Envisioning Chinese Identity and Managing Multiracialism in Singapore

Leong Koon Chan

University of New South Wales, School of Design Studies
Sydney, Australia, l.chan@unsw.edu.au

Abstract : Multiracialism and bilingualism are key concepts for national ideology and policy in the management of Singapore for nation building. Multiracialism is implemented in social policies to regulate racial harmony in the population of Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other, a social stratification matrix inherited from the British administration. Bilingualism – the teaching and learning of English and the mother tongue in primary and secondary schools – is rationalised as the 'cultural ballast' to safeguard Asian identities and values against Western influences. This focus on 'culture' as a means of engendering a relationship between the individual and the nation suggests that as a tool for government policy culture is intricately linked to questions of identity. In discussing multiracialism it is necessary to address ethnicity for the two concepts are intertwined.

This paper investigates the crucial role that imagery plays in our understanding of nationalism by examining the policy and process of language reform for the Chinese in Singapore through the visual culture of the Speak Mandarin Campaigns, 1979-2005. Drawing upon object analysis, textual/document analysis and visual interpretation, the research analyses how the graphic communication process is constructed and reconstructed as indices of government and public responses to the meanings of multiracialism and Chineseness.

Central to the findings are Anthony D. Smith's (1993) contention that "national symbols, customs and ceremonies are the most potent and durable aspects of nationalism," and Raymond Williams' (1981) contention that social ideologies are reflective of "structures of feeling", defined as individual and collective meanings and values, "…with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension...a social experience which is still in process."

1. Background

For Anthony D. Smith "Imagery has always played a crucial role in politics and nowhere more so than in our understanding of nationalism" as exemplified by recent and prominent "'uses of imagery'…in attempts to *explain* the formation of nations and the spread of nationalism" [1]. From the turn of the 20th century to the contemporary era, graphic design – for example banners, posters and print advertisements – has been used in the process of nation-building to create awareness, effect behavioural change and represent notions of everyday experience, identity and ideology [2]. However, the design/representation matrix is not static for the practice of graphic design concerns meaning making in the production and consumption of knowledge which bears a direct relationship to social processes and institutions, in this instance how information about socio-cultural identity in the Republic of Singapore is commodified and mediated for consumption as public knowledge about ethnicity and national consciousness. This case study focuses on graphic design as a tool for national ideology and policy in Singapore, particularly the visualising of multi-racialism as a continuing reference for national identity and social harmony.

1.1. Birth of a Nation

During the post-World War II era, politics in South and Southeast Asia was characterised by the rise of national consciousness in the colonies of the British in India and Malaya, and the Dutch in Indonesia. The British granted Malaya and Singapore self-rule in 1957 and 1959 respectively. In 1963 Malaya and Singapore achieved full independence as part of a new nation, Malaysia, as a result of the union of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah. The relationship between Malaysia and Singapore was brief and constrained by conflicting differences in nation-building objectives, and irreconcilable differences between the Federal government in Kuala Lumpur and the state government in Singapore which resulted in the expulsion of Singapore in 1965 [3]. The Republic of Singapore was created on 8 August 1965. Race is a politically sensitive issue: Singapore is the only nation with a Chinese-dominated population within a region surrounded by Indonesia and Malaysia. The 2000 census reported a total population of 3,263,200 Singapore residents with a racial composition of Chinese (76.8 percent), Malay (13.9 percent), Indian (7.9 percent), and Others (1.4 percent) [4]. The Singapore Department of Statistics defines Singapore residents as citizens and permanent residents with local residence.

1.2 A Plural Society – Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others

Singapore inherited from the British administration a system of social stratification based on ethnicity and occupational or trade specialisation which managed by segregating a plural society of immigrants from China, India, Indonesia and Malaya. The immigrants were characterised by closely bonded ethnic groups divided geographically and socially by culture, language, religion, trade and social class [5]. For example, the Indians were employed in colonial administration and public works, the Hokkiens were well-regarded as merchants in view of their domination of international trade, the Cantonese and Hakkas specialised in building and construction, and the Hainanese in food retail. Cantonese, Hainan, Hakka and Hokkien represent some of the dialect groups in Chinese Singaporean society, and reflect the diversity of immigrant cultures from southern Chinese provinces. This system of social stratification categorised culturally diversed immigrants into four broad racial groups – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other (CMIO) – and continues in use to the present day. For a

definition of the diverse ethnicities which are categorised under the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) classification system, refer to the Singapore Statistics website under Glossary: Census 2000 Concepts and Definitions <www.singstat.gov.sg/statsres/glossary/population.html#C>.

Plural societies are created as a result of peoples from diverse cultures, ethnicities, languages and religions coming to co-exist within the same political boundaries due to colonialisation, economic migration, forced or voluntary relocation, political persecutions, trade, warfare and so forth. The Republic of Singapore in 1965 was a new state, and a new society in which ethnic segregation meant that there were no foundations of a national identity and social cohesion based on collective history and culture found in older societies like India or Indonesia [6] Central to the objectives of the People's Action Party (PAP) which formed government in 1965 was the imperative to control all mechanisms and policies to prioritise "economic progress and ethnic harmony" in a society where segregation and loyalty along ethnic lines were not conducive to the formation of a community with common interests [6]. For the Singapore government the rationale for nation-building has always been and continues to be the fostering of the development of a Singaporean national identity among the population, particularly one which will prevail over the demands of the Chinese, Malay or Indian communities in the city state [7].

2. Multi-racialism and Nation-building

As part of nation-building the Singapore government espouses "multi-racialism" as "the ideology that accords equal status to the cultures and ethnic identities of the various 'races' that are regarded as comprising the composition of a plural society" [8]. For Singapore, the concept of multi-racialism also concerns ethnicity and ethnic relations because of several features set within its urban, national and regional contexts: the ethnic and social heterogeneity of its people; the historical and social relations among ethnic groups and social interactions among ethnic individuals; and the state's management of ethnic issues and ethnic relations [7]. Further examination of multi-racialism raises issues about "race" and "inter-race", concepts which interact in the continuous construction of community and identity for the three ethnic groups at local and national levels. "Race" is kept in check politically by the explicit recognition that Singapore is a multi-racial society, and racial tolerance is protected by the law. In making multi-racialism a national policy, the government is placed in a neutral position where legislation prevents acting in ways which cannot advantage any particular ethnic group, hence racial cultural matters are directed to the domain of private and voluntary, individual or collective, practices [9]. The neutral stance has preserved for the state a very high level of autonomy and insulates it from pressures which may arise from matters related to race issues. Multi-racialism has a two-pronged effect: "a high visibility of race is promoted voluntarily in the social body, and concurrently, the strategic effect is one of pushing race out of the front line of politics" [9]. Simultaneously the ideology of multi-racialism is crucial to the government's strategic policy in maintaining racial harmony within the island nation as well as in the Southeast Asian region where Singapore's major Chinese population contrasts sharply with the Malay majority in Malaysia and Indonesia. This ideology of multi-racialism and its implementation as policy and national identity can be seen in the government's legislation and administration for social stratification, bilingualism and public housing which will be examined in this paper.

2.1. Visualising Multi-racialsim

Multi-racialism, as a "cultural and social *institution*", has become ingrained almost invisibly in the fabric of the life in Singapore [8]. Since 1965 the implementation of multi-racialism as ideology and policy in nation-building has resulted in a rich history of representing ethnicity and multi-racialism in Singapore. The process of cultural representation raises two concepts which affect the visualisation of ethnic groups: "'cultural definition' involves being identified by oneself (and by others) as belonging to a distinctive cultural group; and 'cultural control' involves members of a specific cultural group exerting social, economic, and/or political influence over laws, issues, and representations of that group" [10]. In this case, the Singapore government clearly takes on the role of "cultural control" in steering the socio-cultural construction of ethnic identity and multi-racialism in posters and other forms of graphic design produced for a specific ethnic group or the nation. The "official" graphic designs draw from contemporary, historical and ethnographic diacritic for inclusion as cultural markers in the design. A survey of the typology of diacritic from language reform campaign poster designs for the Chinese community during 1979-2002 indicates two categories of diacritic: (1) ethno-specific including costume, festival, food, mythology, calligraphy, art/craft, auspicious symbols, architecture, colour, cartoon or *manhua* and patterns; and (2) culture-specific including family, career, work, children, relationship, school, commerce, social situations, and social spaces.

Members of Parliament in Singapore represent electoral divisions – known as constituencies – either by single or multiple seats. These divisions are categorized as single member constituency (SMC) and group representation constituency (GRC). The ruling Peoples' Action Party (PAP) selection of candidates for SMC and GRC representation extends the implementation of multi-racialism as ideology and policy to a political level. PAP candidates are strategically selected and groomed to represent the multi-racial composition of the electorates or sometimes to symbolise the traditional ethnic groups of the division.

Figure 1. National Day poster © East Coast Town Council, Singapore, 2006.
(Photograph by the author)

The policy of multi-racialism "requires" the inclusion of representatives from each of the three ethnic groups for images which portray national identity or the nation for domestic consumption, for example banners and posters for National Day. For the 41st National Day celebration in 2006 the East Coast Town Council

displayed large posters and banners in the electorate during the month of August (Figure 1). The foreground of the poster design features prominently five People's Action Party (PAP) representatives – three Chinese, one Malay and one Indian – who are the GRC Members of Parliament for the local electorate, and the slogan, Together. We Celebrate Our 41st National Day, in the four official languages. In this poster the Members of Parliament are wearing white, the symbolic colour of the uniform worn by Lee Kuan Yew and PAP team in 1957. In contrast, the 2009 National Day posters for the Jalan Besar division – a traditional Malay district – shows the female and male Members of Parliament from the PAP team wearing Malay-style blouses and shirts made from traditional batik-patterned cloth. The background of the poster is half-filled by photographic montage of women and children: to the right, an Indian woman in a dark blue sari and a Chinese woman in a red *qipao*-style dress; and to the left, a Malay woman wearing a white *hijab*. At the level of national symbolism the children wave small Singapore flags while a large billowing flag frames the top left-hand corner of the poster.

3. Bilingualism and Ethnic Identity

The Republic of Singapore has designated four official languages: Mandarin or *huayu* (华语) for the Chinese, *bahasa* for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians, while English is for commerce, communication, and science and technology, and historically a "neutral" language for cross-cultural interaction during British administration. *Bahasa* is also the national language and is used for the national anthem and ceremonial purposes. As part of the nation-building process the Singapore government recognised the need for an education system which would nurture in young people the values which would ensure their loyalty and commitment to the nation. The government introduced the policy of bilingualism to promote racial harmony and integration with the rationale that "English is seen as the language of technology and management, and the Asian languages as the carriers of cultural values" [11]. The post-1966 bilingual policy in education refers to the use of English with either Mandarin, Malay or Tamil, depending on the "mother tongue" of the student. Through the preservation of the use of the three main ethnic languages in Singapore, the bilingual policy is seen as a bridge to the three cultural heritages in Singapore, and as such provides the "cultural ballast" for maintaining a cohesive and stable society [11].

The policy of bilingualism is manifest in the use and display of language in official campaign graphics for communicating to the Singapore populace. The policy provides incorporation of the official languages in three ways: (1) all four languages in one graphic application for a national audience, (2) combinations of English and Chinese, English and Malay, and English and Tamil, in a series of generic or integrated graphics for a national audience, and (3) individual language in one graphic for a specific ethno-cultural group. Together the policies of bilingualism and multi-racialism enable the authorities to access a flexible system (at ethnic and/or national level) for communicating language and images in social campaigns, for example, National Day posters to reinforce identity and collective values (Figure 1), or the Speak Mandarin Campaign posters for language reform in the Chinese community (Figure 2). The social stratification of citizens based on ethnic categorization (CMIO) and the bilingual policy create conflicts where ethnic and cultural identities cannot be determined by official classification, for example, Singaporean Indians who speak another dialect while Tamil is completely foreign to them. The bilingual policy has critical implications for non-Chinese Singaporeans who intend their children to study Mandarin instead of Bahasa or Tamil as a second language in primary and secondary schools. For parents of Indian and Malay backgrounds, the reason such as wanting one's child to be proficient in

Mandarin for personal and future career prospects will require a process of justification to the education authorities.

3.1. Speak Mandarin Campaign

In 1979 Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew inaugurated the "Speak Mandarin" campaign with the aims of encouraging young Chinese Singaporeans to speak in Mandarin within five years' time, and of making Mandarin the language of "the coffeeshop, of the hawker centre, of the shops" within a decade [12]. The rationale for the adoption of Mandarin as the *lingua franca* of the Chinese community includes: the function of Mandarin for the retention of Chinese cultural traditions and values, Mandarin as the language for instruction and teaching, Mandarin as the language to unify all dialect-speaking Chinese in Singapore, and Mandarin as the language for trading with mainland China (although this last reason was not publicly announced in 1979 since China was still regarded with suspicion during the late 1970s) [13]. Although the bilingual policy strengthened the use of the mother tongue among the three main ethnic groups in Singapore, the continuing emphasis on Speak Mandarin campaigns led to the Malays and Indians feeling "threatened and perhaps even alienated by the repeated exhortation to speak Mandarin" and consequently heightened the racial consciousness of all Singaporeans [14]. The poster designs for the annual Speak Mandarin campaigns focus on themes which feature "traditional" cultural markers including Chinese architecture, decorative arts, mythology and painting, as well as contemporary images of the individual and/or family in social scenarios.

Figure 2. Speak Mandarin campaign poster © Ministry of Information and the Arts, Singapore, 1989.

The year 1989 marks the tenth anniversary of the Speak Mandarin campaign, and the theme reads "More Mandarin, Less Dialect. Make it a Way of Life" in English and Mandarin (Figure 2). The focus of the poster is provided by two images: the first, a couple and children in a family scenario, and the second a workplace setting with three adults. Although the most conspicuous cultural marker is the dominant use of the

red – an auspicious colour in Chinese culture – the poster image also reflects the major social change in population policies of Singapore. This image of the 1989 Chinese "family" contrasts sharply with typical images of the "ideal" Singaporean family unit during 1966-1980 when the Singapore government introduced three five-year plans for birth control which encouraged women to adopt the national policy of a two-child family [15].

Since the first its first launch in 1979, the Speak Mandarin campaigns continue annually albeit with variations on policies for national benefit (e.g. trade with China), nation-building (e.g. multi-racialism and bilingualism) and cultural identity (e.g. Chineseness). Although the language reform programme for the Chinese in Singapore can be regarded as a success for all the reasons rationalised by the government, there has been a notable sacrifice in removing the socio-cultural identities of the Chinese at a personal level. The substitution of Mandarin as the *lingua franca* for all Chinese Singaporeans has meant that many regional dialects spoken by the first and second generations of the Chinese in Singapore will wither or be diluted. Since 1979, all Chinese films and television programmes in dialects (Cantonese and Hokkien) from Hong Kong and Taiwan are re-dubbed in Mandarin for broadcast in Singapore. This policy includes the import and sale of music and films in CD and DVD formats from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Unlike China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan where the Chinese continue to communicate in dialect(s) spoken by the parents and grandparents, and study in Mandarin (or *putonghua*), this loss of cultural/ethnic identity is ironic in the pursuit of Mandarin as the sole indicator of Chinese identity in Singapore.

4. Public Housing Policy

As a consequence of the poor economic conditions of migrants and the British administration's policy of racial segregation, the population of Singapore in the late 1950s was characterised by relatively homogenous enclaves based on racial and social affiliations. For the Singapore government public housing represents one of the major priorities and instruments to promote the development of a national identity among Singaporeans by desegregation of the ethnic groups. In 1960 the Housing Development Board (HDB) was established by the government to provide low-cost public housing to alleviate housing shortage, poor housing conditions and rapid population growth [16]. The conditions of obtaining a public housing flat are citizenship, income and family size and not ethnic or racial affiliation. In addition to solving the housing shortage during the first two decades of independence, the government's public housing programmes played a significant role in nation-building by establishing public housing estates where desegregated communities of Singaporeans of different racial, linguistic or religious groups co-exist and interact with one another, and in many instances, for the first time.

The implementation of multi-racialism in public housing is exemplified by the government's policy of 'mixing' the three ethnic groups when allocating residences in public housing estates. The policy ensures that all races are represented in the neighbourhood which includes a community centre, market, shops, food court, sporting facilities, police office, car-park and public spaces which can be used by all residents. Local councils and public authorities also apply the concepts of multi-racialism to regulations on racial harmony, personal and public responsibility, and civic pride, and nation-building for the residents on the estate. The 1998 poster, *Keep our estates clean for gracious living*, typifies a reminder from the local council or public housing authority reminding all residents to behave responsibly and maintain good neighbourly relationships with others (Figure 3). Such posters are displayed on special notice boards regularly to keep all residents informed of local council regulations, housing estate regulations, news and events. Since this is a poster for use in a multi-racial

environment the design incorporates cultural markers – including skin colour and wearable typical for the particular ethnic group – as an inclusive message for all residents. The policy on multi-racialism and the social distribution of ethnic groups in public housing estates is successful from the point of view in 'constructing' multi-racial residential areas thus avoiding ghettos. For the younger generation of Singaporeans inter-racial relationships in the republic may mean more than a token gesture experienced by the previous generation.

Figure 3. Poster © East Coast Residents Council and People's Association, 1998.

5. Conclusion

This research illustrates briefly the role of graphic design as a instrument for mass communication, particularly the representation and management of ethnicity, i.e. Chineseness, and the definition of multi-racialism in nation-building. It demonstrates *how* the Singaporean government has influenced the production and consumption of knowledge about multi-racialism as ideology and policy through the use of iconography and language, and the socio-cultural and political effects on national consciousness. The case study calls for further research in graphic design history from the cognitive authority of the narrative without which concrete design forms of past and present would seldom be noteworthy.

Acknowledgement

References

[1] Smith, A. D., 1993, The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?, M. Ringrose, and A. J. Lerner (eds.), Reimagining the Nation, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia, p 9.

[2] Margolin, V., 1979, The Visual Rhetoric of Propaganda, Information Design Journal, vol. 1, pp 107-122.

[3] Milne, R. S. and Mauzy, D. K., 1990, Singapore: The Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew, Westview Press, Boulder, pp 59-61.

[4] Leow, B. G., 2000, Census of Population Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Singapore

Department of Statistics, Singapore, p 9.

[5] Turnbull, C. M., 1977, A History of Singapore, 1819-1975, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, pp 34-77. Reprint 1980.

[6] Vasil, R., 2000, Governing Singapore: A History of National Development and Democracy, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp 47-48.

[7] Lai, A. H., 1995, Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case-Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, p 15.

[8] Benjamin, G., 1976, The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multiracialism', R. Hassan (ed.), Singapore: Society in Transition, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, p 115.

[9] Chua, B. H., 1995, Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore. Routledge, London and New York, pp 106-107.

[10] Ruffins, F. D., 1997, The Politics of Cultural Ownership, M. Beirut, W. Drenttel, S. Heller and DK Holland (eds.), Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design, M. Beirut, Allsworth Press, New York, pp 142-144.

[11] Clammer, J., 1985, Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture, Chopmen Publishers, Singapore, p 133.

[12] Lee, K. Y., 1979, Mandarin or Dialect?, Straits Times [Singapore], 24 November 1979.

[13] Kuo, E. C. Y., 1984, Mass Media and Language Planning: Singapore's 'Speak Mandarin' Campaign', Journal of Communication, vol. 32, no. 2, pp 25-26.

[14] Vasil, R., 1995, Asianising Singapore: The PAP's Management of Ethnicity, Heinemann Asia, Singapore, p 72.

[15] Fourteenth Annual Report 1979, Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, Singapore, p 3.

[16] Hassan, R., 1976, Public Housing, R. Hassan (ed.), Singapore: Society in Transition, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, p 241.