

Visualizing Multi-Racialism in Singapore: Graphic Design as a Tool for Ideology and Policy in Nation Building

Leong K. Chan

For Anthony D. Smith, “Imagery has always played a crucial role in politics and nowhere more so than in our understanding of nationalism.” The truth of this statement, he says, is 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 twentieth century to the contemporary era, graphic design—in the form of banners, posters, and print advertisements—has been used in the process of nation-building to create awareness; affect behavioral change; and represent notions of everyday experience, identity, and ideology.² However, the design/representation matrix is not static; the practice of graphic design concerns meaning-making in the production and consumption of knowledge, and this [meaning—making 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 visualizing of multi-racialism as a continuing reference for national identity and social harmony.

Birth of a Nation

During the post-World War II era, politics in South and Southeast Asia was characterized by the rise of national consciousness in the colonies of the British in India and Malaya, and in those of 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, as well as by irreconcilable differences between the Federal government in Kuala Lumpur and the state government in Singapore that resulted in the expulsion of Singapore in 1965.³

The Republic of Singapore was created on August 8, 1965. Race is a politically sensitive issue: Singapore is the only nation with a Chinese-dominated population within a geographical space

- 1 Anthony D. Smith, “The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?” in *Reimagining the Nation*, M. Ringrose and A. J. Lerner, eds. (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993), 9.
- 2 Victor Margolin, “The Visual Rhetoric of Propaganda,” *Information Design Journal*, 1, 1979: 107–122.
- 3 R. S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy, *Singapore: The Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 59–61.

bordered by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. 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 Other (1.4 percent).⁴

A Plural Society: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others

Singapore inherited from the British administration a system of social stratification based on ethnicity and occupation, or trade specialization, which was managed by segregating a pluralistic society of immigrants from China, India, Indonesia, and Malaya. The immigrants were characterized 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.⁶ This system of social stratification categorized culturally diverse immigrants into the four broad racial groups identified— Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other (CMIO)—and it continues in use to the present day.⁷

Pluralistic societies are created as a result of peoples from diverse cultures, with diverse ethnicities, languages, and religions, coming to co-exist within the same political boundaries. This coming together might result from colonialization, economic migration, forced or voluntary relocation, political persecutions, trade, and warfare. 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, such as India or Indonesia.⁸ Central to the objectives of the People's Action Party (PAP), which formed a government in 1965, was the imperative to control all mechanisms and policies to prioritize "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.⁹ 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 that prevails over the demands of the Chinese, Malay, or Indian communities in the city state.¹⁰

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... compos[ing] a plural society."¹¹ For Singapore, the concept of multi-racialism also concerns ethnicity and ethnic relations because of several features set within its urban, national,

- 4 Bee Geok Leow, *Census of Population Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics* (Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000), 9. The Singapore Department of Statistics defines Singapore residents as citizens and permanent residents with local residence.
- 5 C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1975* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977, 1980), 34-77.
- 6 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.
- 7 For a definition of the diverse ethnicities that fall under the CMIO classification system, refer to Glossary: Census 2000 Concepts and Definitions <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statsres/glossary/population.html#C> (accessed September 26, 2010).
- 8 Raj Vasil, *Governing Singapore: A History of National Development and Democracy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 47-48.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 10 Ah Heng Lai, *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.
- 11 Geoffrey Benjamin, "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multiracialism'" in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, R. Hassan, ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 115.

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.¹²

Further examination of multi-racialism raises issues about "race" and "inter-race," concepts that 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 that cannot advantage any particular ethnic group; hence, racial cultural matters are directed to the domain of private and voluntary, individual or collective, practices.¹³ The neutral stance has preserved for the state a very high level of autonomy and insulates it from pressures that might 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."¹⁴

Visualising Multi-Racialism

Multi-racialism, as a "cultural and social *institution*," has become ingrained almost invisibly in the fabric of life in Singapore.¹⁵ Since 1965, the implementation of multi-racialism as ideology and policy in nation-building has led to a rich history of the representation of ethnicity and multi-racialism in Singapore. The process of cultural representation raises two concepts that affect the visualization 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."¹⁶ 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 diacritics from language reform campaign poster designs for the Chinese community from 1979 to 2002 indicates two categories of diacritics: (1) ethno-specific, including costume, festival, food, mythology, calligraphy, art/craft, auspicious symbols, architecture, color, cartoon characterization, and patterns; and (2) culture-specific, including family, career, work, children, relationship, school, commerce, social situations, and social spaces.

The policy of multi-racialism is represented graphically, for domestic consumption, through the inclusion of ethnic representation

12 Ah Heng Lai, *Meanings of Multiethnicity*, 15.

13 Beng-Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 106–107.

14 Ibid.

15 Geoffrey Benjamin, "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multiracialism'" in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, R. Hassan, ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 115.

16 Fath Davis Ruffins, "The Politics of Cultural Ownership," in *Looking Closer 2: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, M. Beirut, W. Drenttel, S. Heller and DK Holland, eds., (New York: Allsworth Press, 1997), 142–144.

Figure 1
National Day poster © East Coast Town
Council, Singapore, 2006. Photograph
by Leong K. Chan.



from the three groups in images that portray national identity or the nation. These graphic designs are layered with meanings of ethnicity and national identity (e.g., the display of large posters and banners in August 2006 in celebration of the 41st National Day for constituents living in the East Coast district (Figure 1)). The foreground of the poster design prominently featured five People's Action Party (PAP) representatives (three Chinese, one Malay, and one Indian) who are the Members of Parliament for the local electorate, as well as the slogan, "Together. We Celebrate Our 41st National Day," in the four official languages. A photographic montage of women and children filled the background: 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*. The Singapore flag as a symbol of the nation-state was emphasized by the image of children waving small flags while a large billowing flag framed the top left-hand corner of the poster.

Bilingualism and Ethnic Identity

The Republic of Singapore has designated four official languages: Mandarin or *huayu* for the Chinese, *bahasa* for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians, while English, historically a "neutral" language for cross-cultural interaction during British administration, is for commerce, communication, and science and technology. *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 recognized the need for an education system that would nurture in young people the values that 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."¹⁷ The post-1966 bilingual policy in education prescribed 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

17 John Clammer, *Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1985), 133.

heritages in Singapore, and as such provides the “cultural ballast” for maintaining a cohesive and stable society.¹⁸

The policy of bilingualism is manifest in the use and display of language in official campaign graphics for communicating to the Singapore populace. From a survey of graphic designs produced in Singapore since 1979, three categories of how the official languages were presented could be identified: (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 a flexible system of design strategies for communicating via language and images in social campaigns (e.g., National Day posters to reinforce identity and collective values, or the “Speak Mandarin” campaign posters for language reform in the Chinese community).

Speak Mandarin Campaign

In 1979 Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew inaugurated the Speak Mandarin campaign with the two-fold aim of encouraging young Chinese Singaporeans to speak in Mandarin within five years’ time and of making Mandarin the language of “the coffee shop, of the hawker centre, of the shops” within a decade.¹⁹ The rationale for the adoption of Mandarin as the *lingua franca* of the Chinese community included the following: 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 because China was still regarded with suspicion during the late 1970s).²⁰

Although the bilingual policy strengthened the use of the mother tongue among the three main ethnic groups in Singapore, the continuing emphasis on the Speak Mandarin campaign caused the Malays and Indians to feel “threatened and perhaps even alienated by the repeated exhortation to speak Mandarin” and consequently heightened the racial consciousness of all Singaporeans.²¹ The poster designs for the annual Speak Mandarin campaigns focus on themes that 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.

For the tenth anniversary of the Speak Mandarin campaign, in 1989, the selected theme was “More Mandarin, Less Dialect. Make it a Way of Life.” Produced by the Ministry of Information and the Arts, the bilingual poster was designed to focus on two images: the first, a couple and three children in a family scenario, and the second, a workplace setting with three adults (two men and one woman).

18 Ibid, 22.

19 Kuan Yew Lee, “Mandarin or Dialect?” *Straits Times* [Singapore], November 24, 1979.

20 Eddie C. Y. Kuo, “Mass Media and Language Planning: Singapore’s ‘Speak Mandarin’ Campaign,” *Journal of Communication*, 32:2 (1984): 25–26.

21 Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP’s Management of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995), 72.

Although the dominant use of red—an auspicious color in Chinese culture—was conspicuous as a cultural marker, the first image can be interpreted in the context of a revision in socio-economic planning and policy by the government—namely, population growth and labor. The image of the Chinese “family of five” underscored the government’s anxiety of a reduced labor force because of falling birth rates, and contrasted sharply with typical poster images of the “ideal” Singaporean family from 1966 to 1980, when the Singapore government introduced three five-year plans for birth control that encouraged women to adopt the national policy of a two-child family.²²

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 characterized 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 through 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 a housing shortage, poor housing conditions, and rapid population growth.²³ The conditions attached to obtaining a public housing flat were 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 programs played a significant role in nation-building by establishing public housing estates, where desegregated communities of Singaporeans of different racial, linguistic, or religious groups could co-exist and interact with one another, and in many instances, for the first time.

Town councils were established in 1988 as part of the transfer of limited powers from the government to Members of Parliament, to grassroots leaders, and ultimately to the residents in public housing estates. The intention was to empower the residents with more responsibility for their own living environment. As part of the management process, town councils regularly produced posters that encouraged all residents to behave responsibly and to maintain good neighborly relationships with others. These posters were displayed on special notice boards to inform residents of local council regulations, housing estate regulations, news, and events.

The “Keep our estates clean for gracious living” poster, produced by the East Coast Residents Council and People’s Association in 1998, typifies the message and graphics for this purpose. The composition of the illustration idealized two males, Malay and Indian, and a Chinese couple in the foreground, framed

22 Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, Fourteenth Annual Report 1979 (Singapore: Singapore Family Planning & Population Board, 1979), 3.

23 Riaz Hassan, “Public Housing,” *Singapore: Society in Transition* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 241.

by modern apartment blocks and lush gardens in the background. Because this poster was designed for use in a multi-racial environment, the design incorporated cultural markers—skin color and clothing—to differentiate the ethnicity of individuals, as well as to symbolize the “multi-racial community” in an inclusive message for all residents.

Conclusion

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