry her Chinese husband instead of a "nice Eurasian boy," she echoed the stories told by other interviewees regarding the changing

expectations for endogamy across generations. Most of the interviewees from Jane's generation linked the changing attitudes towards non-Eurasian marriage partners to the fact that the Eurasian community remains a small percentage of the Singapore population. Brian (54 years old) compares the expectation for endogamy to the task of "finding an *ikan bilis*[2] in the ocean":

> I don't think nowadays parents will have that control. In those days I would say my dad's time, they will say yes, marry another Eurasian. But [by the time of] my generation, I think they have a hard time to control me, like, eh, [insisting that] you can only go out with Eurasian girl. If I were to do that, it would be like finding an *ikan bilis* in the ocean, you know what I mean? There's more Chinese-Indians than there are Eurasian girls, right?

This perspective is similarly reflected by the younger generation. Haley, Brian's 24-year-old daughter, affirms that for her family, "ethnicity is not a priority at all" in her choice of marriage partner. Pertaining to the smallness of the Eurasian community, she also shared her worries of "be[ing] related to someone that [she] date[s]."

In the 2010 Singapore Census, the total number of Eurasians in Singapore was 15,581, which accounted for only 0.41% of the total population (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011). Although the Eurasians have always been a small percentage of the population (never comprising more than 2.2% of the total population ever since the colonial period in the 1900s; Braga-Blake, 1992, p. 13), a key difference can be attributed to the geographical dispersal of the Eurasian community in Singapore. During the colonial period, Eurasians, like other ethnicities, lived in designated areas that led to the formation of enclaves such as in Kampong Glam, Waterloo Street, Queen Street, Selegie Road, and Katong (Braga-Blake, 1992, p. 51). However, as part of the developmental nation-building project of post-independence Singapore, such enclaves were broken up and the population resettled in deliberately multiracial public housing estates (Chua, 1991; Moore, 2000). Thus, the push towards managed multiracialism has led to the geographical dispersal of the Eurasian community, making it more difficult for both the younger and older generations to fulfill expectations of keeping Eurasian traditions alive through endogamy.

In parallel, globalization, the hypermobility of people, and the increasing participation of women in the labor force have induced important changes in the marriage trends and patterns occurring in Singapore on the macro scale (Lam et al., 2006). Like other East and Southeast Asian countries, Singapore has been experiencing an increasing "flight from marriage," where trends lean towards delayed marriage or opting not to marry at all (Jones, 2005).

Concomitantly, there has also been an increase in inter-ethnic marriages. From 16.4% of total marriages being classed as inter-ethnic in 2007, the figures have spiked to 22.1% of total marriages in 2017 (amongst Chinese, Malays, Indians, Caucasians, and "Others"; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2017). Indeed, with the drastic changes in marriage patterns came a shift in marriage options. This, paradoxically, opened up alternative forms of familyhood that diverged from the tradition of marriage, while further limiting opportunities to marry only within the Eurasian community. The relaxing of preferences for endogamy (and therefore, a dilution of this marriage practice) was hence not only a reflection of the waning desire to maintain the boundedness of the Eurasian identity at the micro-level but could also be seen as a strategy to keep up with macro-level changes induced by globalization.

The decision to marry within or outside the Eurasian community is often a complex choice that involves a rethinking of values. Participants tend to avoid framing their choices as "either/or" options; rather they favor a more strategic form of decision-making, compromising certain values in order to keep other aspects of the familial culture and practices alive for the next generation. Although many in the older generation feel that ethnicity is not a strong priority when it comes to their children's choice of marriage partners, marrying within the Eurasian community is still seen as a "bonus." However, while there is less stigma around crossing ethnic lines, both the older and younger generations maintain that religion is a key consideration in contemplating marital unions. Anna (50 years old) explains her strong preference for her son not to marry into the Muslim faith:

> Yeah, it's fine [if he marries a non-Eurasian] for me personally. But my husband has very strong [views]. He'll say, if you can, marry Eurasians. He's a typical [Eurasian] (laughs). yeah. . .. There's one [thing]. . .. I mean, I wouldn't—wouldn't encourage—I'm sorry, it's, it's a personal thing—I wouldn't [approve of the marriage]—not [to a] Muslim. Because of the religion. . .. I'm Catholic. . . [Religion is] very important. It bonds the family closer, better, I feel personally.

Philip (21 years old), Anna's son, shares his mother's view about religion being a priority:

> I'm really okay with my partner being from another race. . .. But being Eurasian would be nice. Hmm. . .. If it's Malay then maybe I'll consider because you have to go through different, um, what's the word – [convert to Islam]. I'll just consider it, if it was Malay, maybe reconsider. . .. I think I'm ok with the culture, but [would be more hesitant] on the religion side. Might be a bit complicated.

For both older and younger generations, interreligious unions are thus more controversial. Islam in particular is viewed with suspicion, with many suggesting that such a union would create complications for marital and family relations. The centrality of Catholicism to Eurasian identity is often cited as one of the core reasons religion has become more pertinent than race. Victor (61 years old) explains the complexities of marrying into a non-Catholic family:

> But I don't want to change my religion, so forget about it. So. . .. I knew that the kids. . .. if we had kids, it'll be a big issue. So. . .. it just didn't happen. So Indians and Chinese and Caucasians were again, not a problem at all.

Lucy (59 years old) also affirms the unifying force religion brings into family dynamics. She says that "[by] marrying a Catholic, the traditions come along." Religion is thus inextricably linked to ethnic heritage for some, perhaps reflecting the historical genesis of Eurasian identity around religious and cultural practices.

At first glance, Singapore's multiracial project has significant effects on Eurasians' long-held ideals of marrying within the Eurasian community. Compared to previous generations when ethnicity was still a key priority in terms of marriage partners, both the older and younger generation interviewees argued that ethnicity is no longer the main priority. However, the strong preference for children to marry within the Catholic faith has replaced ethnicity as a way of distinguishing the familiar from the "Other". As religion has historically been central to Eurasian identity, marrying into a different religion raised fears around the disruption of the intimate orderings of family dynamics. However, by making religion a key determinant in the choice of spouses, marriage options are re-racialized. Although the interviewees rationalize that any ethnicity is fine as long as they are Catholics, ethnicities such as Malay, and in some cases Indian, are largely excluded as these are intricately intertwined with the practice of the Muslim faith. In many ways, the more relaxed expectations around marrying another Eurasian have been superseded by a hierarchy of suitable marriage partners, where Eurasians are the ideal, Catholics (and other Christians at a stretch) who are not Eurasian are acceptable, and Muslims and other non-Catholics are the least desirable.

In this section, we have examined how Singapore's changing marriage landscape has influenced the Eurasian community's stance towards endogamy. Here, we have highlighted the strategic negotiation of marriage options from one generation to the next. The macro socio-political changes in the marriage landscape have induced what we argue to be a "compromised dilution" of one's racial identity, in which familial practices and values are reprioritized in order to cope with the changing times.

## The Politics of Language Choice: "The Language of My Race" and the Allure of Mandarin

In this section, we explore how Eurasians negotiate to keep their mother tongue alive vis-à-vis Singapore's multicultural language policies. Specifically, we attempt to understand how the younger and older generations navigate this, and explore the family's role in the changing meanings and practices of language choice and adoption.

### *Knowledge of English and Kristang as "Fading" Identity Markers*

Many older interviewees expressed some sense of regret for not having had opportunities to learn *Kristang*, a Creole language used by the early Eurasian communities (mainly those of Malay and Portuguese mixed descent), but later incorporated as a symbol of the wider Eurasian community. Interestingly, the reasons for this regret were not practical, but more symbolic and emotive. Knowing *Kristang* expressed a cultural marker that has been strategically adopted by the Eurasian community and further implemented by the EA as one of the key markers of Eurasian-ness. Brian (54 years old) grew up listening to older relatives speaking *Kristang* while living in Katong, an enclave where many Eurasians resided at that time. However, he had not formally learned the language and was assigned Malay as his official second language in school. Here, Brian compared his experience to a Eurasian child he met in Malacca, who, unlike him, was fluent in *Kristang*:

> Until today my dad can speak *Kristang*. . .. [For me,] one or two words. Like numbers I could pick up. And certain things. Just a few words. Barely. But I always used to love the way they [the older generation] used to speak. . .it sounds so nice when they speak Portuguese. And it blew me away when we went to Malacca. We went to the Portuguese settlement and there was a little boy, like 5 years old, and he was speaking [in *Kristang*] like water coming out from his mouth. I was just kinda shocked. The mother was talking to him and he could just answer his mother. A full conversation!

Meanwhile, Jane (53 years old) relayed that her mother did not teach her *Kristang* and in fact actively suppressed even the few words she knew as "she wanted [us] to speak the kind of English that my paternal grandmother [who worked as a personal assistant in a British company] spoke because she felt that my paternal grandmother was very educated and spoke the right way". She further explained that "when the British were here, it just didn't give you any advantage to speak *Kristang*, and the better you spoke English, the better

chances you have in employment. So that's why everybody kind of didn't let on that they knew *Kristang*." Similar to Jane's case, there was little impetus for the parents of the interviewees from the older generation to pass on *Kristang* to their children. This is despite the fact that *Kristang* was spoken by grandmothers and other relatives in the communities in which the older generation grew up. In the few cases when these interviewees had a strong desire to learn *Kristang*, it was because of an emotive and nostalgic connection with the language. Anna (50 years old) linked her reasoning for wanting to learn *Kristang* to a sense of ownership of 'the language of my race':

> [M]aybe a few more years down, when I'm not so stressed out with work, [I will learn *Kristang*]. But still so much things to do! But it's definitely. . .. I've always wanted to learn the language. Because it would have been my language. The language of my race. But then down the road, you still think that your own race, and your own language is very important. You can communicate. . .it would be nice if I could communicate with somebody—there's a bond there. There will be a bond. And we will. . .who knows, if I am able to speak the language with one other person. And we can even share, and get more knowledge about our ancestries and the general race.

The more practical decision to speak English at home was a strategic choice made for the older generation interviewees by their parents. During the colonial period, English was closely tied to jobs and status. The Eurasian community—despite being a mix of many Western ethnicities including German, Dutch, Portuguese, and British—embraced English as their "mother tongue" in a strategic move to create a stronger affiliation with the colonial government (Braga-Blake 1992). The impetus to adopt English became even stronger after independence when the Singaporean state implemented a bilingual policy, with English as the common language or lingua franca for the different racial groups. Bokhorst-Heng and Silver (2017, p. 339) argue that this language policy promoted a symbolic segregation of languages, where English is "for modernization" and second languages (the so-called "mother tongues") are "for cultural ballast". English is seen as a neutral language to be used for intra-ethnic interactions on the national level and in the public sphere, while the mother tongues (Malay, Mandarin, or Tamil) are for cultural intra-ethnic interactions designated for the private sphere. Given the high symbolic and economic value of speaking English, the EA informally laid claim to English as the Eurasian mother tongue, strategically deploying their cultural and historical association with the language, and inadvertently clashing with the bilingual requirement for racial groups (Wee, 2002).

**Table 1.** Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Language Literate In, Bilingual Population (Singapore Census, 1947–2010).

| | Total (15 Years Old and Above) | English and Chinese Only | English and Malay Only | English and Tamil Only |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1947 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 1957 | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| 1970 | 1,125,524 | 84,773 | 62,190 | 13,854 |
| 1980 | 1,996,378 | 306,856 | 155,272 | 28,797 |
| 1990 | 1,870,087 | 612,328 | 217,051 | 37,109 |
| 2000 | 2,494,630 | 877,510 | 283,342 | 64,074 |
| 2010 | 3,105,748 | 1,305,705 | 390,124 | 104,570 |

## *Navigating Singapore's bilingual policy and the allure of Mandarin*

Despite the fact that good facility in English provided Eurasians with an advantage for civil service work and other economic opportunities particularly during the colonial times, the language policy in which English has been designated as the national language (regardless of ethnicity) has meant that English fluency is unremarkable in contemporary Singapore. Most older-generation Eurasian interviewees admitted that when speaking English became a standard for everyone, the Eurasians lost their professional linguistic advantage and, along with this, the privileged status that they had previously enjoyed. This influenced the decisions of many older-generation interviewees to choose a more strategic second language for their own offspring: Mandarin. Molly (22 years old, younger generation) describes her mother's relentless pursuit of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to allow her and her siblings to opt for Mandarin as a second language:

> Originally my sister and I were slated to learn Malay. MOE was just like, you're going to learn Malay because you're Eurasian. . .. My dad learned Malay in school. But then my mum was like, no, they're not, because she figured that learning Mandarin was the smart way to go. . .. Chinese is going to be the language of the future, so we should learn Mandarin. She kept writing in [to MOE] and being very irritating. . .to change the mother tongue. They [MOE] didn't see [our mother tongue] as Chinese, for some reason. I think because we are Eurasian, so they saw it as, we should learn Malay, by default. [When mum finally succeeded], I think we had to miss like one week of language class because we were still in the process of changing it.

In Table 1 and Figure 1, census data from 1947–2010 (Tufo, 1949; Singapore Department of Statistics, 1958; 1973; 1981a; 1981b; 1992; 1993; 2001;

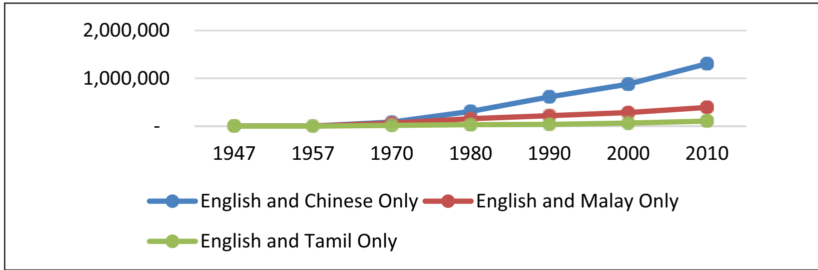


**Figure 1.** Resident population aged 15 years and over by language literate in bilingual population (Singapore Census, 1947–2010).

2011) show a steep rise in the resident population (aged 15 years and over) who are literate in both English and Chinese, among all other possible bilingual combinations. What is interesting is that in the period 1970–1980—which marks the introduction and subsequent hardening of bilingual policies and the launch of the Speak Mandarin campaign—English and Chinese literacy increased by 262%, compared to English and Malay (150%), and English and Tamil (108%).

The implementation of these two institutional language policies have led to not only the standardization of English as a first language but also the increased desirability of Mandarin as a second language. Brian (54 years old) recalls why he chose Mandarin for his children, when he himself had no Chinese heritage:

> At the time Lee Kuan Yew's [then Prime Minister] stance was the Speak Mandarin campaign. At the time they didn't like people talking dialects and all that, that was what 20 over years ago? Yeah, the 80s. So growing up everything was Mandarin, Mandarin, Mandarin, so we felt that this will put them at an advantage when they start working.

In contrast to this, in Brian's time, he said that there was an automatic assumption that Eurasians would choose Malay as their second language, as it was seen as the easier option:

> In my time, it was automatically Malay. Very few Eurasians—I don't even remember any of my Eurasian friends in the year before me and the year after me taking Mandarin. It was all Malay. So you go to a class for Malay and you see the Malay boys and the Eurasians. That's it, in St. Pat's [a school in Katong popular with Eurasians].

This was also the case for Jane (53 years old). In the 1980s, at the onset of Singapore's bilingual policy when all students had to choose a "mother

tongue" in addition to English, Jane's mother chose Malay for her but later regretted the decision:

> [In the 1970s] you had a choice and my mother chose Malay because she felt that we could cope with Malay better. . .. On hindsight, she said she should have made us do Mandarin because by the time we reached secondary school, Mandarin was becoming very useful and important, and my mother was very progressive so she actually . . . paid our [Chinese] neighbour to come over and teach us Mandarin. But you know, we'd missed the boat. . . I just don't get the tones at all!

In view of the trend towards an increasingly Mandarin-speaking bilingual population, parents in the older generation like Anna (50 years old) see speaking Mandarin as having both economic and social advantages. For her, it is a means to give her children the ability to better integrate with the larger Singaporean community and to blur their Eurasian distinctiveness. She explains:

> I guess um, when they go to the coffeeshop, you know—when people know that she can't speak [Mandarin], they will know straight away that they are not Chinese, right. So, there is, how to say—for Eurasians, there is a [difference]. . .. Usually, they will see you differently. . .uh, negatively. So if you could speak the language, *their* language. . .or at least *understand*, they are more. . .uh. . . gentle with you. We have personally felt that, in our generation. Yeah. [As a Eurasian] you are different, you are different from the lot.

Despite the perceived difficulties of learning Mandarin, Eurasian parents are, by and large, happy for their children to learn Mandarin and acquire the advantages of the language. Hence, many among the younger generation interviewees are able to learn Mandarin in an educational setting, and they acquire a level of Chinese proficiency that the older-generation Eurasians were not able to access. Brian reflects on how his children have acquired a "secret language":

> Haley did up to "A" levels, Mandarin. And my youngest one, she had distinction for Mandarin in IB (International Baccalaureate). So don't ask me how they did it. They only use their Mandarin when they want to talk among themselves without us knowing. So when they're in a group and they talk in Mandarin, I say, oh, they're talking about us, some secretive talk.

Mixed-race families theoretically have access to a wider range of language heritages by virtue of their mixedness compared to monoracial families. During colonial times, the choice and mastery of language for Eurasian

families was an integral strategy to increase the community's social capital and status, and access resources in the public sphere. In post-independence multiracial Singapore where—unlike the official Chinese, Malay, and Indian race communities—Eurasians have not been assigned an official language, their mixed heritage has meant that Eurasians have more freedom to select a "mother tongue" as a strategic choice. However, as seen in Brian's case, this can create intergenerational language gaps in the family. These family shifts between generations are central to further changing the cultural and social markers of what it means to be Eurasian in contemporary Singapore.

What is interesting here is that the language adaptation strategies of Eurasians resonate with the dynamic and strategic adaptation of languages displayed by other historic mixed-race communities such as the Anglo-Indians in India. Like the Eurasians in Singapore, Anglo-Indians have capitalized on their hybridity by adopting practices and values that would attach them more closely to their Western roots, and thus gain them certain privileges from the colonial rulers. The mastery of English became one of the most valuable racial identity markers that ensured their class position in colonial society. However, as Coelho (1997) has argued, the transition from colonial to post-independence India has decreased the value of English as cultural capital, prompting Anglo-Indians to "Indianize" as a way of strengthening their belonging and perceived loyalty to an Indian society independent of the British Empire. Similarly, for Eurasian families who have to navigate the changing socio-political landscape in Singapore, leveraging the cultural capital of language is not so much about preserving racial consciousness in the intimate sphere of the family, but more about making flexible and strategic choices to acquire the language that would best position the next generation in the public sphere.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which family histories, dynamics and expectations, impact the negotiations of identity for Eurasians in Singapore. As a historical community of mixed descent, Eurasian identity has shifted significantly over time, and in contemporary Singapore, it represents an interesting mixture of historical traditions, new cultural adaptations, and strategic identity choices. Through cross-generational interviews, we illustrate how identities can shift over generations, changing in substance and label from parent to child, as the salience of ethnic identity shifts according to changing social and political context. Generational changes can be seen clearly in discussions of the importance of race in the choice of marriage partner, and the intertwining between race, ethnicity, and religion comes to

the fore when defining what it means to be Eurasian and what it means to be not acceptable as a partner of a Eurasian. The politics of language in Singapore are also particularly revealing, from the fact that racial groups are linked with a “mother tongue” (sometimes unrelated to the language proficiency of the mother), to the complex positioning of English as a language that both facilitates social and economic interactions, and marks Eurasians as essentially different.

Singapore is thus an interesting context in which mixed race Eurasian families experience and mould the boundaries of the family in response to changing policies to ensure even-handed multiracialism. While racial and ethnic boundaries are increasingly porous and open to everyday crossings, state and social categorizations continue to shape interactions and personal identifications. Drawing on the narratives of our interviewees, we find that while the family is key in the transmission of material culture and everyday practices, the younger generation has significantly more space than the older to order familial rhythms differently, and to (re)define what makes them Eurasian. As Pereira (1997, p. 18) acutely observes, hybridity, which has caused Eurasians to be marginalized in the past, is now deployed to take advantage of the “flexibility to select and utilize whichever cultural elements they choose to reconstitute their identity.” While the boundedness of racial identification and the inflexibility of racial markers were more evident for earlier generations, a tempering of race as a boundary marker and an openness to changing familial boundary-making, marriage partner options and language choices has served to encourage a lowering of race consciousness among younger Eurasians in Singapore.

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## Notes

1. Membership to the EA must satisfy one of the following definitions: (a) individuals with both Eurasian and Asian ancestry (and the subsequent children of

those who have this mixed heritage) and (b) individuals whose family practices Eurasian custom and tradition. With such a broad definition of Eurasian, membership to the EA is no longer exclusive to the historic mixed Eurasians. It has now been made more encompassing to include those whose ancestry cannot be traced back to the historic colonial past, and those born of recent interethnic marriages.

2. *Ikan bilis*, or dried anchovies, are a small dried fish, popular in Singapore.

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