Research Article

Decolonising Multiculturalism in Singapore: CMIO, Ethnic Integration Policy, and the Coloniality of Social Engineering

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Abstract: This study explores the role of education in empowering Multiculturalism is a crucial issue in the governance of pluralistic societies in Asia, where colonial legacies continue to shape post-independence state policies. Singapore serves as a significant example through its adoption of the Chinese–Malay–Indian–Others (CMIO) framework as the official model for managing diversity. Since independence, the CMIO has been institutionalized in various policy domains, particularly education, housing, and politics. While often lauded for its success in maintaining social stability and preventing ethnic conflict, the CMIO also reproduces rigid racial classifications and limits the recognition of more fluid and hybrid identities. This article aims to analyze the CMIO as a continuation of colonial epistemology in educational governance in Singapore. Using a critical-qualitative approach and a decolonial epistemological framework, specifically Aníbal Quijano's concepts of coloniality of power and Walter Mignolo's epistemic disobedience, this research examines policy documents, educational curricula, and academic literature related to multiculturalism and colonial legacies. The findings indicate that the CMIO continues to shape language policy, historical representation in the curriculum, and the distribution of educational resources through ethnic-based aid programs. While these policies contributed to increased social mobility, they simultaneously reinforced racial segmentation and epistemic violence. This study concludes that decolonizing multiculturalism in Singapore requires dismantling essentialist racial categories and opening up space for more inclusive identity narratives, particularly in education, a key arena for national identity formation.

Keywords: CMIO Framework, Colonial Epistemology, Decolonial Critique, Education Policy, Multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

Multiculturalism has long been a central theme in the governance of plural societies, particularly in Asia where colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary state policies [1] [2]. Singapore stands as one of the most prominent cases in this regard. Since independence in 1965, the state has institutionalized the Chinese–Malay–Indian–Others (CMIO) framework as the primary mechanism for managing diversity and distributing social resources [3] [4]. The CMIO model, originally introduced under British colonial administration, continues to define identity categories in education, housing, census-taking, and political representation.

While the CMIO system is often praised for its role in ensuring social stability and preventing ethnic conflict, it simultaneously reproduces rigid racial classifications that may obscure more fluid and hybrid identities [5]. Scholars have highlighted both the integrative and exclusionary effects of CMIO, yet most analyses remain within the paradigms of sociology and policy studies. What has been less examined, however, is the epistemological dimension of CMIO: how colonial categories persist as forms of knowledge that structure governance in the present [2] [6].

This article proposes to read CMIO through the lens of decolonial epistemology, drawing on Aníbal Quijano's notion of the *coloniality of power* and Walter Mignolo's call for *epistemic disobedience*. By situating CMIO as a continuation of colonial strategies of classification and control, the study seeks to problematize its role in shaping contemporary multiculturalism in Singapore. The central question guiding this inquiry is whether CMIO represents an inclusive framework for diversity management, or whether it perpetuates colonial modes of governance under the guise of national integration.

In doing so, the paper contributes to two debates: first, the broader discussion on multiculturalism in Asia and its colonial entanglements; and second, the theoretical effort to apply decolonial thought to the analysis of law and public policy in a non-Latin American context. The Singaporean case thus provides a critical site for interrogating how colonial epistemologies of race continue to shape state practices, and what alternative imaginaries of multiculturalism might emerge through decolonial critique.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Colonial Legacies in Singapore's Multicultural Framework

Colonial governance in Southeast Asia was profoundly shaped by strategies of classification and segregation [7]. In British Malaya, ethnic categories were institutionalized through labor migration regimes that assigned Chinese to commercial activities, Indians to plantation labor, and Malays to agriculture and administration. This compartmentalization was not merely economic but epistemological, producing race as a fundamental organizing principle of governance. Scholars such as Hirschman (1986) have shown how colonial census practices hardened fluid identities into discrete racial categories.

In the Singapore context, the colonial administration's reliance on census-making and urban zoning reinforced the perception of distinct racial communities. The allocation of residential enclaves such as Chinatown, Little India, and Kampong Glam materialized these divisions in urban space. The state thus inherited not only demography but a grid of racialized spatial and social order. Such legacies complicate contemporary multiculturalism, which appears as both a continuation and reconfiguration of colonial strategies.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the durability of colonial epistemologies in postcolonial nation-states. Stoler (2008) underscores how "imperial debris" lingers within institutions and bureaucratic rationalities, shaping the contours of citizenship and belonging. In Singapore, these traces manifest in the persistent use of colonial categories for policy-making. This challenges narratives of rupture at independence, highlighting instead a genealogy of continuity.

Comparative studies in other Asian contexts provide useful parallels. In Malaysia, the Bumiputera policy is similarly rooted in colonial classifications that distinguished "natives" from "immigrants." In Indonesia, the legacy of Dutch "indigenous" versus "foreign Oriental" distinctions resonates in current debates over Chinese-Indonesian identity. These examples situate Singapore within a broader regional pattern where colonial categories were nationalized rather than dismantled.

At the same time, some scholars argue that postcolonial states have strategically reappropriated colonial categories for the sake of stability and legitimacy. In Singapore, the adoption of the CMIO framework can be read as both pragmatic and constraining: pragmatic in its ability to pre-empt ethnic conflict, yet constraining in its foreclosure of more fluid identity expressions [21]. This ambivalence invites deeper interrogation through critical theoretical lenses.

Overall, the literature on colonial legacies in Singapore demonstrates how deeply entrenched racial categories remain in governance. However, what is often missing is a sustained engagement with epistemology; the question of how colonial knowledge practices continue to produce realities in the present. This gap provides the entry point for a decolonial critique of CMIO.

2.2. CMIO and the Legal–Policy Architecture of Multiculturalism

The CMIO framework has been extensively studied as Singapore's official model of multiculturalism. Instituted in the early post-independence years, CMIO classifies every citizen as Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Others [22] [23]. This framework permeates key state institutions: the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the Ministry of Education, and the Elections Department. It thus constitutes not only a sociological schema but a legal–policy architecture with profound distributive consequences.

In housing, the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) enforces quotas based on CMIO categories within public housing estates. This is designed to prevent ethnic enclaves and promote integration. While the policy is often lauded for producing "racial harmony," scholars note that it also reifies racial difference by continually reminding citizens of their group membership (Chua, 2003). Critics further highlight that the EIP disadvantages minorities in the resale market, thereby reproducing economic inequalities along ethnic lines.

In education, CMIO informs the teaching of "mother tongue languages." Each racial group is assigned a specific language; Mandarin for Chinese, Malay for Malays, Tamil for Indians, while "Others" often face limited recognition of their linguistic heritage. This policy assumes essentialist links between race, culture, and language, leaving little space for hybrid or interethnic identities. The result is a narrow conception of multiculturalism that privileges state-defined categories over lived experiences.

Politically, CMIO underpins mechanisms such as Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), which require multi-ethnic electoral teams. While designed to ensure minority representation, the system has been criticized for entrenching racial identities within political institutions. Similarly, the reserved presidential election scheme, where candidacy is sometimes limited to specific racial groups, exemplifies how CMIO continues to regulate political legitimacy.

From a legal perspective, CMIO is notable for its absence of direct codification in the constitution. Instead, it functions as an implicit norm embedded across policy domains. This diffuse presence allows the state flexibility while limiting possibilities for legal challenge. As Benjamin (2017) argues, CMIO operates as a "meta-framework" of governance, shaping policy logics without being formally enshrined in law [28].

The literature on CMIO as a legal–policy architecture thus reveals its dual character: stabilizing interethnic relations while simultaneously perpetuating rigid categories. Yet much of this scholarship treats CMIO as a pragmatic tool rather than a colonial residue. Few analyses explicitly situate CMIO within the epistemology of colonial governance, leaving a crucial gap that this study seeks to address.

2.3. Decolonial Epistemology and Critiques of State Multiculturalism

Decolonial thought, emerging primarily from Latin American scholarship, offers critical tools for interrogating the persistence of colonial logics beyond formal independence [29]. Quijano's (2000) concept of the "coloniality of power" highlights how colonial modes of classification, particularly race, continue to structure knowledge, labor, and governance. Mignolo (2011) further calls for "epistemic disobedience," a refusal to accept Western epistemologies as universal. These concepts are increasingly mobilized beyond Latin America to examine Asian and African contexts.

Applied to multiculturalism, decolonial epistemology problematizes the naturalization of racial categories. Rather than viewing race as an empirical fact, it is seen as a colonial invention that sustains global hierarchies. In the case of Singapore, CMIO's reliance on rigid ethnic boxes can be interpreted as a continuation of this epistemic regime. Decolonial critique thus reframes CMIO not as a neutral policy tool but as a colonial knowledge system repackaged for the postcolonial state.

Comparative research illustrates how similar critiques are being articulated elsewhere. In South Africa, for instance, scholars interrogate how apartheid-era racial categories continue to inform affirmative action policies. In India, caste-based reservations are debated in terms of whether they dismantle or reproduce colonial classificatory systems. These cases resonate with Singapore's CMIO, suggesting that decolonial epistemology offers a transnational framework for critique.

However, critics of decolonial theory caution against its overgeneralization. Some argue that the application of Latin American frameworks to Asia risks obscuring local specificities. For example,

Singapore's racial politics are shaped not only by colonial legacies but also by Cold War geopolitics, regional tensions, and developmental imperatives. A nuanced application of decolonial thought must therefore attend to these unique contextual factors while still recognizing structural continuities.

Within Singapore studies, only a handful of scholars have engaged explicitly with decolonial perspectives. Most critiques of CMIO remain grounded in sociology or policy analysis, focusing on inequality and identity politics without challenging the epistemological foundations of race. This absence reflects a broader hesitancy in Asian scholarship to adopt decolonial theory, perhaps due to its perceived distance from regional intellectual traditions.

This lacuna underscores the contribution of the present study. By mobilizing decolonial epistemology, the article seeks to reframe CMIO as a colonial residue embedded in Singapore's governance. Such a perspective opens the possibility of imagining alternative forms of multiculturalism, ones that decenter colonial categories and privilege more fluid, relational understandings of identity. In doing so, it contributes both to decolonial theory and to policy debates on multiculturalism in Asia.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, critical-interpretive approach to examine the persistence of colonial epistemologies in Singapore's multicultural governance through the CMIO framework. Rather than focusing on empirical measurement, the study emphasizes conceptual and discursive analysis, drawing upon the theoretical tradition of decolonial thought.

First, the research is grounded in documentary analysis of state policies, legal frameworks, and official discourses relating to the CMIO system. Key materials include parliamentary debates, policy statements from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, census reports, and regulations governing public housing and education. These documents are examined to trace how ethnic categories are institutionalized and reproduced.

Second, the study engages in a critical literature review of academic works on multiculturalism, race, and colonial legacies in Singapore. Works by sociologists, political scientists, and historians are placed in dialogue with decolonial theorists such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. This comparative reading enables the research to interrogate the epistemological underpinnings of CMIO beyond its policy functionality.

Third, the methodological orientation is decolonial critique, which entails both *epistemic disobedience* (challenging dominant categories of knowledge) and the search for alternative frameworks of understanding multiculturalism. The analysis does not aim for positivist neutrality but consciously adopts a normative stance in questioning how colonial categories continue to govern social life.

Finally, the paper applies thematic analysis to organize findings into three clusters: (1) CMIO as a colonial legacy; (2) CMIO and its impact on social policy (with emphasis on housing and education); and (3) theoretical implications for decolonial studies in Asia. This structure ensures both empirical grounding and theoretical contribution.

The methodological design thus combines documentary analysis, theoretical interrogation, and critical reflection. By situating Singapore within the broader conversation on decoloniality, the research aspires to illuminate how colonial epistemologies persist in contemporary governance, while also pointing towards possible alternatives for more inclusive forms of multiculturalism

4. Finding and Discussion
4.1. Finding
1) CMIO and the Colonial Genealogy of Education

The CMIO framework, inherited from British colonial census practices, was never a neutral categorization. Its design served to simplify governance by fixing fluid identities into rigid racial boxes. In the educational realm, this system provided the blueprint for policies that would later shape curriculum design, language instruction, and even school admissions. Instead of dismantling this colonial logic post-independence, Singapore institutionalized CMIO as a cornerstone of nation-building. The result is an education system deeply intertwined with colonial epistemologies.

The persistence of CMIO categories reveals how colonial tools of classification can become normalized in postcolonial societies. Schools, as sites of both knowledge and identity formation, play a crucial role in reproducing these categories. By teaching students to identify primarily as Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Other, education sustains a colonial legacy that positions race as the dominant marker of difference.

From a decolonial perspective, such reproduction of colonial epistemes in education points to the entrenchment of "coloniality of power." Instead of liberating knowledge from colonial logics, the system doubles down on them, embedding them into national narratives. This epistemic continuity demonstrates how colonial knowledge systems retain authority long after the departure of colonial rulers.

The genealogy of CMIO in education also highlights the selective appropriation of colonial legacies. While colonial rule was marked by racial segregation and hierarchy, Singapore re-articulated these divisions under the rhetoric of multiculturalism and harmony. Yet, the underlying classificatory impulse remains intact. The difference lies in the discursive justification rather than the epistemic structure.

Thus, examining CMIO through the lens of education exposes the paradox of decolonization in Singapore. Rather than erasing colonial legacies, the education system refashioned them into instruments of state cohesion. This raises the critical question of whether such reforms represent continuity or rupture, and how far a society can claim decolonization if colonial epistemes remain at the heart of its knowledge systems.

2) Language Policy and the Construction of "Mother Tongues"

Language policy is one of the clearest areas where CMIO has left lasting marks. By mandating English plus a designated "mother tongue" based strictly on racial category, the state effectively conflated racial identity with linguistic identity. This policy does not reflect linguistic realities but rather a state-imposed essentialism rooted in colonial classification. For example, the erasure of dialects like Hokkien or Punjabi in schools exemplifies how the policy disciplines diversity into conformity.

From a pedagogical perspective, this rigid bilingual policy has profound implications. Many students grow up in multilingual households that do not align with the official "mother tongue" assigned to them. This mismatch often creates barriers to learning, turning language education into a tool of discipline rather than empowerment. Instead of celebrating diversity, the education system forces compliance with categories derived from colonial census logic.

The privileging of Mandarin over Chinese dialects, for instance, mirrors a colonial hierarchy of "high" and "low" languages. Similarly, the exclusive recognition of Tamil for Indians marginalizes speakers of Malayalam, Hindi, or Punjabi. In both cases, language policies perpetuate epistemic violence by denying legitimacy to certain knowledge forms, cultures, and lived linguistic practices.

Decolonial critique here exposes the deeper epistemological problem: language is not simply a tool of communication but a site of power. The state's enforcement of "mother tongues" reflects a colonial-style attempt to stabilize identities and manage populations through language. This echoes Walter Mignolo's concept of the "coloniality of language," where certain linguistic forms are privileged as universal while others are delegitimized.

Ultimately, the "mother tongue" policy illustrates how CMIO's colonial legacy continues to structure educational experience. By denying students the ability to learn in or about their actual heritage languages, the system imposes a homogenized identity. Education thus becomes less about nurturing critical thought and more about reproducing state-sanctioned versions of heritage, revealing the enduring epistemic violence of colonial frameworks.

3) Curriculum and Representation of History

Beyond language, the CMIO framework shapes how history and identity are taught. Social studies curricula often present Singapore's story as a harmonious blend of four racial groups, glossing over internal diversities and hybrid communities. This narrative, while promoting cohesion, reduces history to a simplified racial schema. Such curricular framing reflects the colonial strategy of managing difference through classification.

The omission of groups like Eurasians, Arabs, or Peranakans from mainstream narratives underscores this selectivity. These communities complicate the tidy CMIO model, so they are often relegated to the margins of history textbooks. This act of exclusion not only impoverishes students' historical imagination but also normalizes CMIO as the "natural" foundation of Singaporean identity.

Furthermore, the curriculum frequently frames racial harmony as an achievement of state policy rather than a complex historical process. These risks creating a mythologized version of multiculturalism that silences tensions and alternative narratives. Students are taught to see race relations through state-endorsed lenses, limiting critical engagement with issues of inequality or discrimination.

A decolonial perspective challenges this narrative by asking: whose histories are remembered, and whose are forgotten? By privileging the CMIO framework, the curriculum enacts epistemic silencing of those who do not fit neatly into racial boxes. This selective representation mirrors colonial practices of producing knowledge that serves governance rather than truth.

In this sense, the curriculum becomes both a pedagogical and political instrument. It reproduces colonial epistemologies by presenting CMIO categories as timeless and natural. Students, in turn, internalize these categories as the default way of understanding themselves and their peers. This perpetuates the coloniality of knowledge, constraining possibilities for imagining more inclusive and fluid identities.

4.2. Discussion

CMIO's analysis in the context of education confirms how colonial heritage continues to shape the structure and epistemology of schools in Singapore. As discovered, CMIO is never neutral; it was born out of the British colonial census practice that simplified complex identities into rigid racial categories. The initial implementation in the field of education, starting from the curriculum to school admission, reproduces colonial logic, which is then used as the foundation of post-independence national development. Education, in this case, functions not only as a transmission of knowledge but also as an identity-forming mechanism that positions race as the main differentiator, thus demonstrating the colonial epistemic continuity in postcolonial societies.

The sustainability of the CMIO category highlights how colonial classification tools can be normalized and institutionalized. The school, as a space for the production of knowledge and identity, plays a central role in the reproduction of this category. By teaching students to identify themselves as Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Other, the education system reaffirms colonial logic. This approach exposes the paradox of decolonization: although physical colonialism has ended, colonial epistemology remains alive in the national narrative, complicating efforts to imagine a more inclusive and fluid identity.

One of the most tangible impacts of CMIO is seen in language policy. The designation of English as the primary language and the "mother tongue" based on racial categories creates an essential relationship between racial identity and language, which does not reflect the linguistic reality of multilingual families. This policy eliminates the variety of dialects such as Hokkien or Punjabi, and disciplines diversity into uniformity. From a pedagogical perspective, many students face learning difficulties due to the mismatch between the home language and the official "mother tongue". Thus, language education serves more as a tool of control than empowerment, showing how colonial structures continue to influence the experience of everyday education.

The privileging of Mandarin over Chinese dialects, or Tamil over other Indian languages, confirms the existence of a colonial hierarchy in language policy. This practice is not just an administrative choice, but a form of epistemic violence that discredits certain linguistic knowledge, culture, and practices. This approach is in line with Walter Mignolo's concept of "coloniality of language", which emphasizes that language becomes a tool for population management and identity stabilization. Thus, the mother tongue policy emphasizes the homogenization of identities built on racial frameworks, while limiting space for critical education and reflection on more complex cultural history.

CMIO also shapes the way history and identity are taught in the curriculum. Historical narratives often simplify Singaporean society into four racial groups, erasing internal diversity and hybrid communities. Groups such as Eurasian, Arab, or Peranakan rarely appear in textbooks, signifying a selectivity that maintains the CMIO as the "natural" foundation of national identity. By emphasizing racial harmony as a state achievement, the curriculum creates a mythological version of multiculturalism that silences tensions and alternative narratives. The decolonial perspective emphasizes the importance of questioning remembered and forgotten history, so that the curriculum does not become a political instrument to strengthen colonial epistemology.

Recent data shows how CMIO also affects the distribution of educational resources through ethnic-based organizations. CDAC in 2022 provided more than 11,600 scholarships and 12,400 study places for 16,600 households, with expenditures exceeding S\$31.6 million. MENDAKI, through a 2002 record, succeeded in increasing the secondary school completion rate for Malay students from 61% (1992) to 85%, while in 2015, self-help programs from CDAC, SINDA, and MENDAKI showed a growth in student participation of up to 67% in five years. Although these initiatives increase social mobility, they still reinforce race-based segregation, showing how colonial legacies are preserved within the framework of community assistance.

From a decolonial perspective, these ethnicity-based interventions reveal the continuity of "coloniality of power" and epistemic segmentation. Educational aid tied to racial identity—while intended to reduce disparities—simultaneously teaches students to see access and identity as fixed category bound. This confirms that formal decolonization does not automatically remove colonial logic from education. As such, while self-help programs and language policies bring tangible benefits, they also reflect how Singapore's education system continues to produce and reproduce colonial epistemology, demanding critical reflection on the way the state frames identity, opportunity, and historical narratives.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the CMIO framework, inherited from Singapore's colonial past, continues to exert significant influence on the country's educational and social policy landscape. By structuring access to resources, such as language education and scholarships, along rigid ethnic categories, the system has institutionalized a particular form of multiculturalism that reinforces rather than transcends colonial classifications. The analysis of state-sponsored scholarships and educational programs shows that while they are officially framed as tools of equity, they often serve to entrench racial boundaries and limit the recognition of more complex and fluid identities within Singapore's diverse society.

From a decolonial perspective, the persistence of CMIO in education reveals how colonial logics of classification remain embedded in contemporary governance. This perpetuates epistemic dominance, where cultural legitimacy and opportunity are mediated through state-sanctioned racial categories. The evidence further suggests that such practices produce unequal outcomes, as seen in the differentiated access to scholarships and the symbolic privileging of certain languages as "mother tongues." These effects not only shape the distribution of resources but also the very imagination of nationhood among younger generations.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the decolonization of policy requires more than the expansion of multicultural rhetoric; it demands a critical rethinking of the epistemological foundations of social governance. Singapore's continued reliance on CMIO demonstrates the limits of a technocratic approach to diversity management, one that prioritizes administrative order over cultural complexity. To move toward a more inclusive and decolonial future, it is imperative to dismantle essentialized categories and create spaces for alternative narratives of belonging, particularly within education where national identity is most actively cultivated.

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