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# The Construction of *Singapore* in Singapore Cinema

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*A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Media, Film and Television, the University of Auckland, 2018.*

## **Abstract**

My PhD will explore Singapore's 'identity' as it is constructed through the lens of Singapore cinema, a complex task given the country's multiracialism, diasporic past and present, and the ever-changing cultural landscape of the country. My research will cover national and cultural identity in Singapore, local film culture, and the relationship between identity and filmic representation. As my PhD is with Creative Practice, I will also be producing a feature documentary as part of the research process. The documentary exemplifies the concept of 'research-led practice' (Smith & Dean 2009, p. 7), while the in-depth interviews with a diverse range of people featured within provides qualitative data for the written component of the thesis.

## **Acknowledgements**

My deepest thanks to my primary supervisor, Professor Anne Goldson, for her intellectual and creative guidance on both my dissertation and documentary. Her insight, critique and support have been invaluable for my PhD project.

I also want to thank my associate supervisor, Dr Xuelin Zhou, for his constructive criticism in helping me improve my work.

Many thanks to the staff and my colleagues in the disciplinary area of Media and Communication in the School of Social Sciences, University of Auckland. Their support and friendship have greatly enriched my PhD journey.

I am grateful to Dr Ian Brailsford and Dr Brígida Orioli Figueira, whose advice and direction through the Doctoral Skills Programme helped me with the fundamentals of thesis writing.

My gratitude also to Hyeun Kim, whose emotional support kept me going, especially during the most trying times.

My PhD project would not have been possible without the financial support from the University of Auckland and SkillsFuture (Singapore), so my appreciation to the university and the Info-communications Media Development Authority as well.

I am indebted to all the participants in my study who were so generous in giving me their time and sharing their stories. Their contribution is the heartbeat of this PhD. My thanks also to the numerous people behind the scenes who helped me in one way or another for my film and who provided resources for it.

To my friends...There are too many to name here. Thank you all for caring, for being there when I needed it, for making me laugh and for believing in me.

I owe special thanks to my family for their encouragement and in particular, my mum, who tried her best to support me even though she never understood why I had to disrupt my life to do a PhD. It turned out to be a life-learning journey for both of us.

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*Chapter 1*  
*Introduction*

This chapter will introduce my project, and present my methodology and literature review. At the heart of my PhD research, I am exploring how Singapore's 'identity'<sup>1</sup> or cultural 'authenticity' is discursively constructed and negotiated in Singapore<sup>2</sup> films. As such, I will explore Singapore identity as constituting national and cultural identity, how it is authentic, and how these complexities are negotiated in the construction of Singapore identity on screen.

**My research question is composed of three parts:**

**First, how is Singapore identity defined given its complexities as a multicultural diasporic country?**

**Second, given these complexities, how do filmmakers construct a 'national cinema'?**

**Third, how do Singaporean filmmakers negotiate speaking to local audiences, that is, retaining their 'Singaporeanness', while at the same time, reaching and addressing the global marketplace?**

My topic is broad and breaks down into four smaller research questions which will be addressed in subsequent chapters. First, what is Singapore's relationship to its identity and how is it currently defined? Second, how do Singapore films address 'the national' and construct the Singapore identity? How do Singapore films work as a 'national cinema'? Third, how do Singapore films strive to be 'authentically Singaporean'? Fourth, can an 'authentically Singaporean' film be universal at the same time, given the pressure to reach international audiences? That is, can it satisfy both local and global demands?

The first area I am exploring focuses on Singapore's national and cultural identity. Given that the term 'Singaporean' encompasses various ethnicities, I borrow Cheng's (2004, p. 142)

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<sup>1</sup> I recognise that 'identity' is a contingent term, rather than an essence. Thus, in the first instance, I use

<sup>2</sup> The thesis uses the terms 'Singapore' and 'Singaporean' interchangeably. Unless otherwise specified, they have the same meaning – belonging or relating to Singapore or its people.

ideas in exploring whether it is possible just over several generations for a ‘people’ with a shared cultural identity to be created from a diverse collective whose origins extend from East Asia and Southeast Asia to the Indian subcontinent. Singapore seems on the surface to have achieved this, but according to Lowe (1996, p. 65), there is still an essentialising logic behind this homogenisation of a clearly “heterogeneous entity”. Koshy (2000, p. 491) suggests such essentialism can be avoided if responsibility is taken to articulate the inner contradictions of what it means to be any given nationality, for example, Singaporean, enunciating the representational inconsistencies and dilemmas of this label.

The second area focuses on how Singapore identity is constructed in Singapore cinema. Identity is about sameness and difference (Hall, 2004, p. 390). Hall suggests identity can be thought of as being framed by two axes that are simultaneously operative: “the axis of similarity and continuity (the past – colonialism); and the axis of difference and rupture (the present and future – diaspora)” (2004, p. 389). Sameness is problematic for Singapore as it is a nation comprised of people with no shared cultural heritage or indigenous traditions. Singapore as a nation is artificially constructed and its sense of identity is still being forged. Difference is also problematic because in the absence of shared heritage and values, how can Singapore and its identity/culture be distinguishable from others? How then can Singapore cinema address a “sameness” and “difference” that do not exist? Furthermore, how can Singapore and its cinema negotiate tensions between its national and cultural identity, and between being local and going global? As Tan (2008, p. 50) questions:

Can filmmakers, faced with the dilemma of producing ‘local’ works that aim at a certain kind of indigenous authenticity or producing internationally appealing works that can speak to a greatly expanded market, reasonably be expected to maintain in their films a unique ‘national’ quality that speaks with nuances and sophistication especially to local audiences?

Singapore filmmakers constantly have to negotiate between this inward and outward focus (Higson, 2000, p. 67) while at the same time tackling various issues. These include a lack of cinematic heritage due to the death of the industry during Singapore’s early years, the strong hand of government censorship, a small domestic film market and Singapore’s own identity crisis. The result is a Singapore cinema that is just as eclectic as the nation is heterogeneous; a cinema, like the country, that is still searching for itself and its place in the world.



To supplement my research, I am also producing a documentary on the same topic, which will be further discussed below and in Chapter 6. My research is significant for two main reasons. First, I extend existing literature on identity and national cinema beyond its usual Western focus. Also, while there is considerable literature on Singapore identity and Singapore cinema, their connection requires more scholarship – a gap which my research fills. Second, the creative component of my research – the documentary – adds many further reflexive layers to the research. As a filmmaker, the relationship between identity and cinema will be explored from a theoretical (external) perspective, but also from a practitioner-oriented (internal) perspective. In other words, ‘I preach what I practise’ and ‘practise what I preach’. Finally, a documentary can have greater outreach and mass appeal than an academic thesis. Thus, I see my PhD project as contributing both theoretically and creatively, serving both academia and the wider public.

## **Methodology**

This section covers the methodology for my entire PhD, including the documentary, which is about 40% of my PhD research.

My ontological and epistemological positioning informs my research and methodology, so I briefly state them here. Using Bryman’s terms, my ontological position is constructionism. Constructionism accommodates subjectivity, where “social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). My epistemological position is interpretivism, which Bryman describes as the study of the social world “that reflects the distinctiveness of humans as against the natural order” (2012, p. 28). Interpretivism is “concerned with the empathic understanding of human actions rather than with the forces that are deemed to act on it” (Bryman, 2012, p. 28).

My methodology in my written thesis is two-fold. First, I use critical framing methods to explore key theoretical concepts. Second, I use qualitative analysis to supplement and extend my theoretical framework, drawing upon in-depth directed interviews that I conducted for my documentary through ethnographic fieldwork. As the data generated is through the production of a documentary, I engage in creative practice research, which is the methodology for my documentary. These three methodologies are further detailed below.

### Critical Framing

Critical framing enables researchers to critically analyse and interpret social and cultural contexts and the political, ideological, and value-centred purposes of texts (Mills, 2006, p. 1). I use critical framing to study key theoretical concepts which has involved drawing on the work of multiple scholars whose theories serve as a foundation for my own research. Some of these theories will be expanded further in the following chapters. Critical framing helps focus my literature review which I present below. The grounding provided by my literature review also helped to prepare me for data collection and data analysis.

### Data Collection: Interviews

The arguments I make about Singapore identity and cinema will be supplemented by interviews I have undertaken. The interview is a critical component of the documentary genre but doubles here as qualitative research, serving as a hinge between my academic and documentary work. According to Weiss (1994), “Interviewing gives us access to the observations of others. Through interviewing, we can learn about places we have not been and could not go and about settings in which we have not lived” (p. 1). The use of interviews in my exploration of Singapore’s identity allows me to address sensitive and conflicted topics like race, politics and censorship. The notion of identity is also subjective and deep. Interviews are more conducive for recording these personal narratives given my interviewees had their own stories to share. Besides conducting interviews singly, I also interviewed groups of two, three and four which resemble small focus groups, a method which can take some of the burden of interpretation off the researcher because participants themselves can provide insights and commentaries in the course of discussion (Barbour, 2007, p. 35 – 37). Oates (2000, p. 187) argues that focus groups compel individuals to explain to others why they hold certain views, providing greater insight into the reasoning behind held opinions. Disagreement may also demonstrate the steadfastness with which individuals hold their convictions.

I used purposeful selection (Light et al, 1990, p. 53) to choose my interviewees. In this strategy, specific settings, persons or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to one’s questions and goals, which could not be better acquired from other choices (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). Weiss (1994) argued that many qualitative interview studies do not use samples, but panels – “people who are uniquely able to be informative because they are expert in an area or were privileged witnesses to an event”

(p. 17). As such, I chose participants who were specialists in their field, for example, filmmakers and academics. I also chose participants whom I believed had interesting personal narratives to share or whose background or experience enabled them to speak broadly on the various issues. Maxwell identifies two possible goals for purposeful selection which apply in my case. First, it adequately captures heterogeneity in a population, allowing for maximum variation in a sample and demonstrating a range of differences within the population (Maxwell, 2013, p. 98; Harding, 2013, p. 17). To be representative of the Singapore population, I interviewed 75 people of varied ages, ethnicities and social backgrounds. Second, purposeful selection allows the inclusion of participants with whom the researcher can establish the most productive relationships, and who can answer his/her research questions (Maxwell, 2013, p. 99). As such, 55% of the interviews were with people I know and whom I believed would make good contributions to my research.

#### Data Analysis: Qualitative Analysis and Creative Practice

My qualitative strategy involved using Thematic Analysis and Screen Production Enquiry. The first focuses on finding themes based on examining commonalities, differences and relationships in the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 128 – 129). Thematic analysis combines within-case (studying the particular experiences against the backdrop of the participant's full account) and cross-case analysis (examining patterns of themes across the full data set) (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 150). King and Horrocks define 'theme' in thematic analysis as "recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which is seen as relevant to the research question" (2010, p. 150).

While I used thematic analysis to identify themes from the data, the objective of my study is not to compare and contrast data across the different accounts in relation to these themes. Rather, I am more interested in the perspectives and experiences of participants in discussing the various themes or issues. Given my ontological position as constructionist, I used these individual perspectives to construct a narrative that constitutes my thesis and that is visually represented in my film. This describes my creative practice whereby through documentary production, a narrative is constructed based on the data collected through interviews. Creative practice is one of three research paradigms identified by Kerrigan (2018) – the other two are quantitative and qualitative (p. 12). She notes that creative practice has emerged through a qualitative paradigm, with significant overlap between the two (2018, p. 16). Nonetheless,

Smith and Dean (2009) recognise creative practice research as “a new and distinctive form of research that is developing its own domain-specific methodologies” (p. 5).

The specific creative practice methodology I used is Screen Production Enquiry (SPE), which involves the production of a film, an iterative process of practice and reflection by the researcher/filmmaker, and a theoretical perspective that informs the overall research (Kerrigan et al, 2015, p. 106). SPE uses filmmaking to investigate research questions, and encourages the reflection on filmmaking as a practice (Kerrigan et al, 2015, p. 102). SPE also shows how filmmaking as a research method can generate new knowledge through published journal articles, conference proceedings and non-traditional research outputs (Kerrigan et al, 2015, p. 105). Through my own use of SPE, I have published two journal articles related to my documentary work and research, while my documentary itself is an educational resource and “researcher-created data”, which are “images or films taken by researchers” (Prosser in Wiles 2013, p. 84).

By employing both thematic analysis and SPE, I used both categorising and connecting strategies. According to Maxwell (2013), thematic analysis is a categorising strategy and SPE, a connecting strategy. Categorising strategies focus on relationships of similarity, and connecting strategies focus on relationships of contiguity (p. 105 – 106). Expanding on McMullen’s (2011, 209 – 211) description of the data analysis process, I detail my process in terms of how I used thematic analysis and SPE. For thematic analysis, employing the categorising strategy, I read the interview transcripts, made undirected notes on the speaker’s key words and ideas, broke the data into categories/themes, and noted key similarities and differences within categories. Supplementing this categorising strategy with a connecting strategy using SPE, I noted the relationship between categories, identified key concepts linked to these relationships, and noted how these key concepts advanced the narrative. While thematic analysis helped to organise my footage during editing, SPE helped in the actual building of the narrative.

By using both categorising and connecting strategies, I maximised the strength of qualitative analysis and was able to access rich data, gaining deeper insights into my research areas. The weakness of qualitative analysis, however, means that I had to be very conscious of the validity of my findings. Jupp (2006, p. 311) defines validity as: “the extent to which conclusions drawn from research provide an accurate description of what happened or a

correct explanation of what happens and why.” I was conscious of potential ‘validity threats’ which Maxwell (2013) describes as researcher bias, and the effect of the researcher on the individuals studied, often called reactivity (p. 124).

Researcher bias refers to how subjective the researcher is in the selection of data that fit his/her existing theory, goals or preconceptions, and that “stand out” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 263; Shweder, 1980). Maxwell argues that it is impossible to eliminate such bias, so qualitative research is more concerned with understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations may have positively or negatively influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study, and avoiding the negative consequences of these (2013, p. 124). In fact, qualitative researchers have long recognised that the researcher is the instrument of the research, acknowledging that the researcher’s background and identity (often considered bias) should not be eliminated, but leveraged upon as a valuable component of the study (Maxwell, 2013, p. 44 – 45). This does not mean that researchers should uncritically impose their own assumptions and values on the research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Instead, they should use “critical subjectivity”, which Reason (1988) explained as an awareness quality in which researchers neither suppress nor magnify their primary experience, but raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process (p. 12). As Maxwell highlights, researchers should be aware of the assumptions and purposes that they themselves bring to the researcher-participant relationship (2013, p. 93).

Maxwell (2013, p. 125) suggests that a way to understand and apply researcher bias is to use reactivity, or what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) more aptly called “reflexivity” – the fact that the researcher is part of the world he/she studies. As what the interviewee says is always influenced by the interviewer and the interview situation, researchers can be reflexive in understanding how they influence what respondents say, and how this affects the validity of the inferences drawn from the interview (Maxwell, 2013, p. 125). I discuss my reflexive approach in documentary production in Chapter 6.

Aside from being reflexive about my work, I also used two other strategies to deal with validity threats. First, I used Triangulation, which Maxwell defines as collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods (2013, p. 128). I interviewed people of varied ages, cultural and professional backgrounds. My interviewees range from age 20 to 70 with representation in every age group in between. They include

Singaporeans (consisting of members of Singapore's four racial groups and other minorities) and foreigners (both foreign talent and foreign workers<sup>3</sup>). They also come from all walks of life, which together with the cultural mix, made for a highly diverse pool of participants. Specifically, I used Triangulation of Sources which Patton (2015) explains as examining the consistency of different data sources from within the same method. For example, I conducted interviews at different points in time, in public and private settings, and compared people with different views. Second, I used rich data, which Maxwell describes as detailed and varied data resulting from long-term involvement and intensive interviews, which can be achieved from transcribing and recording (2013, p. 126). My fieldwork took one year and each interview averaged between one to two hours. I also filmed and transcribed all the interviews.

### Documentary Production

As creative practice, the workflow for the documentary can be further broken down according to the filmmaking process. First, I worked on concept and pre-production, which includes the development of the documentary treatment. I also developed a budget to ensure that I could work with the university funding I had. The second phase of documentary production is the shoot, resembling the fieldwork in social science disciplines. My fieldwork was in Singapore, consisting of shooting the documentary and conducting all the interviews, which was a major undertaking given the number of interviews. The final phase of filmmaking is post-production, which is another laborious endeavour. The editing process involves reviewing and logging footages, transcribing and translating the interviews, doing a rough cut and polishing it to a final cut.

I now briefly discuss my production and post-production processes which give insight into filmmaking as a research method. For my fieldwork, I interviewed 75 people – 7 of them in Auckland in 2014, 43 in 2015 and 25 in 2016 in Singapore. Initially, I planned to interview about 50 subjects, half of them filmmakers and the other half from other backgrounds. The number swelled during the production phase as my research progressed and the need to interview beyond the existing pool arose. For the bulk of the interviews in Singapore, I started recruiting my interviewees about 10 months before production started. I gave myself 4 months to film the interviews to allow time for filming cutaways (supplemental footage),

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<sup>3</sup> Foreign talents are highly skilled high-cost professionals who bring specific expertise and skillsets not possessed by Singaporeans. Foreign workers are low-cost unskilled labour who do the jobs Singaporeans are unwilling to do. The two groups fall on opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum.

acquiring archival and other media, and editing. To accomplish filming 68 interviews in 4 months, I adhered to a strict weekly shooting schedule, shooting between 3 to 9 interviews each week, averaging 5 a week.

In the post-production process, I first edited a short teaser of the film, cutting some of the interviews together. I promoted it through social media, using it as a marketing tool to garner interest and support for the film. Next, I spent 6 months logging and roughly transcribing about 100 hours' worth of interviews. Given the quantity of material, the challenge of editing the footage to a reasonable length was significant. I first separated the interviews into two categories, one on Singapore identity and the other, on Singapore cinema. Following this, I organised the interviews within each section into certain themes or topics. Each theme/topic comprised its own sequence of clips. I then edited each of these sequences independently, extracting the best clips to edit into the master sequence, thus slowly building the rough cut section by section. As the interviews form the backbone of the film, they ultimately determine the narrative of the overall film. Due to the large amount of footage and in the interest of time, I decided not to do a rough cut of the entire film to submit for the PhD. Instead, I extracted one section of the larger film – the one on race and language which itself is already 1 hour long – for PhD submission. I will work on the longer documentary after the PhD when I have more time.

Once the rough cut for the extract was done, I progressed to overlaying the cutaways I shot, film clips from the filmmakers I interviewed as well as archival media from Singapore's National Archives, Singapore Press Holdings (the national press) and Mediacorp (the national broadcaster). Once I reached Picture Lock, I worked on other post areas like sound design, music and colour grading. Finally, the film was output and packaged for submission and screening.

## **Literature Review**

This section will briefly explore the core areas of my research: identity, national cinema and authenticity, structured according to my four smaller research questions and referencing key sources that have helped structure my argument.

## Identity

Stuart Hall's (2004) seminal work on cultural identity is a useful contribution to my discussion on identity. While his focus was on cultural identity, his ideas can apply to identity in a general sense, which is how I use it here. He argues that identity is not eternally fixed in some essentialised past, but subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power – it is not an essence but a positioning. There is always politics underlying positioning (p. 389), hence, the shifting and dynamic nature of the concept. Cheng (2004) suggests that with identity constantly changing in response to real-world situations, political contingencies and cultural specificities, we *create* – not merely inherit or “retrieve” culture. We become active agents, making and shaping our cultures (p. 179). Filmmaking can be seen as one way in which we shape culture. P. Ramlee, a prominent figure within Singapore's Golden Age cinema, regarded the social function of films as important in raising societal consciousness. He said, “Society should follow the development of films...film producers are a creative group and are able to nurture society; for what is produced would be emulated by society” (cited in Yusnor Ef, 2000, p. 89 – 90).

By actively shaping our cultures as Cheng (2004) suggests, we construct a shared cultural identity based on common practices, values and ideals, which, according to Aguas (2011, p. 108), we seek to preserve despite the fluidity of culture. As one's cultural identity is determined by difference from other people's, so too are cultures defined in relation to and in contradistinction from other cultures (Aguas, 2015, p. 55). Countries affirm their cultural identities by preserving and appreciating their own cultural heritage and promoting their national or ethnic language. According to Constantino (1997), language is the expression of culture and the embodiment of national power (p. 133). Yet, language marks the difference between national identity and cultural identity. For Schlesinger (1987), if language is central to cultural identity, cultural identity cannot be equivalent to national identity, as people of the same linguistic group may inhabit a given nation-state or be otherwise connected beyond its borders (p. 227). Language is particularly complex in Singapore given its multilingualism and the fact that language policies, while serving a national purpose, have resulted in cultural losses, such as the loss of true mother-tongue languages in various ethnic communities.

Nedpogaeo (2001) makes another distinction between cultural identity and national identity. While the former is defined in terms of its difference from other cultures, national identity is really a “product of differences that have been blended into one and in this construction, some



elements will be excluded while others will be included” (p. 100). This suggests that a cultural identity is more inclusive, where members of a given culture will feel they belong. With national identity, the sense of belonging is tied to citizenship (which supports political allegiance) to a country. A stateless person may identify culturally with a country but would not be able to share its national identity. Given Singapore has no ‘one’ culture, cultural identity is usually seen in terms of a consolidation of various ethnic identities<sup>4</sup> – a multicultural identity if you will – given the country’s multi-ethnic make-up. According to Pisto (1983), ethnic identity emerges from a form of social organisation based on ethnicity, which can change at different times and in various sociocultural systems. The ethnic group is defined by the social boundary which separates them from other groups, not the cultural reality within those borders (p. 83). Ethnic identity in Singapore is seen as being at odds with a supra-ethnic national identity, which will be explored further in the thesis.

If we are active agents shaping our culture, as Cheng (2004) suggests, then the key agent shaping national culture and national identity is the state, as evident in Singapore’s case. According to Hall (1992), the formation of national culture is built on universal literacy, the use of a single vernacular language as the dominant medium of communication, homogenous culture and national cultural institutions like the education system (p. 292). This recalls Ernest Gellner’s (1983) argument on the impact of education and modernity on producing nationalism. The state constructs its national identity/culture by producing meanings about ‘the nation’ with which we can identify. This is done according to Hall through five main elements: ‘narrative of the nation’; origins, continuity, tradition and timelessness; ‘foundational myth’; the idea of pure, original people or ‘folk’; and what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) referred to as the ‘invention of tradition’ (Hall, 1992, p. 293 – 295). A product of meaning-making, a nation also produces meanings – a system of cultural representation. As Hall explained, people are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of the nation as represented in its national culture (1992, p. 292). Hall’s position aligns with Benedict Anderson’s (1983) influential theory of national identity as an ‘imagined community’ – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (p. 15 – 16). Because a

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘ethnic identity’ refers to identity conceptions based on ethnicity, so in the Singapore context, ethnic identity is based on the four recognised racial groups of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian.

nation is a symbolic community, this accounts for its “power to generate a sense of identity and allegiance” (Schwarz, 1986, p. 106).

If the nation is a construct, what constitutes a nation? Hall’s (1992) idea of the nation being built on the use of a single vernacular language and homogenous culture is difficult to apply to Singapore, which is racially heterogeneous with distinct languages and cultures. While the adoption of English gave Singapore a common language, this also brought on a raft of other problems. Without a sense of origin, tradition, timelessness, common history and shared culture (Hall, 1992; Smith, 2010; Anderson, 2006), Singapore worked hard to try to create a national identity. In other words, national identity for Singapore is a politically constructed identity which helps affirm nationhood. In contrast to the experiences of Western European countries, where nationalism initiated by popular struggle led to the formation of nations and attainment of nationhood, Southeast Asia experienced decolonisation, which led to the formation of states (Chang, 2012, p. 692). Thus for most Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, the state and the notion of nationhood “preceded the development of nationalism rather than emerging as its political consequence” (Willmott, 1989, p. 581). In the course of becoming an independent nation-state, the ‘state’ was instrumental to the development of the idea of a Singapore ‘nation’ (Velayutham, 2007, p. 26). Nationalism in Singapore was thus fostered through projects of nation-building (Chang, 2012, p. 692). Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ thesis therefore holds true for Singapore, where the idea of the nation as imagined is sustained and realised by the state through nation-building.

National identity defined by Smith (2010) and Anderson (2006) as a sense of common history and culture shared by communities within national boundaries does not apply to Singapore. Kong’s definition of national identity is more apt for Singapore. She describes national identity as “national consciousness where people possess a shared image of the nation, identify with and feel a sense of belonging to the ‘nation’” (1999, p. 571). With national consciousness, people are unified through common solidarity and are collectively committed to a set of ultimate national goals (Mutalib, 1995, p. 28 – 29). For Singapore, with the state itself as “the first major symbol of national identity” (Willmott, 1989, p. 581) and nationalism (solidarity) spurred through nation-building (national goals), a sense of national consciousness developed, solidified by Singapore’s successes post-nation-building.

The construction of national identity in Singapore has been a challenging process to say the least. Peterson (2001, 51) points to the combination of the absence of a strong group identity prior to independence and the country's rich linguistic and cultural mix, which have made it difficult for the Government to create a sense that all Singaporeans share core elements that constitute a common, national identity. Yet, as he indicates, the Government is promoting an identity founded on a duality that is hard to fuse together, that is, on one hand, having an overarching Singaporean identity while on the other, being ethnically defined by the various cultures that inhabit the country (2001, p. 51 – 52). This duality is exacerbated through race and language-based policies implemented by the Government, which served only to promote an essentialist view of identity, focusing only on one aspect of identity and ignoring many key differences and similarities among people.

Ironically, as Singapore's identity is defined in essentialist terms, the nation itself continues to be increasingly diasporic, in part due to Singapore's reputation as a business and trading hub, and in part due to the Government's import of foreigners to compensate for the country's low birth rate. Yeoh and Huang (2000) suggest that as a migrant nation, Singapore's identity experiences constant negotiation and re-negotiation. New waves of migrants, often low- or unskilled, fail to be included as Singaporeans, while the older diaspora of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries are respected as having contributed to Singapore's history and cultural identity (p. 416). Despite Singapore's increasingly diasporic make-up, essentialist and discriminative attitudes persist.

In the pursuit of national self-definition, the Government used four major instruments to promote nation-building, all of which are still relevant today. While intended to cultivate a sense of national identity, these instruments also served to dilute that identity. The instruments are economic development, education, national service (conscription), and public housing (Quah, 2000). As pillars on which the nation is built, these four instruments are also the highlights of *The Singapore Story*, Singapore's "narrative of the nation" (Hall, 1992). The Singapore Story is founding father Lee Kuan Yew's story, literally, metaphorically and politically. Involved in nearly every aspect of Singapore's development, Lee "pushed, pulled, prodded, cajoled and commanded Singapore into its new shape", with an intimate hand "in crafting the life of the citizenry from cradle to grave" (Thomas, 1996, p. 4; Chong, 2015). His own values shaped those of the state and his influence on the Singapore psyche and identity is seen in several ways. For example, the creation of a national culture based on pragmatism and

paranoia, where national survival is dependent on economic survival; and the cultural invention of the ‘Singaporean’, who imbibes Lee’s vision of society and his social policies (Chong, 2015).

The constructedness of national identity and the nation in Singapore’s case raises the question of authenticity – how is Singapore’s identity and formation as a nation authentic when both are invented by the state? The need to understand authenticity in my research concerns the idea that a country’s identity is valued because it is regarded as authentic, and a national cinema seeks to construct that identity authentically to meaningfully represent the nation and to justify its position as a national cinema. In nation-building, it is cultural authenticity which provides a cultural and symbolic dimension (Yang, 2014, p. 415), serving as a cornerstone of modern, postcolonial nation-states (Skurski, 1994). As Duara (1998, 2003) explains, there exist ‘regimes of authenticity’ which seek to inscribe the nation with timeless values and traditions, thereby distinguishing it from other nations. By providing an orientation and anchorage for the nation, these regimes give the nation an identity. Yet, Duara (2003) notes that authenticity is a social construction, often motivated by political calculations. Thus Yang (2014) argues that “instead of the everyday reified understanding of authenticity as quintessence, genuineness or originality, in the context of sociopolitical representation, authenticity ought to be understood as resulting from processes of imagination, construction and negotiation” (p. 415). Thus, the writers behind the regimes of authenticity are significant; these writers being the state and cultural producers who struggle for the privileged position to stake their claim as custodians and authors of this authenticity (Chong, 2011, p. 878).

Regimes of authenticity in Singapore include the National Day Parades; the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign and Confucian Ethics Discourse; the Malay literary movement *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* (Literary Generation of 1950); and the romanticisation of the working-class ‘heartlander’ through contemporary popular culture (Chong, 2011, p. 880). These regimes are all connected to Singapore cinema. The first regime – the National Day Parade – is a national ceremony commemorating Singapore’s independence. The parade includes military, school and civil contingents and is followed by a celebratory spectacle of Singapore’s multiculturalism through song and dance performances. Held annually on Singapore’s Independence Day on 9 August, the parades embody timelessness, nostalgia and authenticity, rooting Singaporeans to the idea of the nation. As the symbol of patriotism, national day

parades are featured in many films, including Tan Pin Pin's films which address Singapore identity.

The second regime – the Speak Mandarin campaign and Confucian Ethics Discourse – were intended to stem the tide of Westernisation, locating authenticity in what were considered genuine Asian values. The promotion of Mandarin also cemented it as the dominant language in cinema. The third regime – Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (Asas '50) – brought together mostly teachers and journalists who, through Malay literature, espoused socio-political consciousness and the embracement of progress. For this literary intelligentsia, authenticity was located in the rustic Malay identity, posited in opposition to European colonialism (Yang, 2014, p. 416). Asas '50 became the prime transmitter of cultural-historical sources which later informed those in the early Malay film industry, with ideational and artist exchanges across literary and filmmaking circles (Ibrahim, 2018, p. 80, 82). Finally, cinematic representations of the heartlander, the 'Everyman' in Singapore, offers the most popular symbols of national identity in Singapore, portraying the working class as overcoming the force of globalisation (Chong, 2011, p. 880). All these regimes act as embodiments of authenticity which "can nourish sentiments of nostalgia and loyalty that political forces try to channel to their goals" (Duara, 2003, p. 171). As Chong (2011) puts it: "The search for an authentic national identity often has little to do with the power of the state or the clarity of its boundaries but with the politics behind the production of its national imaginary and its values" (p. 877).

Yang, however, argues against Chong's regimes of authenticity, asserting that his essentialist constructions of cultural authenticity are problematic (2014, p. 417). He states that with Asas '50, a regime of authenticity rooted in rural Malay identities could not have been sustained given the Chinese racial majority in Singapore. The Speak Mandarin campaign, Confucian Ethics Discourse and cinematic representations of Singaporean heartlander identity too have left the multi-ethnic make-up of Singapore in an awkward position (Yang 2014, p. 417 – 418). Yang suggests instead of formulations centred on national identity or identification, we use formulations of feelings of national belonging (2014, p 418 – 419; 431). Thus, authenticity is not something one has (race), but something that the "other" does not have (feeling of national belonging) (Yang, 2014, p. 418). Yang's position recalls Kong's (1999) definition of national identity on the shared sense of identification and belonging to the nation. As such, the National Day Parade works as a regime of authenticity being a vehicle of equal representation promoting national belonging.

Continuously cultivating a sense of national belonging, Singapore strives for authentic nationhood, spurred on by its own perceived inauthentic beginnings. Becoming a nation overnight and emerging out of extraordinary circumstances, Singapore was not meant to be – and in fact, was a nation-building experiment which succeeded spectacularly well (Schell, 2015). For Yang (2014), Singapore, as a nation, seems constitutively inauthentic (p. 409), reinforced in Koolhaas's (1995) observation about Singapore being entirely artificial and engineered to be a certain way.

The heavy hand of social engineering along with the Government's evident manufacturing of nationhood and identity through the continuous construction of the country (it is regularly built and rebuilt) has contributed to Singapore's perceived lack of authenticity. Singapore's identity cannot be separated from the state because the Government has largely shaped it. As Gomes notes, the Government created a citizenry that equates nation with government, thus according the state full control (2015, p. 52). Its major tools have been, according to Tan (2012a), the "Ideology of Pragmatism" and censorship. Pragmatism is deemed necessary for national survival because Singapore's identity is built on a discourse of vulnerability and overcoming crisis. The national rhetoric since Singapore's independence reinforces that Singapore is a small country with an economy open to the fluctuations of the global market, making it vulnerable – pragmatism is needed for it to survive. However, as Tan (2012a) argues, the Government uses pragmatism and its end goal of economic growth to justify its authoritarianism and the maintenance of a one-party rule. This authoritarianism is maintained through the application of censorship, which protects the Government from overt contentious voices and covert criticism arising from the artistic and cultural community (Lee, 2010, p. 28).

While Singapore's identity cannot be separated from the Government, neither can it be separated from its people who have helped build its national identity and also nurture its cultural identity. Thus, the duality in Singapore's identity – the conflict between its national and cultural identity – will always remain. As Yang (2014, p. 414) explains:

Because of the country's constitutive cultural hybridity, the Singapore state emphasises a national identity that is more pragmatic than cultural. Without the cultural elements, however, a weakening of social bonds seems to occur. Yet, when

authentic cultural traditions are invoked, they seldom promise to create a common identity that all Singaporeans can comfortably assume. Rather, they pose the danger of further entrenching ethnic and cultural divisions among the multiracial population.

### National Cinema

A good starting point on the discussion of national cinema is to acknowledge that the concept of national cinema is indeterminate because national cultures are always imagined. Recalling Gellner and Anderson, who state that nationalisms invent nations where they do not exist, Hayward contends that national culture does not represent what is there but asserts what is imagined to be there: a homogenised fixed common culture (2000, p. 99). Therefore, a national cinema can never be “a seamless totality that somehow accurately expresses, describes and itemises salient concerns and features of a given national culture” (Hjort & MacKenzie, 2000, p. 4). Furthermore, the ‘imagined community’ argument is problematic for Higson (2000), who notes that Anderson’s conception imagines the nation as limited, with finite and meaningful boundaries, where films that narrate the nation are confined to this limited national space, closed off to other identities besides national identity. For Higson, the ‘imagined community’ argument seems unable to acknowledge the cultural diversity that marks most nations today, which is unfortunate given that most cinemas now operate on an increasingly transnational basis (2000, p. 66).

A number of theorists have therefore constructively expanded upon the framing of national cinema. Hayward (2000) takes on the challenges in defining/framing national cinema. First, most national cinema discourses assume a one-to-one relationship between ‘cultural artifact’ and ‘nation/national identity’, meaning the artifact ‘film’ speaks of/for/as the nation. Second, national cinema discourses tend to infer that a nation remains unchanged throughout history, which is unrealistic as nations constantly undergo transformation. Lastly, these discourses tend to frame the ‘national’ against the dominance of Hollywood, which is not constructive because a national cinema is judged wholly in terms of its economic performance, while also being positioned in a binary relationship (Hayward, 2000, p. 91), thus reinforcing Hollywood cinema’s canonic centrality (Yoshimoto, 2006, p. 256). While the term ‘national cinema’ remains contested, Choi (2011) offers a useful definition:

National cinema is a compound of subject-constituting ideologies, institutional embodiments of those ideologies, and a host of organised practices enacted by the

conceptual and institutional establishments. National cinema is a discourse, an amalgamation of policies, social subjectivities and political aspirations. National cinema is a cultural category, social consciousness and cognitive framework simultaneously (p. 184).

As a cultural category, national cinemas serve an identification function, providing a sense of what is specific (and perhaps unique) to a given nation/culture, and how this is different from others. Hence, the importance of Vitali and Willemen's (2006) idea of national specificity in studying national cinema. Their example, the *Black British* film, is part of a British specificity, but does not share the ideas of British nationalism, given the latter's imperial identification (p. 6). Thus, the discourses of nationalism/national identity and those addressing national specificity are not identical (Willemen, 2006, p. 34). This idea of national specificity applies to much of Singapore independent cinema, which is specific to the Singapore condition, but not nationalistic.

Willemen (2006) suggests that the more a cinema is involved with nationalism's homogenising project, the less it will be able "to engage critically with the complex, multidimensional and multidirectional tensions that characterise and shape a social formation's cultural configurations" (p. 36). The commercial Singapore films that are state-commissioned and funded, for example, *1965*, a retelling of the Singapore Story fall into this camp. Thus, Willemen argues that the marginal and dependent cinema is simultaneously the only form of a true national cinema available: one which consciously deals with the elements at work within the national cultural constellation. For Willemen, the issue of national cinema is primarily a question of address, rather than a matter of the filmmaker's citizenship or even the film financier's country of origin (2006, p. 36).

Vitali and Willemen (2006) also address the issue of government control, which is exercised fully within the Singapore context. They argue that the functioning of cinema as an industry and a cultural practice is over-determined by state institutions – from censorship through to taxation – but the state has little control over whether films address the national and to what extent if they do, which is more influenced by the filmmaker's inclinations and economic forces (p. 7). Contrary to Vitali and Willemen's view, which sees the state's ideological influence on films as limited, the Singapore Government has great creative control over films made in Singapore in terms of funding, censorship, exhibition and distribution. Of these,



censorship in particular, has the greatest impact because content is then state-controlled. Higson (1989) offers a fruitful contribution, writing that “histories of national cinema can only be understood as histories of crisis and conflict, of resistance and negotiation” (p. 37). This suggests that national cinemas are marked by conflict, expressing but also strategically repressing information (Hjort & MacKenzie, 2000, p. 4). Along these lines, Singapore films address the national both in what is expressed – and what is not.

Chris Berry (2010) proposes a different school of thought, introducing the notion of transnational cinema, which has grown with globalisation, shaped by neo-liberalism, ‘free trade’, the collapse of socialism, and post-Fordist production (p. 112). While Berry’s definition may not be universally applied given his focus on Chinese cinemas, he makes an important point in arguing that transnational cinema does not replace national cinema. He stresses that “to turn away from the national is to confuse deconstruction with destruction” (2006, p. 154). The form or issues of the national do not disappear even if the idea of the territorial nation-state as exclusive may no longer be applicable. Abandoning the national altogether also risks ignoring a nation’s power to activate collective affiliations with very real political and social consequences (Berry, 2006, p. 154). As Berry puts it, “deconstructing the national only proliferates it” (2006, p. 154). While Singapore cinema seeks to be transnational for economic reasons, there is a growing concern over the preservation and nurturing of a national cinema for cultural reasons.

Berry’s definition of transnational cinema may be too specific to the Chinese situation and given that the term ‘transnational’ has multiple meanings, it is useful to identify one that is more applicable for Singapore cinema. This definition comes from Higson (2000), which focuses on a national/transnational binary. It rejects ‘national cinema’ as a theoretical model unable to account for the movement of films across borders, the reception and influence of foreign films, and the rise of cross-border filmmaking with international cast, crew, locations and financing (Berry, 2010, p. 113). The transnational, in contrast, becomes a subtler means of understanding cinema’s relationship to the cultural and economic formations that extend beyond national boundaries (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p. 9). Higson notes that cultural industries and the film business have long operated on a regional, national and transnational basis, in production, distribution and reception (2000, p. 67 – 68). Historically, Singapore cinema was transnational even before it was national.

Singapore's cinematic history is broken down in three phases. The first is the golden age (1947 – 1972), dominated by Malay cinema which had extensive reach throughout the Malay world (Tan, 2010, p. 152; Tan et al, 2003). The golden age was followed by a barren 20-year period with little to no film production, a consequence of Singapore's focus on nation-building and economic development. The third phase, known as the revival period (1991 – present), can be thought of as the beginning of a national cinema for Singapore, with films addressing Singaporean national specificity as an independent nation. During the golden age, Singapore cinema was transnational before it was national because Singapore did not exist as an independent nation then and cinema at the time reflected a larger Malayan cultural sensibility, produced to reach audiences in the wider region. Contemporary Singapore cinema after the revival has also become transnational before solidifying as a national cinema because the country's domestic market is too small to sustain its film industry. The necessary focus on the international marketplace has contributed to the sense of an 'inauthentic' Singapore cinema, one that uncomfortably straddles local and international audience expectations.

### Authenticity

As I will explore in my thesis, the notion of authenticity in Singapore films is challenged by many factors – the key ones include Singapore's fragmented cinematic history, censorship, race and language issues, and Singapore cinema's negotiation of local and global forces. Given the importance of authenticity in my thesis, it is critical first, to attempt an understanding of the term. Lindholm (2008) defines authenticity "as the leading member of a set of values that includes sincere, essential, natural, original, and real" (p. 1). For Vannini and Williams (2009), authenticity is "understood as an inherent quality of some object, person or process" which is neither negotiable nor achievable. This perspective which sees authenticity as fixed and as a given is the same as one of two perspectives on identity: one where identity is fixed. Hall (2004) explains that such a perspective defines identity in terms of having a shared history and culture which is unchanging (p. 387).

Another perspective of authenticity regards it as some sort of ideal, highly valued and sought by individuals and groups as part of a process of becoming, rather than a state of being (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 3). This perspective sees authenticity as a "moving target" (Peterson, 2005, p. 1094). As culture changes – along with tastes, beliefs, values, and practices – so too do definitions of what constitutes the authentic (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 3). This second perspective of authenticity also reflects the second perspective of identity,

where identity is changing and constantly negotiated. Hall (2004) articulates that identity “in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’, belonging to the future as much as the past” (p. 388). Hall’s view of identity as being “in process” (1996, p. 2) is reinforced by Waskul (2009, p. 61), who states that authenticity is a circumstantial rather than an essentialised concept. In short, authenticity greatly resembles identity across the two perspectives – one where authenticity and identity are fixed, and one where they are situational and coincidental.

Cheng (2004) explores the specific relation between authenticity and national identity. He states that the project of national self-definition is about the invention of an authentic self (p. 35). Thus, national identity is often defined in terms of specific distinctiveness, where countries try to differentiate themselves by emphasising their unique cultural characteristics (Cheng, 2004, p. 30). In reality though, Cheng notes that culture is both local and global, both national and transnational, both particular and hybrid, both native and cosmopolitan (2004, p. 61). So how can cultural authenticity exist if culture is both local and global and both are equally ‘authentic’? Greenwood (1982) offers another perspective:

All societies create traditions, accept elements from outside, invent ceremonies and reinvent themselves for both sacred and secular purposes. All viable cultures are in the process of ‘making themselves up’ all the time. In a general sense, all culture is staged authenticity (p. 27).

In pursuing an authentic identity, countries also face the perceived ‘invisibility’ or non-existence of their own cultures. Rosaldo (1989) suggested the majority regards itself as invisible: it is always ‘other people’ who have cultures, while the self seems transparent. As a result, authenticity is often pursued via a “heritage industry” (the commercialisation of cultural practices and rituals) or a “roots mania” (an interest in other identities other than one’s own) (Cheng, 2004, p. 177). Singapore engages in both these practices. Rosaldo’s point about the invisibility of one’s own culture is particularly pertinent to Singapore, in fact, is reinforced by its lack of shared traditions and culture. Authenticity in Singapore is pursued through the celebration of nostalgia. According to Cheng (2004), constructing an authentic identity based on nostalgia is most possible and likely when the particular culture being authenticated has been largely eradicated (p. 175). In Singapore’s pursuit of national self-definition, culture is always on the move, made up, changed, replaced. Much has been lost in

the shuffle, and in the face of this disappearance, it is unsurprising that the Government makes use of official remembering not only to reclaim a forgotten past but also as a tool for nation-building and nationalism (Gomes, 2015, p. 85).

Given Greenwood's perspective above, culture can be regarded as authentic, authenticated by the state – a view shared by Svob-Dokic who sees culture as hegemonically determined. In her study on the influence governments have on culture, she found that culture could be controlled by a governing power (Svob-Dokic, 1994). Singapore is a case in point given the Government's creation of the country's multicultural identity. However, Lindholm argues that culture is never wholly unified or hegemonic and it is complicated by many different entwined factors. He does recognise, however, that people do strongly identify themselves as members of various national–ethnic–racial–tribal–religious collectives (2008, p. 143). He states:

The fact that such collective identities are historically constructed, internally complex, and inevitably divided does not make them any less real and compelling to those who belong to them (2008, p. 143).

Lindholm's point is reinforced by Friedman (1994) who wrote that culture may be supremely negotiable in the eyes of 'professional culture' experts, but not for those whose identity depends upon a particular configuration (p. 140). Similarly, Omi and Winant remind us that in the US, each person needs to have an identity: "Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity" (1994, p. 62). Thus, in the quest for authentic identity, identity as a social construct is further constituted by other identity categorisations (and constructs) such as culture, race, and ethnicity. Of these, race is the most commonly invoked because it is supposedly easy to distinguish people by race. Race refers to biological distinctions between different cultural groups, while ethnicity refers to distinctions based on national origin, language, religion, food and other cultural markers (Fozdar et al, 2009; Mittelberg & Waters, 1992, p. 425). However, the concept of race as a biological category has been roundly discredited in the sciences. Indeed, genetic variations within a race are much greater than variations between the races, and genetic similarities among the races are much greater than differences (Cheng, 2004, p. 128). Despite this, the Singapore Government endorses the view

that cultural groupings are fixed and biologically determined races, hence the terms ‘race’<sup>5</sup> and ‘multiracialism’<sup>6</sup> tend to be used in place of the internationally more common terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘multiculturalism’ (Chua, 2003; Hill & Lian, 1995). Multiracialism is the Government’s solution to managing the disparateness of its people, race thus becoming the basis for Singapore’s identity construction and being placed at the forefront of the government agenda and Singaporean psyche, reflected across official policies (Gomes, 2015, p. 61; Clammer, 1998).

The notion of authenticity as abstract and shifting is challenging when applied to culture and identity. However, as Cheng (2004) articulates, if an identity is still in the process of being formed, we can shape and affect its yet-to-be determined qualities and future (p. 164). There is still the possibility, unlike with identities that have been imagined for centuries, of avoiding the very rhetoric and dynamics of authenticity (resulting in essentialism and racism) that have plagued these imagined older identity categories (Cheng, 2004, p. 164 – 165). In other words, identities in flux can avoid the “cultural politics that rely upon the construction of sameness and the exclusion of difference” (Espiritu, 2001, p. 32). Ideally for the Singaporean identity which is, borrowing Cheng’s words, still young and which has not hardened into a long history, rhetoric, and practice of authenticity, it can avoid being essentialised (Cheng, 2004, p. 168). However, because the Singapore identity is a “strategic/political fabrication” (Cheng, 2004, p. 168), it cannot escape being essentialised when the state has constructed it as such.

Having provided the grounding for my research in this chapter, Chapters 2 and 3 will explore identity construction in Singapore, and Chapters 4 and 5 will examine how Singapore’s identity is constructed in Singapore cinema. These four chapters will identify four focus areas which impact on the construction of Singapore’s identity and its articulation in Singapore cinema: the loss of history, government intervention, the adoption of multiracialism, and the negotiation local and global forces. In Chapter 6, I reflect on filmmaking as a research method as I discuss my creative practice more fully. Finally, the last chapter will draw on

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<sup>5</sup> While the thesis uses the terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ interchangeably, I recognise the distinction between them. The term ‘race’ will likely be invoked more often as the term used by the Singapore state. Ethnicity, as used in the Singapore context, is bound to conceptions of race.

<sup>6</sup> While the thesis uses the terms ‘multiracialism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ interchangeably, I recognise the distinction between them. The term ‘multiculturalism’ will likely be used more often being the more globally accepted term. However, it should be understood to refer to ‘multiracialism’ when applied in the Singapore context.

conclusions based on my findings and existing literature, illuminating on the nature of the relationship between Singapore identity and Singapore cinema.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Identity Construction in Singapore: The Government's Influence*

In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore how Singapore identity is constituted as this is critical to an understanding of Singapore cinema. In addressing my first research question, I will focus on the formation of Singapore's identity through exploring three critical areas: first, Singapore's history; second, Singapore Government and its use of the Singapore Story for nation-building; and third, the incorporation of the principles of Multiracialism and Meritocracy. Chapter 3 will continue the discussion on the impact of multiracialism on Singapore's identity construction, focusing on ethnicity, language and national integration. For both chapters, I will incorporate key ideas and discussions from existing literature, and include quotes and ideas taken from the interviews<sup>7</sup> I conducted in the production of my PhD documentary.

#### **Singapore's Contested Histories**

I definitely don't think you can have a critical understanding of your own identity if you don't interrogate your own history as well (Daniel Hui (Director), interview, 2 February 2016).

As Hall (1992) suggested, nations are narrated, and Singapore's "narrative of the nation" is known as *The Singapore Story*, the official version of Singapore's history. Official narratives of Singapore's history tend to mark the starting point of modern Singapore as 1819 when it was established by the British as a trading post with the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles (Turnbull, 2009; Yang, 2014, p. 408). However, there is also an unofficial history, relegated to the margins or considered a legend, which explores the role Singapore played in Malay kingdoms prior to British colonisation and how it was a trading port in the fourteenth century (Turnbull, 2009). While Raffles is recognised as Singapore's founder, very little is known about Sang (Nila) Utama, a 13th-century Palembang prince from the Srivijaya ruling house who founded a settlement called Singapura (from which Singapore got its current name) on the island Temasek (the former name of Singapore) sometime in 1299 (Rahman, 2016). In fact, the Sang (Nila) Utama story is regarded as "foundational myth", one of Hall's (1992)

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<sup>7</sup> To distinguish them from scholarly quotes, I have referenced excerpts from my interviews in the format of (name (occupation), interview, date) where applicable.

five elements that create national identity through discourse. However, if this alternative starting point is considered critically, a rather different identity emerges for Singapore – one that acknowledges a regional founder of the country; one that recognises Singapore’s development before colonisation, thus underplaying the significance of colonialism in the country; and one that situates Singapore’s place in the Nusantara (the Malay world and archipelago) geographically, historically and politically, resulting in an identity that is closer to the Malay identity rather than its current Chinese identity.

This alternative ‘origin’ is explored by Artist/Director Ho Tzu Nyen who questions why the founding of Singapore is associated with the coming of a colonialist. As he puts it:

Why is it that Singaporeans regard the founding moment of their country as also the moment of a kind of submission to British colonial power, which is also the same moment that Singapore is plugged into this network of early capitalism?

For Ho, because Raffles was accepted as the official founder, there is very little knowledge and interest in Sang Nila Utama, a figure almost relegated to kitsch. Such a decision poses an ideological and political problem as the founding moment with Raffles speaks to Singapore’s current political climate, with the immediate plugging into capitalism and Western modernity as a convenient starting point. Whereas with Sang Nila Utama, Singapore is plugged into a deeper, messier history bound to the greater Malayan world and its histories (Ho Tzu Nyen, interview, 13 January 2016).

Artist/Curator Khairuddin bin Hori shares Ho’s view, emphasising the importance of remembering Singapore’s place in the Nusantara and how this affects Singapore’s concept of identity. He states:

I think there’re a lot of us in Singapore who first of all don’t even understand our position within this geography...how Singapore became a migrant society in the first place. We are surrounded by Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia...and all of us together, we are part of a big archipelago, in fact the biggest in the world – it’s called the Malay archipelago. I mean ‘Malay’ not in the sense of a race but in a geographical sense – we’re actually a collective of countries, we are one kind. We’re Asians, but we’re a special kind of Asians. If we can accept that, then we



can accept all this diversity and we understand that we're not this little dot within the globe, but we're a collective of islands and lands [and] we can easily accept differences in languages, cultures, habits etc...And that would make us feel like as Singapore, as the place where all this actual integration happens, as something really special and something we should embrace (interview, 22 January 2016).

According to LaPierre, collective identity is forged on the basis of collective memory, but due to the selectiveness of memory, there is “selective interpretation of history” which affects identity (1984, p. 196, p. 203 – 204). Given this, Singapore has what Poet/Playwright Alfian bin Sa'at (2001) refers to as a “history of amnesia”. Yet, such amnesia can support nationalism. As Smith noted, “the importance of national amnesia and getting one's own history wrong is essential for the maintenance of national solidarity” (1996, p. 382). The grave consequences of national amnesia are evident with the state's disavowal of Singapore's unofficial history, leaving Singaporeans with very little historical consciousness as a people. If selective history/memory is undertaken and reconstructed by the Government for ideological mass control, then the resulting identity is one that is manipulated and fallacious. Religious Teacher of Islam Zhulkeflee bin Haji Ismail supports this view, asserting that history cannot be hidden and while different versions can co-exist, they need to be recognised and discussed. He questions how deep people's sense of identity can be if history is selective, facts are hidden, and places and memories are lost (interview, 5 January 2016).

Singapore's official history was forged for both political and economic reasons, even to the extent of how multiculturalism (the basis of Singapore identity) developed and functions in Singapore. While Singapore was believed to have had a culturally diverse population even before the British arrived (Turnbull, 2009), this diversity was underplayed. As Sum (1991) explained, “History could be a strong disintegrative force” against nation-building efforts given Singapore's multicultural population, “each possessing their own pasts” and “attached to their respective place of origins” (p. 32 – 33). Furthermore, if all ethnic groups in the country could be considered immigrants, then none can legitimately claim to be the ‘native people’ of Singapore. However, if a significant history prior to British arrival was acknowledged, Malays may have been able to make a case for special status, which dissembles the Singapore Government's commitment to racial equality and meritocracy (Hong, 2007). Singapore's first Foreign Affairs Minister S. Rajaratnam contended that propagating a Singapore history prior to 1819 could alienate members of the country's

multicultural fabric (Chan & Haq, 1987, p. 149), which explains the choice of Raffles as Singapore's founder.

Raffles and the arrival of the British brought significant change in the population composition and social structures of the region. Migrants came from the Indian subcontinent, China, and other parts of the Malay region to meet the labour needs of the colony and to be involved in trade, eventually settling in Singapore (Turnbull, 2009). By the mid-twentieth century, what made Singapore stand out in a largely Malay-Muslim territory was that it had become a predominantly Chinese society. Ethnic Chinese accounted for some three quarters of its population in the country's broader multicultural mix.

### **The Building of a Nation and National Identity**

In this section, I discuss the Singapore Government's efforts in nation-building and identity creation through the use of the Singapore Story. I also explore how nation-building has completely revamped Singapore and how this has impacted on Singapore's identity, resulting in the preoccupation with nostalgia.

The Japanese occupation of Singapore in World War II brought an end to British colonisation and Singapore emerged as a new independent nation. The country was deemed unviable given its very small land area and lack of natural resources and as such, united with Malaysia for two years in 1963 (Chua, 1998). The union was troubled as members of the Malaysian federation disagreed on fundamental issues like who should control the finances of Singapore. Furthermore, Singapore's political leanings and majority Chinese population caused racial tensions, leading to riots between Singaporean Chinese and Malay groups, which resulted ultimately in the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 (Chua, 1998; Leyl, 2015; Baker, 2008). Multiculturalism was said to be the cause of the separation between the two countries, but another interpretation is the fear the Malaysian leadership had of Singapore's Chinese dominance politically and socially which they believed might spread to Malaysia ("Singapore", 2012). However, the Singapore Government used multiculturalism as a rationale for their political advancement, saying it wanted equality between Malays and non-Malays. The Malaysian Government was unwilling to accept this model of multiculturalism, wanting special Malay rights for Malays as embedded in the Constitution (Chou, 2014, p. 153; Hussin, 2001). The divergent approaches to multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia

continue to the present and influence how multiculturalism is practised differently in both countries. The view that Singapore became independent as a result of promoting an equality-based multiculturalism policy continues to be used in contemporary discourse to justify its existence as an independent country and the centrality of multiculturalism to Singaporean identity and policy (Hussin, 2001).

Singapore's expulsion from the Malaysian Federation on 9 August 1965 was unexpected and unceremonious (Thomas, 1996, p. 1). The ousting came as a shock to its people and former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, when announcing Singapore's separation, wept on national television (Schell, 2015). The traumatic beginning to independence suggested the national survival of Singapore appeared at stake (Leyl, 2015; Thomas, 1996, p. 1). The nation was required to start from 'ground zero', building the infrastructure that would transform the city (Leyl, 2015). As Chua explains, "Singapore as an independent nation-state was first and foremost a political reality foisted on a population under conditions beyond their control. Once this was a *fait accompli*, a 'nation' had to be constructed" (1995, p. 69).

Singapore's early years were undoubtedly extremely difficult. When Lee's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP) came to power, it faced the challenge of bringing together a multi-ethnic population with nothing to tie them together, being descendants either of those coming to Singapore for better prospects or of workers imported by the British to develop the colony (Peterson, 2001, p. 11). Aside from a resulting internal instability, Singapore also faced external threats: tensions with Malaysia continued; China's disapproval of Singapore's alliances with the US and UK; aggression from Indonesia given its policy of "konfrontasi" (Confrontation) in opposition to the formation of Malaysia (of which Singapore was part of) which threatened Indonesia's imperialistic ambitions to control the entire Malay world (Schell, 2015; Lee, 2000). How Singapore overcame these odds to become a successful, reputable nation is detailed in *The Singapore Story*. Here, a complex and politically contested past is condensed to a single perspective – that of Lee Kuan Yew (Gomes, 2015, p. 163; Tan, 2012b, p. 149). A propaganda tool, the Singapore Story serves as a motivational mantra that urges Singaporeans to resist the complacency of success while also exhorting a system of 'good governance' for others to learn and replicate, enshrining fundamental principles of survival, success, multiracialism, meritocracy, Asian values and pragmatism (Tan, 2012b, p. 148; Tan, 2016, p. 236).

As the story goes, left with few allies, having no natural resources, Lee sought to maximise Singapore's potential assets: its strategic location and its people (Thomas, 1996, p. 3). Envisioned as a crossroads for world trade (Peterson, 2001, p. 1), Singapore developed an export-oriented economy based on value-added manufacturing and built a world-class airport, making Singapore an "air hub" with excellent connectivity to the Asia Pacific region. Singapore's people were seen as its other major resource, but this also posed two ongoing constraints. First, the population has always been small, which means the local talent pool will always be limited. There still is a need for foreigners to undertake skilled jobs that Singaporeans cannot handle, as well as unskilled jobs that Singaporeans are unwilling to do (Quah, 2000, p. 75). Second, the population is heterogeneous – multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious. Singapore's population comprises 74.3% Chinese, 13.4% Malays, 9% Indians, and 3.2% Eurasians and other minorities – representing Singapore's four recognised racial groups (Department of Statistics, 2017).

This ethnic make-up has remained relatively unchanged since independence. Lee's challenge was to mould a singular national identity while remaining sensitive to the diverse cultural backgrounds of these groups (Thomas, 1996, p. 2). His past experience with the racial riots and Malay nationalists in Malaysia shaped his view that a person's race was a fundamental marker of identity (Chong, 2015). Thus, race formed the backbone of Singapore's nation-building and identity conception – by nurturing the growth of a Singaporean national identity to prevent the threat of racial riots which marked its history (Quah, 2000, p. 77). Race in the Singapore identity is thus both revered and feared.

Recognising the need for national cohesion, the PAP formulated and implemented policies for encouraging and promoting racial and religious harmony through the idea of multiracialism, along with four other major instruments of nation-building: economic development, education, national service, and public housing (Quah, 2000, p. 75, 77 – 81). All are still relevant today and to some extent, promote the idea of a nation of "one people" belonging to "one place" (Yeoh & Huang, 2000, p. 416).

Quah (2000) expands on the four nation-building instruments. First, economic development provided citizens the necessary material foundation for enhancing their commitment to Singapore (p. 78). Second, recalling Gellner's conception that education is central to nationalism, the Singapore Government invested heavily in education to develop the

country's human resources, providing students with the skills required for economic growth, and inculcating values that would promote loyalty and commitment to the country (Quah, 2000, p. 78). The third nation-building instrument is national service (conscription). A two-year national service (NS) in either the armed forces, police force, or civil defense force is mandatory for all Singaporean and second-generation permanent resident men upon turning 18. After completing NS, the conscripts are required to undertake reservist duties for most of their adult life, serving annually for up to forty days each year (Chou, 2014, p. 159; Tan, 2008, p. 11). Conscription is first a continuous means for providing for national defense, given Singapore's predominantly Chinese population in a largely Muslim region (Thomas, 1996, p. 2). Second, it gives "the youth of our multiracial nation a common experience and objective, binding potentially divisive strands" (Quah, 2000, p. 80), socialising Singapore's men into accepting the social order, the official narratives of Singapore's story, and their obligations to the nation (Chou, 2014, p. 159). As Barr and Skrbis (2008, p. 230 – 231) indicate, the NS experience has a particularly profound impact, as echoed by one of my interviewees who completed NS:

You put a group of boys through two and a half years of supporting, defending and creating something – the stability and defense of Singapore – eventually, when they leave, they will support that. You get people doing things not because you tell them to, but because they want to, and that's the art of social engineering (Hong Huazheng, Artist/Photographer, 18 January 2016).

The final instrument is the development of public housing by the Housing Development Board (HDB), which solved the housing shortage providing a "safety net" [for]...families who did not have enough to meet their minimum needs" (Lee, 1998, p. 130). Through HDB's Home Ownership scheme, eligible Singapore citizens were able to own their own homes, giving them a stake in the country (Quah, 2000, p. 81). These housing developments granted political legitimacy to the PAP regime (Tan et al, 2003), being a "literally concrete reminder of the pervasive presence of the Government" (Chua & Yeo, 2003, p. 179). HDB also plays an important role in bringing Singaporeans of different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups together, contributing to national integration by desegregating ethnic enclaves which had been created by immigration and the British Colonial Government's policy of ethnic segregation (Quah, 2000, p. 80). HDB achieves this through the application of racial quotas and the design of HDB apartment blocks to maximise inter-cultural interaction.

Paradoxically, these four instruments used to facilitate nation-building and cultivate a sense of national identity also served to dilute that identity. With economic development, citizens became more mobile and many Singaporeans went to study and/or work overseas, sometimes feeling compelled to leave because of the pressures of living in an economically driven society, or emigrating so that their sons could avoid national service. The Government's language policies within the educational system that were intended to retain cultural roots served only to heighten racial consciousness, thus separating communities (Quah, 2000, p. 79). Perhaps the only instrument that has been successful in fostering national identity is the development of public housing, which better succeeded in its aim to break down ethnic boundaries, although some would disagree, as explored below.

With nation-building underway, the Government continued in its efforts in nurturing a national identity to keep Singaporeans invested in the country and the ruling party. This was done through the "Rhetoric of Vulnerability" (Alfian, 2016) and "Ideology of Pragmatism" (Tan, 2012a). As Alfian explains, under the vulnerability rhetoric, certain historical events, such as the racial riots of the 1950s and 1960s, are blown out of proportion to incite fear and 'national anxiety' in the population (Alfian bin Sa'at (Poet/Playwright), interview, 7 January 2016). The list of problems to be anxious about has expanded – including a lack of natural resources, fault lines in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and increasingly class-conscious society, volatile neighbours, terrorists, economic competitors or externally induced economic crises (Tan, 2010, p. 151). The discourse on vulnerability and survival has been instrumental in forcing through many social engineering policies (Alfian bin Sa'at, interview, 7 January 2016). By manufacturing fear and uncertainty, a siege mentality that mobilises support for the Government is fostered, endorsing its 'natural' right to rule while remaining relatively free from public scrutiny (Tan, 2008, p. 24).

From the Government's perspective, national survival is intertwined with economic survival, so paranoia becomes disguised by pragmatism. With the "Ideology of Pragmatism" (Tan 2012a), the Government has been able to use the 'end-goal' of economic growth, to justify its authoritarianism and maintain a one-party dominant regime (Tan, 2012a, p. 71), functioning as a 'nanny state' (Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 35). Tan sees Singapore's pragmatism as ideological because it hides or sugarcoats its association with capitalism in the form of neo-liberal globalisation (2012a, p. 71). Singapore must "punch above its weight" to remain globally competitive (Chong, 2015). Thus, pragmatism has become part of national culture,

meaning Singaporeans inevitably equate success with hard work and economic prosperity.

Pragmatism also creates a culture of compliance, a “do what works” dictum that effectively suppresses any further inquiry or debate (Tan, 2012a, p. 73). Singaporeans are persuaded to practise self-restraint and suspend their “shortsighted” wants in the interest of maintaining the peace, affluence and efficiency of their city, which – they are constantly reminded – must not be taken for granted. They are nurtured to believe that adhering to rules limiting individual rights is for the greater good of society, for everyone to have maximum enjoyment of their freedoms (Schell, 2015; Peterson, 2001, p. 20 – 21). In this culture of compliance and fear, Singaporeans learn not to question, let alone oppose the plans and policies of an ever-paternalistic Government (Tan, 2012a, p. 87).

Pragmatism is also used to advocate for multiracialism in Singapore. Although S. Rajaratnam, one of the PAP’s pioneers, had wanted a Singaporean identity that transcended ethnic identities, his proposal in the early decade of independence was rejected by then Prime Minister Lee who, adhering to elitist and racist beliefs, argued that transcending “natural” differences was not realistic nor “practical” (Tan, 2012a, 74). Hence, multiracialism became the basis for Singapore identity, built on the rhetoric of overcoming racial difference and potential interracial conflict, which the Government has used to justify its position of power (Tan, 2012a, p. 75).

Lastly, pragmatism has also resulted in the appropriation of culture as an economic resource – a Singapore “ideology” as it were (Tan, 2012a, p. 80). Such ideology appropriates “Western values” such as rugged individualism and “Asian values”, notably thrift and diligence (Tan, 2012a, p. 80). This approach has led to a balancing act – when Western values appeared to threaten the Government’s authoritarianism, Confucian and Asian values were invoked to counter such influence. The PAP started out as a left wing socialist party and was a member of Socialist International, an international association of political parties which seeks to establish democratic socialism. However, in 1976, the PAP resigned from Socialist International over anti-PAP allegations, namely the suppression of freedom of speech and the mistreatment of political detainees (Tilman & Tilman, 1977, p. 153). Following this, the PAP sought to fill the vacuum left with an ethnic- and culturally-based set of values, taken from the academic symposium on ‘Asian Values and Modernisation’ (Chong, 2011, p. 889). The project eventually developed into a particular reading of Chinese values and Confucian ethics

by Lee Kuan Yew, celebrating traits like state and family-centred social networks, hard work, respect for authority and filial piety, amongst others (Chong, 2011, p. 889). These ideals are embodied in the Confucian Ethics/Asian Values Discourse, forming the basis of the ‘Singapore Model’, a form of governance which combines Asian values-centred authoritarianism and Western democracy, state capitalism with the free market. Ever pragmatic, the Government picks and chooses useful and harmful values for the country’s prosperity, marks them off arbitrarily as “Asian” and “Western”, and then promotes and demotes them respectively under these labels to generate an “authentically” Singaporean culture that is plugged into global capitalism (Tan, 2012a, p. 80).

Given this approach, Singapore’s national identity can then be seen in terms of the tensions between the two contesting thrusts: the pragmatic and the cultural. Culture is a complex concept, but in the present context, it is used in a narrower sense to refer to the particular customs, practices and value systems seen as enduringly related to particular groups of people (Yang, 2014, p. 412). Indeed, Singapore’s ideological pragmatism is itself a kind of “culture” (Yao, 2007). The paramount importance of economic survival has led to Singapore’s identity being defined in terms of pragmatism and economic realism at the expense of the cultural dimensions of national identity (Yang, 2014, p. 412).

Two points can be made here. First, when culture is seen as serving capitalism or as secondary to economics, art (including film) can never be fully developed and will only be seen in economic terms, which is limiting in terms of arts cultivation. Second, with the appropriation of Asian and Western values and the dismissive regard of culture, it is not surprising that Singapore culture has been described as “neither here nor there”, “neither Eastern nor Western” and even “non-existent”. Perhaps because of this absence of or contradiction in its culture, the Singapore psyche is marked by the pragmatic need to be exceptional for the sake of economic survival. The need to be exceptional is articulated by the current head of state:

We are today, exceptional. And if we are not exceptional, we are ordinary, I think we are in big trouble... (Lee Hsien Loong, *Today*, 6 July 2013).

By both its own account and in the opinions of many outsiders, Singapore is exceptional by many measures. It is a world leader in global transportation, education, healthcare and



economic performance (Schell, 2015; *Channel NewsAsia*, 6 September 2016; World Health Organization, 2000, p. 154). It has also won awards in urban development and land transport (Housing and Development Board, 2010; SMRT, 2013). No doubt with such achievements, Singaporeans looked to their first-generation leaders with gratitude and awe. However, of late, this has unravelled with core areas of government responsibility such as housing, transport and immigration in crisis (Barr, 2016, p. 3). The 2011 General Election has been described as a watershed event in Singapore's political history with the PAP winning only 60.14% of the total vote (its worst performance since independence) (Tan, 2016, p. 233). Policy failures resulting in a more expensive, overcrowded and less efficient city and the Government's heavy-handed and bullying style, a hallmark of its tough survivalist and developmental years, had become unacceptable to an emboldened electorate (Tan, 2016, p. 233 – 234). The idea that the ruling party has fallen off its pedestal and is now increasingly regarded as "ordinary" instead of "extraordinary" has substantially levelled the political playing field, at least in terms of the electorate's expectations (Barr, 2016, p. 4).

### Reconstructing Singapore

Since its inception, the state of Singapore has been one of constant change which has also shaped its national identity. The country undergoes constant reconstruction – all part of "erasing, silencing, marginalising, and forgetting" – in the name of economic development and nation-building (Tan, 2012b, p. 150). Singapore's volatility encompasses both natural and infrastructural changes. With unceasing land reclamation, the island itself is changing with coastlines being moved further seawards. The ongoing process of infrastructural reconstruction is a physical manifestation of the country's identity creation. In keeping up with global trends, Singapore has modelled itself after other global cities in terms of urban planning, iconic structures, architecture, entertainment facilities, consumer brands and lifestyle options (Tan, 2012a, p. 79). Singapore has an iconic opera house, a skyline that boasts some of the tallest buildings in the world, a giant Ferris wheel (the "Singapore Flyer"), waterfront developments, casinos and a rejuvenated downtown where old commercial and residential buildings have been converted into boutique hotels, nightclubs, offices and affordable spaces for artists and arts groups (Tan, 2012a, p. 79). To accommodate this new infrastructure, old buildings and spaces that were authentic and meaningful to Singaporeans were torn down and revamped. In the pursuit of achieving world-class status, officialdom failed to consider how Singaporeans felt about losing their childhood places – what they valued as sources of national belonging were disregarded. For example, the old National

Library building was replaced by a road tunnel which saves five minutes of travel time despite considerable public opposition (Siew, 2007).

The drastic changes Singapore has undergone are keenly felt by some of my interviewees. After ten years overseas, F & B Director Nelson Choo returned to Singapore in 2013 and found Singapore unrecognisable. He states, “Seriously, I felt as if I was in a foreign land, as if I was migrating to another country, although I was returning home” (interview, 28 December 2015). Similarly, ICT Academic Connor Graham who was away from Singapore for several years, notes:

Coming back to Singapore periodically became about recognising a kind of change and loss almost, so Singapore changed under my feet if you like. That would probably encapsulate a key aspect of Singapore – it is change, it is transformation, and it is a sense of forgetting places which are traditional and not modern, and don’t necessarily match up to a vision of the future. I think Singapore has that kind of struggle between the ultramodern and the traditional ongoing, and that’s part of a feature of what it is as a city and as a country (interview, 4 December 2015).

As part of Singapore’s transformation, forced resettlement between 1965 and 1985 from *Kampungs* to HDBs not only uprooted people from their homes and neighbourhoods, but also weakened “the *kampung* effect” or sense of community (Deruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 142). Even with hawker centres – another key feature of Singapore life – hawkers retire, grandparents pass on, recipes are forgotten, techniques disappear, and wet markets serving hawkers are demolished (Leow, 2010). The state thus manufactures and keeps its population and city in such constant psychological and physical flux that a sense of disequilibrium and change becomes an uncomfortable norm that shapes national identity (Deruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 178).

With the loss of a sense of place, there is also a loss in social memory, which contributes to Singapore’s national amnesia. As Smith affirms, memory is “crucial to identity. In fact, one might also say: no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation” (1996, p. 383). The identity of places, as Massey (1995) argued, is “very much bound with the histories which are told of them, how those histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant” (p. 186). However, in Singapore’s case, change happens too quickly for histories to truly exist and even when they do, there often is a single ‘voice’ narrating that history.

### Nostalgia and the return to Authenticity

The loss of places and memories in Singapore has led to an engagement in nostalgia, both at the state and individual level. Singapore is no different from other first world cultures whose members feel themselves to have vacated, inauthentic identities and who “try to fill that vacuum by seeking an authentic self amid a haze of nostalgic essentialisms” (Cheng, 2004, p. 175). A construction or reification of an authentic identity based on nostalgia is most possible when the particular culture being authenticated has been largely eradicated (Cheng, 2004, p. 175). With so much that has been lost in terms of culture and heritage, it is unsurprising that the Government makes use of official remembering not only to reclaim a lost past but also as a tool for nation-building and nationalism (Gomes, 2015, p. 85). Recalling Hall’s (1992) ideas about continuity, tradition and timelessness in national identity discourses, national nostalgia is used to nurture this sense of timelessness for Singapore. By promoting widespread national nostalgia but at the same time controlling what should be collectively remembered, the Government has been able to invoke patriotism and a sense of belonging to the nation according to its terms (Tan, 2016, p. 233). As Smith (1996, p. 375) articulated, nationalisms have an investment in the past, forged in a seizing and remodelling. Nostalgia thus can be used to depoliticise the past, a pleasurable mode of consumption by remembering the past in a selective, sentimentalised and romanticised way, which disclaims the more inconvenient memories (Tan, 2016, p. 243). Hence the success of nostalgia marketing in F&B franchises like Ya Kun, Toast Box and Killiney Kopitiam, which serve to invoke a sense of nostalgia in fast changing Singapore (Deruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 46 – 60).

The last national nostalgia event was the nation’s 50th anniversary of independence (branded as SG50) in 2015 which, together with the death of founding father Lee Kuan Yew in March of that year, resulted in a year-long spectacle of celebrations and ideological engagements, conveniently culminating in a successful General Election for the PAP in September that year (Tan, 2016, p. 233). Espousing the theme “Celebrating as One People”, SG50 was an inclusive celebration comprising a series of activities contributed by the people, private and public sectors (Tan, 2016, p. 243). Many of the SG50 projects were heritage-focused, featuring personal and social memories of popular culture and places in Singapore’s past. In many ways, SG50 appears to be a renewed and seemingly more inclusive version and performance of the Singapore Story (Tan, 2016, p. 244).

At the individual level, engagement in nostalgia is an attempt to reclaim what is considered

authentic. However, because collective memory is controlled even in national nostalgia activities, the return to authenticity is impossible as authenticity is already adulterated. As Writer Ben Slater articulates:

The very definition of nostalgia is the pain of not being able to go home and going home means to return to the past. So nostalgia becomes the dominant mode...Artists [here] are often pursuing what they feel is something authentic and inevitably, they're drawn to old places. It feels like there's an anger to that nostalgia, a sense of paths not taken (interview, 10 December 2015).

The return to authenticity in Singapore is unattainable because of its literal constructedness as a nation. As Yang (2014) expresses, "each movement of nostalgic imagination of cultural continuity with the past inevitably leads to a "home" country or civilization that is not Singapore" (p. 417).

## **Multiracialism**

This section will address the Singapore Government's incorporation of Multiracialism and Meritocracy, encompassing the CMIO racial framework and various race-related policies. As the basis of Singapore's identity, multiracialism and its impact will also be explored through the various ethnicities and languages in Singapore, language policy, and the state of race relations today.

Singapore's key resource is its people, who have built the nation, who are essential for it to continue succeeding globally, and who ultimately define the Singapore identity. Yet, forging a country's identity through its people is problematic in two ways. First, recalling Hall's (1992) discourse on national identity based on the idea of pure, original people or 'folk', Singapore possessed no sizable indigenous population prior to the arrival of its coloniser. As a largely immigrant population representing a diverse range of Asian cultures that originated elsewhere, Singaporeans have no natural cultural cohesiveness that comes from shared traditions (Peterson, 2001, p. 51). As observed by playwright Kuo Pao Kun, "Singapore had no nation to revive and no national identity to invoke after gaining independence" (Peterson, 2001, p. 53).

Second and related to the first point, Singapore was and continues to be diasporic. Singapore has been called “a child of diaspora” (Harper, 1997, p. 261). Singapore’s early settlers made up its diasporic history, and the diaspora continues today with the influx of transient migrant workers to the island. These migrant workers support Singapore’s economic growth and are differentiated as “foreign talent” and “foreign workers”. The former constitutes top-end, highly skilled professional and managerial workers while the latter are low- or unskilled, serving as construction and domestic workers (Yeoh & Huang, 2000, p. 416). While the older diaspora of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries are “celebrated as ancestral roots that nourish the cultural identity of the present generation of Singaporeans”, the present-day labour diaspora are considered “transgressors of national space”, who threaten Singapore’s workforce and way of life (Yeoh & Huang, 2000, p. 416). Yet as a diasporic nation, the Singapore identity will continue to evolve as the people who make up Singapore change. As Yeoh and Huang (2000) suggest, the identity of a migrant nation is in constant negotiation and re-negotiation.

The discourses of nationalism are bound up in a constant struggle to transform the reality of dispersal and diversity into the experience of rooted community (Higson, 2000, p 65). In transforming Singapore’s diaspora into a rooted community, Singapore’s Government has spent considerable time and energy on creating “the Singapore tribe”, where different races can gel and feel “as one people, and pulsate with the same Singapore heartbeat” (Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. Quoted in Ibrahim, 1999). Multiracialism is the means for the Government to achieve this.

Mobilised as an official policy, multiracialism is a “conscious, ideological construction” for the purposes of public administration and governance (Chua, 2009, p. 240). Multiracialism is the foundation of Singapore’s national identity with race being at the forefront of the government agenda and the Singaporean psyche, in terms of official policies that govern housing, education, employment, national service, and the electoral system (Gomes, 2015, p. 61; Clammer, 1998). Singapore’s multiracial framework has institutionalised colonial racial identities and woven them into the fabric of political and social life to the extent that they constitute a common sense through which people conceive identities of themselves and others (Goh & Holden, 2009, p. 2 – 3). Yet the idea of multiracialism and maintaining the individual racial, linguistic and religious boundaries of each official racial group is at odds with the idea of a unified Singapore identity – an issue that plagues the Government to the present. As

Peterson (2001) elaborates: “While on the one hand, the Government wants to encourage its citizens to continue to identify with their cultural roots, it also seeks to articulate a sense of what it means to be Singaporean that transcends ethnic, cultural, and linguistic borders” (p. 51 – 52).

Multiracialism, Singapore’s brand of managing ethnic diversity, is different from Multiculturalism which has acquired differing meanings in the past forty years. Berry et al (1977, p. 1) defined Multiculturalism through three closely related features. Multiculturalism is a demographic fact, an ideology, and an outcome of government policy-making on promoting diversity. Most countries are now culturally diverse with different views on how to approach diversity. America, for example, has a ‘melting pot’ model which incorporates colour-blind ideologies and policies which ignore or minimise group differences. This ‘colour-blindness’ is itself contested: members of the dominant group argue that it reduces inequality, while others suggest it functions as a justification for existing inequality and is associated with stronger racial bias (Apfelbaum et al, 2012). Singapore’s multiculturalism – multiracialism – is not colour-blind, but rather ‘colour-conscious’. Poet/Playwright Alfian bin Sa'at makes a distinction between multiculturalism and multiracialism: multiculturalism, he argues, is more inclusive and respects cultural diversity, whereas multiracialism in Singapore categorises ethnic communities through the “Chinese-Malays-Indians-Others” (CMIO) framework and creates a hierarchy based on the numerical strength of each racial group. So instead of the ‘melting pot’ model, Singapore has a ‘mosaic’ or ‘salad bowl’ model, in which all the ingredients in the salad are there, but they are still discreet and distinct (Alfian bin Sa'at, interview, 7 January 2016).

In this sense, Singapore’s multiracialism does reflect a positive recognition and accommodation of diversity as multicultural models should, but the diversity is over-emphasised in race-based policies which contradict the objective of multiculturalism. Effective multicultural models of diversity are associated with greater inclusiveness, less racial bias and more engagement from non-dominant groups (Plaut et al, 2011; Plaut et al, 2009). For Berry and Ward (2016), multiculturalism in ideological terms rests on the joint value placed on cultural maintenance (the cultural diversity element) and equitable participation (the intercultural element) (p. 448). While in Singapore, there is no question of cultural maintenance, the same cannot be said for equitable participation. As ICT Academic Connor Graham explains, an emphasis on ethnic difference means that there are “people

who're included and people who're not included" (interview, 4 December 2015) – this is evident in the privileging of the Chinese majority in many areas from language policies to jobs and in the alienation of migrant workers. As entrenched in its history, paranoia and anxiety over ethnicity are part of the Singaporean cultural landscape. Yet, Singapore maintains a façade of peace and harmony within a culturally disparate population by successfully instilling a strong sense of loyalty and allegiance to the nation; a form of 'everyday nationalism' (Gomes, 2015, p. 19). Thus, Singapore has 'imagined multiculturalism', where ethnic communities are both unified and divided (Chua, 2003; Gomes 2010).

Given that Singapore's national identity was constructed against the threat of inter-ethnic conflict, Singapore's multiracialism is a form of social control. According to Chua (2003), the Singapore Government used multiracialism as an ideological basis for the rationalisation of race-based policies and administrative practices. The result is a series of impromptu decisions that discriminate against different racial groups at different social structural and political junctures and historical times, that lack ethical and political consistency, and that are rationalised under a vaporous notion of 'racial harmony' (p. 76 – 77). As ethnicity is very much intertwined with religion in Singapore, any racial conflict is also a religious conflict, which compounds the problem and to be avoided at all costs. The fragile state of Singaporean multiculturalism is evident in a 2010 qualitative analysis of *Straits Times* newspaper articles by Holman and Arunachalam, who found there was an overwhelming sense that it was unnatural for different ethnic groups to live together peacefully, and that the Singaporean national identity was perceived as weak and needed strengthening through government intervention (2015, p. 502).

Government intervention to promote multiracialism has been sustained through the "invention of traditions" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Recalling Hall's (1992) discourse on national identity, the nation adopts a set of practices of a ritual or symbolic nature to inculcate certain values (invention of traditions), which by repetition over time implies continuity with a historical past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 1). Cheng (2004) maintains that if national identity is about self-invention, it would be best constructed and authenticated in a cultural vacuum, where the invention of traditions can take place relatively freely (p. 35 – 36). This very much applies to Singapore, where national identity was 'invented' in the absence of a historically shared culture – a Singapore multicultural identity and tradition were created.

As part of this process, the four acknowledged racial groups are encouraged to express themselves through communal identity such as traditional ethnic costumes and cultural performances. This “manufacturing of tradition” freezes previously fluid ethnic boundaries, and tends to reinforce the notion that race corresponds to culture, which is consistent with the multiracial model (Leong, 1989, p. 373), thus becoming a metaphor for racial harmony (Chong, 2010, p. 137). These invented traditions are epitomised in the National Day Parade, which the Government has used to encourage national consciousness and cohesion. National Day Parades carry with them “the rhetoric of authenticity” – the ways in which authenticity gets defined, categorised, and negotiated symbolically to transform textualised expressive culture such as songs and tales “from an experience of individual transcendence to a symbol of the inevitability of national unity”. Such a rhetoric could “legitimate its collectivised corollary of cultural authenticity” (Bendix, 1997, p. 20 – 21).

While multiracialism has helped the Government manage its ethnic diversity, it has led to narrow conceptions of race. The current multiracialism model in Singapore also does not account for the changing ethnographic landscape, rendering it outdated and irrelevant if not reviewed.

### Meritocracy

Alongside Multiracialism, Meritocracy is the other cornerstone of Singapore identity. Intended to promote equality across the different races, it has paradoxically led to elitism. Asian Studies Academic Hoon Chang Yau argues that meritocracy assumes that everyone is treated the same, but the fact remains that certain racial groups in Singapore continue to fall behind in terms of education, occupation and social class; those who will never be “on the same level playing field to play the catch-up game” (Hoon Chang Yau, interview, 20 October 2015). Vogel (1989) described Singapore’s system as a “macho meritocracy” – where the elite, including the Government, disregards alternative views expressed by the general public because they believe ordinary people cannot see the “big picture”. The schools are regarded as a seamless system of meritocratic selection, whereby the best and brightest are separated from the rest and husbanded into better-funded elite schools and elite classes within schools. Then, the best of those are ultimately funded by the Government through university, usually a highly accredited overseas one, so that they can begin their career of public service with academic qualifications of international standing (Barr & Skrbiš, 2008).



### “Chinese-Malays-Indians-Others” (CMIO)

The model of multiracialism and meritocracy that has been adopted in Singapore is the CMIO framework, a system inherited from the British colonialists who held essentialist beliefs about the supposed strengths and weaknesses of each racial group. The British used the “divide and rule” policy, leading to the segregation of an ethnically plural society and limiting the social and cultural integration among the various ethnic groups (Furnivall, 1948; Goh, 2008; Tan, 1994, p. 62; Yang, 2014, p. 409). An idealised “four races” model of society, CMIO assumes that ethnic (or ‘racial’) identities are primordial, authentic, and prior to other identities, and so cannot be eliminated through national integration or assimilation. Instead, the ethnic dimension was used in nation-building to provide historical, cultural and moral depth to a synthetic overarching national identity (Tan, 2008, p. 29). Over time, CMIO has become deeply entrenched in ethnicity-related legislation, policies, institutions, national discourse, and national celebrations (Tan, 2008, p. 29).

A major failing of the CMIO framework is that ethnicities are consolidated and essentialised, with language, religion and other significant sources of identity merged, held to be permanent and passed down through generations, powerfully impacting on identity and difference, community, values, and nationhood (Vasu, 2012, p. 738; Tan, 2008, p. 29). Morton (2007) defines essentialism as referring “to those fixed and seemingly natural foundations or essences that define human identity” (p. 125). An essentialist view focuses only on one aspect of identity and ignores many key differences and similarities among people. According to Bhabha, imagined communities are given essentialist identities (1994, p. 149). So ethnic identity as an ‘imagined community’ is essentialised because it is assumed to be pure and fixed, despite the ethnic heterogeneity that actually exists within an ethnic group.

Such essentialisms become more pronounced in the CMIO model, which is far too simplistic to capture the fluid and hybrid nature of cultural flows and formations in Singapore (Tan, 2008, p. 263). First, the “Others” category includes any minor ethnic group outside the predominantly CMI framework, such as Eurasians (the largest community within this grouping), Arabs, Armenians, Japanese and Europeans. Second, CMI categories disregard ethnic differences within each category, with dominant ethnicities used as recognition shells for communal classification. For example with the Indian category, the Malayalees, Punjabis, Bengalis, Tamils, and even people from other South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh are all grouped as ‘Indian’. The same approach is taken for the Chinese and

Malay categories. Each category is then assigned the language that best represents the majority of the group. For the Indian category, Tamil is the officially sanctioned language and Hinduism is classified as the official religion – regardless of the multiple languages and religions reflective of the South Asian diaspora (Gomes, 2015, p. 92). Similarly, for the Chinese, Chinese dialects were replaced by Mandarin which was intended to create a sense of homogeneity amongst the Chinese. When Chinese dialect names were changed to Mandarin for school-aged children, not only then was ethnic identity at stake, but also clan and family identities (Gomes, 2015, p. 99). Such approaches have the effect of cultural erosion as language is an obvious signifier and transporter of culture.

As Tan (2008, p. 29 – 30) argues, transforming ethnic identities (encompassing language and religion), which are hybrid, nomadic, ephemeral, and dependent on context and situation, into neat categories makes it easier for the Government to manage diversity in terms of administration and governance. However, this fails to account for the existence of hybridity, a concern expressed by some of my interviewees:

I think in Singapore, we always want to categorise things in a very clear and precise way but the fact is that in Southeast Asia, this diversity and hybridity is actually the most common thing, especially on the trading routes (Sherman Ong, Artist/Director, 20 December 2015).

These watertight kind of categorisations prevent more natural and more organic forms of cultural hybridisation which have been going on in Singapore for a very long time (Hoon Chang Yau, Asian Studies Academic, 20 October 2015).

While CMIO nurtured ethnic identities, the Government still crafted an overarching supra-ethnic national identity in the post-independence years, with modernisation, meritocracy and the use of English facilitating its emergence (Gomez, 1997, p. 39). Due to the success of CMIO, however, ethnic identities have now assumed greater prominence over a single overarching national identity, and Singaporeans prefer hyphenated identities – as Chinese-, Malay- or Indian-Singaporeans<sup>8</sup>. The rise of ethnic identity over national identity is in part

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<sup>8</sup> This is supported by a recent Channel News Asia–Institute of Policy Studies Survey on Ethnic Identity which found that 49% of respondents identified with a hyphenated identity, compared to 35% for Singaporean identity only and 14.2 % for ethnic identity only (Lim & Mathews, 2017).

due to the Government's change in tactics during the 1980s; its attempt to combat negative Western cultural influences associated with globalisation (Hill & Lian, 1995). Confucianism and the 'Speak Mandarin' campaign were introduced to the Chinese community, a strategy of re-ethnicisation that was later extended to all ethnic communities (Gomez, 1997, p. 40). While national identity and ethnic identities may have been in competition, for Hoon Chang Yau, there is now no conflict between them, but it becomes problematic when ethnic identities get essentialised and pigeon-holed as watertight categories (interview, 20 October 2015). Artist/Director Ho Tzu Nyen shares this view, stating that CMIO labels can still produce productive results if they are used for specific tasks, "but the label becomes a prison when it becomes the roots of one's thinking" (interview, 13 January 2016). Moreover, the strength of national identity felt by Singaporeans has a bearing on multicultural harmony because a shared sense of being united together as Singaporeans helps provide a basis for positive interaction between the different races, especially with increasing migration and the changing ethnoscape (Holman & Arunachalam, 2015, p. 503).

Yet, the rigidity of CMIO persisted until only recently in 2011 with more inter-cultural marriages between Singaporeans and foreigners taking place, resulting in the framework being extended to recognise bi-racialism, allowing double-barrelled racial classifications for some official purposes. Under this scheme, families can choose either the father or the mother's race as the child's primary racial classification (previously, children are classified according to their father's racial classification) (Holman & Arunachalam, 2015, p. 499, 505). So now, the state allows classifications such as "Chinese–Malay," "Malay–Chinese," "Indian–Chinese," or "Indian–Malay" (Wee, 2014, p. 654).

This initiative represents an acknowledgement of the increasingly hybrid nature of Singaporean identities, however the state believes that the number of actual individuals who would qualify for hybrid identities is numerically small and therefore administratively manageable (Wee, 2014, p. 654). Furthermore, the initiative allows the state to maintain its current policy of assigning ethnic mother tongues, since even hybrid Singaporeans are presumed to have a dominant ethnic identity (usually that of their fathers). This dominant identity is to be reflected as the first member of the hyphenated label. So an individual who opts for "Chinese–Malay" is someone who feels more Chinese and less Malay. By incorporating hybrid ethnic identity onto the existing system, hybridity is re-interpreted as a single ethnicity and effectively reduced to a version of monoculturalism (Wee, 2014, p. 654).

Despite being intended to promote multiculturalism, CMIO has instead led to heightened racial consciousness and the hardening of racial divisions, as seen with many CMIO-based policies. For example, state-supported self-help groups are instituted to serve each official racial group separately. Special elite schools have also been established to promote Chinese language and culture (such schools for the other ethnicities do not exist) (Tan, 2012a, p. 74 – 75).

Despite CMIO being problematic, Singapore may not yet be ready to do away with it. Artist/Curator Khairuddin bin Hori believes that most Singaporeans are comfortable seeing themselves as hyphenated:

Whether it is a means of political control or whether it is pride – that I do not want to lose my race...already I lose being Hokkien for example, I at least want to be Chinese – I think people want to keep it, despite the fact that we say it's racist, we shouldn't have this in our ID, but secretly, I think we want it. I don't mind if the "Malay" in my ID disappears...Maybe if that happens, it would make things even more complicated, depending on our level of readiness and acceptance towards such a thing.

Khairuddin explains that for indigenous ethnicities like the Malays, removing CMIO would have consequences because their classification comes with special privileges accorded in the Singapore Constitution (interview, 22 January 2016). For Aviation Planner Shaun Mathew, racial lines are so intertwined with religion in Singapore that they are unlikely to ever go away, so removing CMIO is a complicated matter (interview, 12 December 2015).

Thus, the tensions between ethnic identity and national identity continue. As Hoon Chang Yau explains:

On one hand, you'll find that people want to identify themselves just as Singaporeans, but on the other hand, they are kept reminded over and over again in every bureaucratic form that they are different by race because they have to tick a box. In other words, they're not able to totally identify as just Singaporean full stop (interview, 20 October 2015).

While Singaporeans hold national identity dearly, it is their ethnic identities, even if not fully

performed, that keep them from ‘cultural homelessness’ (Mathews, 2017). The structuring of Singapore society through CMIO can be seen through the enforcement of the national quota and public housing quota.

### National Quota

Given the political sensitivities, Singapore’s national quota, the maintenance of its racial composition, is not discussed openly. The quota keeps the Chinese population at about 75% and the Malay population less than 15%. Under the “Rhetoric of Vulnerability” (Alfian, 2016), an ethnic Chinese majority and a significant Malay-Muslim minority is seen to protect the country given its location in a Malay-Muslim region dominated by periodically hostile neighbouring giants Malaysia and Indonesia (Leifer, 2000). The national quota also affects immigration. While the Government pursues an open immigration policy, it tries to maintain the existing racial ratios in the country (Gomez, 1997, p. 43). This is difficult in light of a declining Malay population. Relatively few Malaysian Malays migrate to Singapore as Malaysian multicultural policy is advantageous to them (Hussain, 2010; Sim & Kok, 2010).

The national quota is a bitter issue for Malays. Religious Teacher of Islam Zhulkeflee bin Haji Ismail questions when the Malay community ever agreed to having a quota, especially with such uneven ratios. He finds it disturbing that to compensate for the low birth rate in the Chinese community, the Government encourages higher migration of people from China who have no connection to Singapore. He stresses that racial harmony is about different ethnicities trusting each other, not about maintaining certain racial numbers, and that the act of limiting Malay numbers is an act of distrust (interview, 5 January 2016). Similarly, Author Neil Humphreys argues that Singapore’s immigration policy of the last seven years is nothing short of racist, suggesting that it would be seen as extremely racist if the US or UK insisted that all of their immigrants must be 70% White. He questions why Singapore cannot be 50% Malay and why Malay migration cannot be encouraged (interview, 19 January 2016).

### Housing Development Board (HDB) Quota

Another CMIO-based policy is enforced in public housing, which is used to manage social divisions of ethnicity and class. HDB uses an ethnic quota system (under the Ethnic Integration Policy) which ensures that each block and neighbourhood contains an ethnic mix of residents that is in line with national percentages. While the official rationale for this quota is the promotion of ethnic integration, it works favourably for the ruling party, disbanding

critical masses of minority voters who support the opposition (Tan, 2008, p. 17).

Amongst my interviewees, there were mixed feelings about public housing quotas, some believing it did encourage integration:

Every time I go out to the lifts, I meet a Malay, Chinese or Indian...I began to be friends with them, I began to understand them a little better. So, race has been blurred that way (Colin Pereira, Retired (Former Principal), 3 January 2016).

That is Singapore's greatest strength and the Government doesn't often get enough credit for it. I believe in the racial quotas for the estates because if you didn't do it, you'd get ghettos. You would...we are mammals, we all conform to tribal instincts. This doesn't make us racist, it makes us a mammal species...and this is what we do as a species (Neil Humphreys, Author, 19 January 2016).

However, for others like Actor Brendon Fernandez, the HDB quotas reflect outdated policies that are also racist. When the Ethnic Integration Policy was introduced in 1989, the permissible proportion of flats in each neighbourhood for the Chinese was 84% while the permissible proportion of flats in each block was 87%. For Malays, the permissible proportions were 22% and 25% respectively. For Indians and other minority groups, the figures were 10% and 13% respectively (Parliamentary Debates, 1989, col. 652). Fernandez questions the rationale of having around 80% of the flats kept for Chinese people and around 20% or less for other ethnic minorities to prevent ethnic ghettos. He rightfully asks why it is a ghetto for an ethnic minority with numbers higher than 20% and why do we not talk about Chinese ghettos? In addition, as he points out, Chinese people of mixed parentage whose father is not Chinese will not qualify for the 80% of flats allocated to the Chinese. Furthermore, when minority ethnicities want to sell their flat, they have to choose buyers of the same ethnicity to maintain the quotas. The bureaucratic flaws in the system thus cause unnecessary inconvenience and depress housing prices, especially for minority groups (Brendon Fernandez, interview, 16 December 2015).

Despite the claim that the development of public housing has been successful in fostering national identity, it can be argued that the housing policies erode national identity. Through mass resettlement, HDB blocks replaced kampungs, traditional villages where residents from

different racial groups intermingled as part of daily life, yielding a true sense of communal living. This organic racial interaction is considered by many to be more genuine than the top-down, government-imposed quota system meant to encourage racial intermixing. The impact of multiracialism and CMIO-based policies on the construction of Singapore's identity is undeniable, as we shall see in the next chapter.

## *Chapter 3*

### *Identity Construction in Singapore: The Impact of Multiracialism*

As a continuation of the last chapter, this chapter will further examine the impact of multiracialism on Singapore's identity construction, focusing on ethnicity, language and national integration. The multiplicities of ethnicities and languages in multiracial Singapore pose tremendous challenges to the construction of Singapore's identity and the unifying of different peoples as one nation, as will be discussed here.

#### **Ethnicity in Singapore**

##### The Chinese and Racial Hegemony

While multiracialism and meritocracy are intended to ensure equal treatment across the races, Singapore in fact has a majority race that is catered to, meaning that racial hegemony is inevitable. Davis (2004a) describes hegemony as “negotiated power whereby members of a class are able to persuade other classes that they share the same class interests” (p. 46 – 47). For Hall (1994), these negotiations and persuasions occur in and through popular culture, an ideological “battlefield” where there are “always strategic positions to be won and lost” and where the “complex contradictions” of unstable equilibria play out in instances of dominance, complicity, negotiation, alliance, resistance and rupture (p. 460). In Singapore, CMIO and the enforcement of the various quotas described above ensure the maintenance of a Chinese majority and therefore the existence of a racial hegemony, although there are no explicit privileges accorded to the Chinese on account of their numerical majority (Teng, 2016). As Moghaddam (2008) observes, “When minority groups endorse assimilation rather than multiculturalism, they are supporting their own ‘melting away’. When majority groups endorse assimilation, they are more likely endorsing their own survival”, retaining their dominance (p. 153).

Although Singapore supports a multi-ethnic population, the Government has purposefully chosen elements of Chinese cultural values as the template for a common Singaporean national identity (Gomes, 2010, p. 299 – 301). Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew chose Confucianism, presumably for very personal reasons – he wanted to reclaim his Chinese roots and Chinese pride that had been lost due to colonisation and imperialism – which has resulted



in a Chinese-centric national identity. Lim (2014) contends that the imposition of Confucianism on the Singaporean populace is an essentialising gesture at odds with the official celebration of the nation's racial diversity and multiculturalism (p. 94).

Recalling Singapore's racial riots, Tan (2010) explains that maintaining the racial hegemony has to do with the paranoia that "the re-colonised and repressed indigenous Malay threat" would return to weaken the socio-political order (p. 159). Rahim (1998) observed how a "cultural deficit thesis" has evolved, that points to Malay underachievement, incompetence, unreliability and dependency. The belief here is that Malays have not succeeded in meritocratic Singapore because their culture and attitude have not prepared them for modern life. Malays are thus socialised into believing that they alone are responsible and to blame for their own marginalisation and failure, and that they need help in order to overcome these deficiencies and become more like the Chinese (Tan, 2008, p. 30). Rahim (1998) has controversially argued that Malay 'marginality,' an affront to Singapore's claims about meritocracy, has been sustained by the socioeconomic conditions created and rationalised by the cultural deficit thesis, which distracts from the need for fundamental structural reforms.

Nevertheless, former National Development Minister S. Dhanabalan expressed the advantage of having a racial majority. He said that where ethnic groups were the same size, the potential for tension and conflict was very high, and that Singapore was better off with one dominant ethnic group. Given the Chinese in Singapore were a large majority, they did not feel threatened despite being surrounded by countries with Chinese minorities – "Because they do not feel threatened, they would also be prepared to make more effort to meet the sensitivities of the minorities" (*The Sunday Times*, 20 August 1989). Nonetheless, the majority group will always have more advantages due to the natural tendency to cater to the most common denominator (Teng, 2016). Furthermore, the majority group will often take their position and accompanying privileges for granted, while the minorities will always feel that they are disadvantaged. Chinese-Singaporeans I interviewed recognise some of these issues:

Multiracialism describes Singapore society but I think it describes an ideal. It doesn't take into account the blind spots we have regarding other communities (Ho Chi Tim, History Academic, 30 November 2015).

Being a Chinese in Singapore allows me to enjoy a lot of cultural privileges, things that you don't even need to ask, for example, people won't ask whether you speak Chinese, they just assume you understand. Being a Chinese also allows me to not get stared at...had I been someone who wears a different religious costume, for example. I can fit in with the majority quite easily. It also means that renting a place to stay is easier because I have a Chinese name. Landlords wouldn't be too concerned compared to if they were to rent to other ethnic minorities. So, these are the things that most Chinese in Singapore may actually take for granted (Hoon Chang Yau, Asian Studies Academic, 20 October 2015).

Chinese cultural bias is also evident in other areas: new schools and housing estates are increasingly given Chinese names; the lion dance is used as a symbolic representation for distinguished visitors; the Yin/Yang is the logo of the Singapore Air Force; and a majority of public notices and signs are written only in English and/or Chinese (Stimpfl, 1997, p. 124). Teng (2016) argues that while a racial hegemony exists, "Chinese-normativity" should not be allowed to take root in Singapore, granting privileges to the majority Chinese Singaporean population. He suggests a move towards an ideal "post-race" society where policymakers actively avoid catering to the most common denominator. He gives an example of Chinese-dominated elite schools catering to students who excel in Mandarin which should be relooked at to allow students who excel in other mother tongues.

### Ethnic Minorities

Given Singapore's racial hegemony, where do ethnic minorities stand? In Singapore, the rights of ethnic minorities are constitutionally guaranteed, the advancement of their interests and representation is institutionally state-supported, and overt racial discrimination is outlawed (Liew et al, 2016, p. 2; Teng, 2016). While minorities are protected, they nonetheless adapt to the majority way of life and make other concessions. As Stimpfl noted, when strong ethnic boundaries are maintained, ethnic group members must embrace the stereotypical view of others and "live the stereotype" (1997, p. 122). Minorities also inevitably face social barriers, leading to unequal access to and unequal payoffs from social capital (Chua & Ng, 2015, p. 481). Lin (2000) offers two interrelated explanations of why minorities have less social capital: first, their lower position in the stratification system; second, 'homophily', which refers to the frequent observation that co-ethnics tend to associate with each other in personal networks. Minorities, then, often have limited association with

members of higher status ethnic groups (p. 786 – 787). The experience of Singapore's Malays substantiates both of Lin's suggestions.

While Singaporean Malays may be reduced to a minority group by the state, they do not see themselves as minorities, creating a tension fuelled by the racial riots in Singapore's history and the persistence of the Malay 'plight', which is both state-induced and a response by the Malays towards their marginalisation. According to Mutalib (2012), the Malay 'plight' involves a long list of disadvantages including poor educational record, low-skilled workforce, youth delinquency, dysfunctional families, and other social and health problems. Although Malays have made significant gains in their educational and professional attainment, they still lag behind substantially because other ethnicities have advanced as well, especially given a system which subordinates the Malays. Furthermore, because they always lag behind, underperformance academically or professionally is a reaction to limited social and economic opportunities, a trend observed by Ogbu (1983) in the study of American minorities.

While the Government has acknowledged the Malay community by making Malay Singapore's national language and using Malay lyrics for the national anthem, such gestures are superficial. The Malays have long felt displaced in Singapore due to government policies. As referenced earlier, communal living – the central focus of Malay culture – was taken away when kampungs were destroyed to make way for HDBs. Malays also have limited representation in the best schools and are denied of jobs which often go to Chinese workers. Race in Singapore remains a resilient principle of social organisation, determining who gets the job, whom people associate with, and how minorities are treated by powerful others (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Malay marginalisation, even if not considered overt, is prominent in the minds of most Malays. In the words of Undergraduate Badron bin Adnan:

As a Malay Singaporean, to be honest, I feel like I'm always pretending...pretending like among the Chinese, I'm one of you guys, pretending that there's no racism, pretending that there's no such thing as Chinese privilege, pretending that everything is fine when actually inside, we feel angry. I'm just being honest right now, we feel very angry that this is not acknowledged, and at the same time if everyone wants to

acknowledge it, it's quite controversial and sensitive. So it's also about patience, tolerance, adapting not only to non-Malay Singaporeans, but to how people view Singapore as a Chinese country and not a Malay one when we're the real locals of this place...I don't feel like a second-class citizen, but I feel I'm always sucking up to people (interview, 26 December 2015).

As Badron infers, Malays regard themselves as the original people of this region (the Nusantara) and tie an understanding of their identity to a geographical region rather than to a nation. Religious Teacher of Islam Zhulkeflee bin Haji Ismail explains that it is only in moving to Singapore and "opening a new land" prior to colonisation that the Malays found it necessary to forge a new identity as Singaporean (interview, 5 January 2016). More than the other racial groups in Singapore, the Malays have deep historical, geographical and cultural linkages to broader Southeast Asia, beyond Singapore. Being a Malay in Singapore is thus a compromise, articulated on a continuum that runs from the hegemony of an overarching Malay ethnicity which defined this region to the dissolution of this Malayness into a hybrid Singapore cultural identity and later, the demotion to a minority ethnicity (Stimpfl, 1997, p. 134).

For the Indian community, being a minority ethnic group has meant not only tackling discrimination, but also reaffirming their ethnic identity. Individual Indian ethnic identities have been eroded by CMIO. It is only in the last decade with the arrival of new Indian migrants that the "Indian" category in the CMIO framework is now being challenged and subverted. Director K. Rajagopal shares his experience thus:

I knew that my ancestors came from somewhere else but I never thought about it until it happened again recently where I was not considered a Singaporean anymore. They asked me, "Where are you from?" Because a lot of people see Indians as people who come with that migrant group – the new migrants. So, I've lost my identity as a Singaporean because they question where I'm from...Because now they think every Indian is from somewhere else. Foreigners have that perception. I go abroad and they say, "You're not Singaporean. Where are you from? You're not Chinese. Singaporean? There are Indians in Singapore?" So you look at how we're projected outside, something's been lost. We're not known as a multiracial country. Some people think we're in China! (Interview, 7 December 2015).

Rajagopal's sentiments reflect a questioning of the Singaporean Indian identity as a result of both internal and external pressures. Internally, the influx of new Indian migrants has made Singaporean Indians more conscious and protective about their identity. Like Singaporean Chinese and their counterparts from China, there is a sense that Singaporeans distinguish themselves from these foreigners, despite a shared ethnicity, and even claim superiority simply because in a land of migrants, "they were there first". Externally, Singaporean Indians, like other ethnic minorities in the country, actively resist being in the shadow of the Chinese majority and the projection of Singapore as a 'Chinese country' through the extolling of Chinese-centric Asian values as part of the 'Singapore Model'.

Before the further complications to Indian identity brought on by new Indian migrants, Singaporean Indians were mainly concerned with racial prejudice against them, ranging from negative remarks pertaining to skin colour, smell and cleanliness to stereotypical remarks on alcohol consumption and political behaviour (Gomez, 1997, p. 51). As such, Indians tried to deal with ethnic marginalisation and alienation by adapting to the dominant culture or turning to Westernisation (Mulchand, 1997; Gomez, 1997, p. 51). As one of my Indian interviewees reflects:

Growing up as a minority, if you're looking at positions anywhere...jobs, school, sports or whatever...the only way you can compete or survive is to have something extra or something more. Because if you try to compete on equal terms, you will not get it. You need to bring something extra to the table to be recognised, to be selected or to be given the opportunity. As a minority, I think there's always this demand and challenge (Narayanan Nair, Retired (Former Senior Lecturer), 3 January 2016).

Eurasians constitute the third largest minority group in Singapore. They are commonly accepted as descendants of European and Asian parentage, implying that they manifest dual or multiple ethnic identities: European and Asian (Pereira, 1997, p. 8). Eurasian ethnicity declined under the Government's multiracialism and meritocracy policies. First, Eurasians no longer asserted their identity, mainly because there were no benefits in doing so. Given their smaller size, they could not compete on equal footing with the other larger ethnicities. Second, other races were adopting cultural practices once thought to be unique to Eurasians (namely in the adoption of their language and religion), causing Eurasians to lose their ethnic

distinctiveness. Eurasians had problems subjectively identifying their culture, while other races could not objectively identify Eurasian culture (Pereira, 1997, p. 10, 11).

In the CMIO framework, Chinese, Malay and Indian racial identities are ‘contained’ within distinct ethnic boundaries, and essentialised (Chua, 1995, p. 16). Eurasian identity, on the other hand, was not essentialised because of the non-specificity of their culture. Being lumped with other minorities in the “Others” category under CMIO, the Government did not promote Eurasian culture as it did with the other three major races. This had a dual effect: on one hand, Eurasian culture did not encounter the processes of crystallisation and essentialisation experienced by other cultures, while on the other, left alone by the Government, there was little incentive for Eurasians to maintain or practise their culture. Many chose to identify themselves as Singaporeans rather than Eurasians, resulting in the waning of Eurasian ethnicity (Pereira, 1997, p. 11 – 12). In short, the hybridity of Eurasians marginalised them as a community in a society that prefers to essentialise communities (Pereira, 1997, p. 21).

Aside from this systemic marginalisation, discrimination against Eurasians seems less overt as compared to the Malay and Indian communities for two possible reasons. First, the Eurasian community is so hybridised that makes it difficult to discriminate based on race. On the contrary, being part European has actually worked in favour of Eurasians – from colonial days when they were afforded privileges on account of their European blood connections to the present where positive perception of Eurasians continues, particularly in a society that still looks to the West for validation. Second, Eurasians have benefitted from positive stereotypes. These include being attractive because of their mixed appearance and being artistic or talented in other areas. Eurasians have been prominent in the fields of entertainment and sports – Singapore’s only Olympic Gold medal was won by Joseph Schooling. Even then, there were detractors who questioned whether Schooling, being Eurasian, is truly Singaporean.

Following the rise of Asian values emphasising cultural rootedness, the Eurasian identity was revitalised in response to the systemic marginalisation of the Eurasian community, to achieve certain social, economic and political benefits that came with the promotion of ethnic identity (Pereira, 1997, p. 7, 12, 13, 18, 21). Hence, the Eurasian identity itself began to be essentialised – the heterogeneous character of Eurasian ethnicity melded, and ‘one’ Eurasian culture emerged, effectively diluting hybridity to fit within a simplified grid of racial groups

(Pereira, 1997, p. 15, 17; Rocha, 2011, p. 115). One of my Eurasian interviewees expressed it thus:

‘Eurasian’ is a problematic term...because someone with a British father and Chinese mother is in the same category as someone who has a French father and Indian mother. So I’m in this category with people I have no cultural similarity with. I’m in this category with people who are newly mixed in their family lines as well as people like me whose families have been in Southeast Asia for generations (Brendon Fernandez, Actor, 16 December 2015).

Singapore’s principles of multiracialism and meritocracy have, to a large extent, created a fairly equitable society where all the races are respected and enjoy equal opportunity. These principles have helped curb further racial and social discrimination in Singapore society. However, the experience of ethnic minorities has shown that the situation is far from perfect given the racial hegemony, the sometimes conflicting policies, and the inadvertent consequences of the indiscriminate adoption of multiracialism and meritocracy.

### **Language in Singapore**

Like ethnicity, language contributes to the complexity of Singapore’s identity. Under CMIO, language policies were implemented by the Government to further manufacture a sense of national identity (Peterson, 2001, p. 54). The first landmark language policy was the promotion of English as Singapore’s lingua franca, designed to transcend ethnic, cultural and linguistic divisions. The second was the promotion of Mandarin, which together with the Confucian Ethics/Asian Values Discourse, was intended to retain cultural roots and to keep Western influences at bay. Recalling the “Ideology of Pragmatism” (Tan, 2012a), Yang explains that under the PAP, a regime of “linguistic instrumentalism” (Wee, 2003) prevailed, where languages and authentic grassroots cultures and identities are treated as residual categories to be revamped in the pragmatic interest of economic nation-building (2014, p. 412 – 413).

There is a Malay saying – “Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa” – which translates to “language is the soul of the nation/race” (Deruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 162). Being a linguistically diverse nation, Singapore could not claim to have a single language which could be its “soul” and unite the

racess. Thus, the Government adopted English as the country's first language in a bid to have a common language. Before independence, the common language was Malay due to the presence of Malays as the indigenous linguistic majority. Chinese and Indian immigrants also learned Malay in addition to keeping their own dialect languages (Kassim, 2008, p. 49). At the same time, colonial rule required education be bilingual which paved the way for the choice of English as the first language.

The bilingual policy, being essentialist in nature, assumes there is a tight, almost unbreakable link between language, community, and ethnic identity. The state thus assigns official mother tongues to individuals on the basis of their ethnic identities (Wee, 2014, p. 652). For example, if one is a Chinese Singaporean, then Mandarin is one's mother tongue regardless of one's actual sociolinguistic biography. Under the bilingual policy, four languages are defined as Singapore's official languages, namely, English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. English is the first language and the others – the mother tongues – are the second language, depending on a person's ethnicity. Mandarin is the official mother tongue assigned to the Chinese community, Malay to the Malay community, and Tamil to the Indian community. There is no official mother tongue for the "Others" category, given its heterogeneous nature (Wee, 2011, p. 205). The mother tongues are valued for their role as cultural anchors, while English is valued for its socio-economic advantages (Pakir, 1992). This way, Singaporeans can remain rooted to their Asian heritage even as they compete globally (Wee, 2014, p. 652).

### English

English became the first language partly because of colonisation, but also because it was deemed necessary to promote foreign investment and trade, and provide a business-friendly environment (Chou, 2014, p. 157). However, it was also chosen to show fairness to the different races given it was a 'neutral' language that would also be common to all. Choosing one of the mother tongues would have been discriminatory over the other mother tongues (Huang & Cheng, 2016, p. 224). Thus, the PAP aggressively promoted English-language education in the 1970s which also helped Singapore's tourist sector to prosper, as the new nation became the gateway to the rest of Asia (Peterson, 2001, p. 56). Tertiary-educated Singaporeans arguably lead the rest of Asia in their fluency and command of the English language (Peterson, 2001, p. 56). By any indicator – official status, social prestige, extent of use, number of speakers – English is the dominant language in Singapore (Lim, 1989, p. 1).



Despite being Singapore's first language, former Prime Minister Lee asserted that English is not "emotionally acceptable" as a mother tongue. By contrast, Mandarin is "emotionally acceptable [because] it reminds us that we are part of an ancient civilization with an unbroken history of over 5,000 years" (Wee, 2014, p. 652). By denying English mother tongue status, the state fostered a sense of nationalism which stresses 'Asianness', distinguishing Singapore from the West (Vasil, 1995).

Nonetheless, English has become so prevalent that it threatens the official mother tongue languages (Wee, 2014, p. 653). This simultaneous acceptance and rejection of English complicates the language issue in Singapore. Its usage facilitates inter-ethnic interaction, but its status – as a non-mother tongue – lowers its standing. Furthermore, in Singapore's changing ethnoscape, foreign students whose mother tongue is English are still required to fulfill a 'proper' mother tongue requirement from the accepted range. Director Kan Lumé reflects on the complicated relationship with English:

I can't speak my mother tongue but I still refer to it as my mother tongue because rightfully it is. When I'm with native English speakers, American and British friends, I'm self-conscious because I'm speaking their language, a bastardised version. I can do my very best, they will encourage me and say, "Wow, you've got your grammar, it's really good". But I know that it's rootless. It doesn't go back more than several decades. But when my [mainland] Chinese or Malay friends speak to me, their languages stretch back hundreds of years. There is that root and that is what culture is (interview, 9 January 2016).

### Singlish

To further complicate matters, English in Singapore has evolved into 'Singlish', which consists of a largely English-based vocabulary peppered with Malay and dialect, but with syntax closer to Chinese or Malay than English. Like English everywhere, it has its own idioms, diction and idiosyncrasies. Although Singlish is the closest thing to a truly indigenous, hybrid national language, it is considered too colloquial for professional use, and is often virtually unintelligible to English native speakers from elsewhere (Peterson, 2001, p. 58).

Yet, Singlish has become the unofficial symbol of Singapore's multicultural national identity,

fostering an unendorsed nationalist spirit and unifying disparate Singaporeans by being a language bridge across ethnic cultures (Gomes, 2015, p. 41, 150). In fact, it is Singlish which has become the inter-ethnic lingua franca – Singaporeans are considered English-educated, but in practice, Singaporeans who communicate in English really do so in Singlish. Singlish enables people to communicate and identify with each other through a common identifying code of practice, but it is disapproved of and discouraged by the state, seen as the tongue of the uneducated and uncultured, jeopardising Singaporeans' ability to compete effectively in the global economy (Gomes, 2015, p. 152; Tan & Fernando, 2007; Rubdy, 2001; Chng, 2003). Banned in official communiqué and in classrooms and discouraged in the media, Singlish has thus developed into a soft and non-confrontational form of rebellion against the Government (Gomes, 2015, p. 160 – 161). Singlish is undoubtedly one of the few authentic markers of Singaporean identity and culture, but since it is viewed as an economic threat, there is official pressure to abandon it (Wee, 2011, p. 213).

With the rise of Singlish, the Government continued to promote English. However, after about a decade, by the late 1970s, such promotion was criticised for making the local populace more susceptible to Westernisation. The Government was concerned that the Chinese community, more than the Malays or Indians, was de-rooted from its 'distinctive' cultural values and identity, which led to the implementation of the second landmark language policy – the Speak Mandarin Campaign – in 1979 (Chong, 2011, p. 888).

#### Mandarin and Eradicating Chinese Dialects

The Speak Mandarin campaign along with Singapore's Shared Values reaffirmed the 'Asianness' of Singapore's identity. Out of fear that Westernisation was eroding Singapore's Asian values, the Government proposed the creation of a national ideology that would encapsulate the core values of Singapore society. Known as Singapore's Shared Values, these core values have since become a basis for national identity (Peterson, 2001, p. 23). They are: (1) nation before community and society before self (2) family as the basic unit of society (3) community support and respect for the individual (4) consensus instead of conflict (5) racial and religious harmony (Peterson, 2001, p. 23; *The Straits Times*, 6 January 1991). There were economic reasons too for the promotion of Mandarin, allowing Singaporeans to participate in Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the opening up of China (Tan, 2003, p. 757).

The aim of the Speak Mandarin campaign was also to replace other provincial dialects used in

the Chinese community with an overarching language (Chong, 2011, p. 888). To this end, the campaign was successful: Households that claimed to use Mandarin as the dominant language at home increased from 10.2% in 1980 to 45.1% in 2000 to 47.7% in 2010. Conversely, dialects as the predominant household language dropped from 81.4% in 1980 to 30.7% in 2000, and then to 19.2% in 2010 (Department of Statistics, 2010). It should be noted that while the promotion of Mandarin validated overarching Chinese interests, the eradication of Chinese dialects served to weaken the identities of individual dialect groups which had distinct languages, food and cultural practices. In short, the introduction of Mandarin served a national purpose, but also produced a cultural loss for the Chinese. To this day, there is a disconnect between younger Singaporeans who learnt and speak Mandarin and the older generation who speaks Chinese dialects.

Ironically, dialects were banned as they were deemed a threat to Mandarin, but in fact, English and Singlish pose much bigger threats, being more commonly spoken on the ground, especially amongst the different races. Lee concludes that Singapore's case with the Speak Mandarin campaign presents contrary evidence to the hypothesis that language transmits culture (2015, p. 15). It can be argued that language transmits culture if the language is perceived as indigenous. Mandarin was never native for Singapore, and the same can be said for English. This explains why Singapore has not fully embraced English or Chinese culture and is in fact straddling both. Had dialects not been expunged, the authentic heritage and cultures of the individual Chinese ethnicities would still exist today, which would strengthen the sense of Chineseness the Government sought when they launched the Speak Mandarin campaign. In this sense, the campaign failed in its paramount objective to connect Chinese Singaporeans to a wider Chineseness that cuts across borders (Lee, 2015, p. 12). Chineseness in Singapore today is bound to its Singaporeanness and divorced from this wider Chineseness, evident in how Singaporeans regard new migrants from China as 'The Other'.

The loss of dialects is regarded as a national sacrifice. As expressed by my interviewees:

I'm very big on dialect because dialect is very important. Dialect is language and dialect is history and culture. And when you wipe out dialects, you're wiping out a piece of a person's history and culture (Glen Goei, Director, 11 December 2015).

I consider dialects a part of the Singapore language and soundscape as well. It's there, it's in our DNA from the days of the early immigrants. It was there when my grandpa came to Singapore, speaking only Cantonese. So you can't take dialects out of the Singapore culture and definitely not the identity. But because of this social engineering in the many decades by our Government...in a way it's also sad for myself and many people that I know, that the younger generations of Singaporeans are not speaking their ancestral and native tongue. They have been engineered to speak primarily in English, as a common and official language that unifies us, and probably smatterings of Mandarin (David Lee, Vice Chairman, Singapore Film Society, 5 January 2016).

The two landmark language policies discussed above were intended to promote bilingualism, but the effect of enforcing English then switching to Mandarin within a decade has no doubt confused the generations and left most Singaporean Chinese struggling with both languages and excelling in neither (Peterson, 2001, p. 58). Statistics show that only about 10% of the student population is expected to be fully bilingual in English and their mother tongue (Ho, 2004; Wee, 2011, p. 207).

The Speak Mandarin campaign also had the effect of heightening racial consciousness, alienating the ethnic minorities. Although Government leaders made much effort to assure the minorities that they remained committed to a multicultural Singapore, the emphasis on Mandarin in national discourse served to endorse Chinese interests (Chong, 2011, p. 888). With the economic benefits of Mandarin becoming evident over time, the language has now achieved a higher status than the other mother tongues in the national psyche, reinforcing the racial hegemony. Mandarin is increasingly popular among non-Chinese Singaporeans, even though it is not their official mother tongue (Wee, 2003).

### Malay

Prior to Singapore's independence, Bahasa Melayu or Malay was the mother tongue of Malays in Singapore and the lingua franca of this region (the Malay States). Under the British, the Malay States including Singapore used Malay as a language of communication in commerce, administration and education (Stevenson, 1975). Malay was the medium of instruction in Malay schools with English only taught in English schools catering to the elite (Kassim, 2008, p. 48). With the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, many education and

language policies were changed, addressing the apparent needs of the two nations. An example is the bilingual policy cited above which promoted English, impacting deeply on the status of the Malay language in Singapore (Kassim, 2008, p. 48). While Malay remains Singapore's national language, English has overtaken it as the lingua franca and Malay has now become a minority language, only spoken by the Malays as their mother tongue. As expressed by my interviewees:

[Even as Chinese], my parents speak Malay. A lot of people from the older generation speak Malay. But how many people from our generation speak Malay? I'm ashamed to say that I speak very terrible Malay (Daniel Hui, Director, 2 February 2016).

Constitutionally, Malay is the national language, but no one dares to say that. Even though we sing every day in our schools the national anthem in Malay, most people don't understand the words. Most people can't even recite the words till today even though they've grown up singing it for twelve years of their lives (Glen Goei, Director, 11 December 2015).

A recent relaxation of the bilingual policy allowing students to learn a third language may boost the use of Malay and other minority languages (previously, this was allowed only for the top 10% of primary school leavers). This move reflects the Government's view that proficiency in a non-native mother tongue will help facilitate interracial interaction and understanding (Kassim, 2008, p. 47). However, learning a third language can only go so far when there is little opportunity to practise the language. My Chinese interviewee from the Non-Profit Sector, Tan Shin, shares that he went to an all-Chinese secondary school where there were no Malay or Indian students. He took up Malay as a third language but having no fellow Malay schoolmates, his Malay suffered (interview, 1 November 2015). Thus, the good intentions of a relaxed bilingual policy are undermined by the reality of racial hegemony. In Singapore, the learning of Malay seems more culturally motivated, compared to Mandarin and Tamil, whose importance is associated with the rise of economic giants China and India. To a large degree, religious instruction helps to perpetuate the use of Malay language, but also limits its usage to the Malay Muslim community (Kassim, 2008, p. 51).

### Tamil

The Mandarin takeover of Chinese dialects replicated the way in which Hindi took preference

over Tamil in India's independence movement in the 1920s. In contrast to the low status ascribed to Chinese dialects, Tamil was able to present a more formidable challenge to the spread of Hindi. By 1930, a burgeoning Tamil sub-nationalism had spread from India to Malaya. As the majority of South Asians in Malaya were Tamils, and their language resonated more deeply with them than Hindi (Chua, 2012, p. 297 – 298), Tamil was chosen as the official language for the Indian community in Singapore. This disadvantaged other Indian ethnicities who were forced to replace their own languages with Tamil. Retiree Narayanan Nair reflects:

My mother tongue is Malayalam but Malayalam is not offered as a subject in school, so we had to pick Tamil which is the closest Indian language. So our use of Malayalam has also diminished. And Tamil is a minority race and language, so most of my friends will talk to me in English. The only time we use Tamil is in the classroom. In the old neighbourhood, there were some Tamil-speaking families, so we used it, but not as we grew older. I was the only Indian student in my whole class, so the use of the language, Tamil, was very minimal (interview, 3 January 2016).

Furthermore, in the 1970s and 1980s, minority languages like Malay and Tamil were kept as minority languages because many of the elite schools were Chinese-dominated. Very few minority students were enrolled in these schools, some of which also did not offer Malay and Tamil as second languages. Thus, minority students often had no choice but to take Mandarin<sup>9</sup>, fostering the racial hegemony. As Sumitra Sachidanandan from Public Healthcare recalls:

The school that I studied at did not offer Tamil as a second language, so my parents had to send me to a Tamil centre on Saturdays to learn Tamil. But since I was actually free during the Chinese periods from Mondays to Fridays, my dad appealed to the ministry to let me take up Mandarin as a third language...I don't even think they had Malay, they only had Mandarin. And I don't recall having any Malay classmates in my school (interview, 3 November 2015).

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<sup>9</sup> Minority students were allowed to take Mandarin as second language at some elite schools which did not offer Malay or Tamil classes. Students were also allowed to take it as a third language should they opt to take their own mother tongue as second language outside of the schools.

However, following the promotion of Asian values, language policy changes in the 1990s allowed the teaching of other Indian languages. Students are now offered either Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu or Gujarati, but enrollments in such classes are strictly controlled. Unless ethnically eligible for these other languages, any student whose paternal lineage is Indian is still obliged to study Tamil (Gomez, 1997, p. 41).

### Second Language for the Eurasians

While the other ethnic groups had mother tongues as second languages, the situation for the Eurasians is less straightforward. How the language policy is applied to them reflects the Government's essentialist views on language – that it is a natural and irrefutable fact that official mother tongues have to be Asian (Wee, 2011, p. 210). Most Eurasians consider English their mother tongue and when the bilingual policy was implemented, they did not have a second language to choose. As such, Eurasian children were given the option to choose from any of the other three mother tongues as their second language. While this may seem like an advantage, it was also problematic. Also, such an essentialist approach discounts the culture and true mother tongues of the Eurasians. My interviewees explain some of these problems:

I had to choose one second language, so I chose Malay since it was the closest to the English type of alphabet. But I was very disadvantaged because all other races would speak to me in English and I didn't have a chance to practise my second language, so that was lost. The only time I got to speak Malay was probably in class, maybe one question, if the teacher asked me. That's my extent of speaking the language. Most Eurasians are never good in their second language, but they're ok in their first language (Colin Pereira, Retired (Former Principal), 3 January 2016).

I took Mandarin. [But] I'm terrible. I took it for ten years and I hated every moment of it. Looking back now, I don't know if I could've done any better. I tried, I did my best. I passed every exam. But I'm not fluent today. I can't read it. I can barely speak it. Seems like a real wasted opportunity. On the one hand, I did hate the subject, on the other hand, I don't think I was expected to do very well...People don't expect Eurasians to be good at languages. [But] you had better be good in English. Everyone expects you to be excellent in English. So those frames are put on you quite early as a Eurasian child (Brendon Fernandez, Actor, 16 December 2015).

We must remember that as Eurasian, my second language is Portuguese, so my grandmother spoke it. When we went to school, there was no Portuguese, so we lost that. Subsequent generations now don't speak it at all. So it ended with my parents. Now, very few homes continue this language. Because of the development of language education in Singapore, I've lost out on my true second language (Colin Pereira, 3 January 2016).

### Language Policy Mistakes and Redress

The language policies in Singapore have been fraught with problems. In recent years, the Government has admitted to mistakes, specifically in its attempts to encourage bilingual proficiency in English and Mandarin among Chinese Singaporeans (Wee, 2011, p. 202). The sheer number of students who face difficulties with Mandarin has led the state to concede the existence of a real learning problem and abandon its earlier position concerning the mastery of two languages (Wee, 2006). As Lee Kuan Yew himself admitted in 2009, “generations have paid a heavy price because of my ignorance” (Wee, 2011, p. 208). Lee initially held the assumption that general intelligence and language ability were strongly correlated, until he was convinced otherwise by views of his daughter, a neurologist (Wee, 2011, p. 208). After these policy errors were admitted, a series of initiatives was introduced, including modifying syllabi to match student learning capability, and making Mandarin learning more enjoyable (Wee, 2011, p. 207, 209).

Singapore's changing ethnoscape and its endeavour to attract foreign talent will eventually impact on mother tongue education as foreigners who take up Singapore citizenship cannot be expected to fit into CMIO (Stroud & Wee, 2012, p. 200 – 201; Wee, 2014, p. 654). Children of Singaporean expatriates returning to Singapore would also likely not have studied their official mother tongue while abroad. The notion that English-mother tongue bilingualism is the key to building a Singaporean national identity has become questionable, and changing demographics suggest English needs to be allowed mother tongue status (Wee, 2014, p. 654). While the Government acknowledges the need to move away from the Asian 'us' versus Western 'them' dichotomy in Singapore's national identity (Goh, 1999), it is still reluctant to re-examine essentialist ideologies concerning the link between language and identity, and accept English as a mother tongue (Wee & Bokhorst-Heng, 2005). Singapore's identity and the CMIO framework are founded on essentialist ideologies which have taken years to take hold, hence any re-evaluation of such essentialism is a threat to the nation's identity.



Outside of the language policies, language as spoken on the ground is a mix of creolised languages and code-mixing, where people switch from one language to another during conversation or combine words from different languages in a single sentence, as evident with Singlish (Groppe, 2014, p. 152). Such language hybridity, while rich in terms of Singapore culture, is discouraged by the language policies.

### **National Integration: Race Relations Today**

Having significantly impacted on ethnicity and language, multiracialism is a bedrock of Singapore's identity. As such, I explore briefly here how it has affected race relations and changed Singapore society. A recent Channel NewsAsia-Institute of Policy Studies (CNA-IPS) survey on race relations found that while 90% of respondents espoused multicultural values and had interacted with other races, it is impossible to judge the depth of these interactions (Mathews, 2016c, p. 3).

As expressed by ICT Academic Connor Graham, the idea of racial harmony supports co-existence, but whether it supports inter-relation is debatable (interview, 4 December 2015). English Literature Academic Kirpal Singh reinforces this view, noting, "the idea of a multiracial, multi-religious, multilingual Singaporean society is seen to be a political dictum, which is not always transferred to the level of day-to-day engagements" (interview, 27 October 2015). The CNA-IPS survey also showed that more than 70% of respondents viewed the various multicultural policies like CMIO as helping to foster interracial trust. Singaporeans seemingly accept the status quo without questioning the multicultural policies, taking multiculturalism "as a given" (Anderson Ang (Undergraduate), interview, 29 November 2015).

Many of my interviewees agreed with the statement that "Singapore is multiracial but not multicultural". Multiracialism recognises cultural diversity by emphasising racial boundaries, whereas multiculturalism recognises cultural diversity by blurring racial boundaries. Singapore considers itself a multicultural nation which celebrates racial harmony. Yet, multiculturalism in Singapore, as Barr and Zkrbis (2008) and Velayutham (2009) argue, is steeped in a racism primarily rooted in the dominance of the ethnic Chinese in politics, economy, culture and society. Barr and Zkrbis (2008) point out that most Singaporeans generally accept and support the maintenance of this hierarchical situation. The CNA-IPS

survey showed that a quarter of the respondents are mildly racist, experienced in the form of insults, name calling, threats or harassment (Mathews, 2016a). About 60% of respondents have heard racist comments with 45% at their workplaces, and 65% ignored such comments (Mathews, 2016b, p. 10, 54, 55). The survey also found people preferred a member of their own race marry into their family, share personal problems, manage their business, and even be appointed Prime Minister and President (Mathews, 2016a; Mathews, 2016b, p. 11). Reflecting the racial hegemony, more minority respondents were accepting of Chinese than Chinese accepting minorities for various roles and relationships (Mathews, 2016b, p. 37; Mathews, 2016c, p. 4). Poet/Playwright Alfian bin Sa'at characterises this state of race relations as “multiracist harmony” – the idea that difference is tolerated without real understanding of such differences (Deruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 176).

Furthermore, the Government discourages public discussion on race. Many regard talking about racial issues as highly sensitive, disconcerting and having the potential for tension (Mathews, 2016b, p. 11; Mathews, 2016c, p. 4). The CNA-IPS survey found that a quarter of respondents had wanted to ask someone about issues related to their race but did not, which indicates race remains a taboo topic in Singapore (Mathews, 2016c, p. 4). As Actor Brendon Fernandez puts it:

Whenever we try to discuss race or ethnicity in media, in theatre, in any kind of public forum, we're told, “No. Don't discuss it. Discussing it might raise tensions, remember the riots in the '60s. Don't talk about race. We are a multiracial society.” So I think those two statements logically don't follow, they don't work together – “Don't talk about race. We are a multiracial society” don't work together (interview, 16 December 2015).

The survey shows that despite the Government's efforts in promoting multiculturalism, race relations still have a long way to go. For Kirpal Singh, Singapore's racial harmony does exist, but it is what he calls “Harmony Across Walls”, where “there is a presence of harmony without always the understanding and the knowledge of ‘The Other’”. He explains that racial harmony as such has come from the top, because of the work done by national education, national service and such. Multiculturalism has not been allowed to develop organically. As such, “real inter-community, interracial, inter-religious engagement has declined in Singapore” (interview, 27 October 2015). This view is shared by other interviewees. Tan Shin

from the Non-Profit Sector notes how his parent's generation can speak multiple languages to communicate with the different races whereas his generation cannot (interview, 1 November 2015). Retiree Narayanan Nair recalls how great Singapore's "kampung spirit" was, where everyone intermingled, which really helped foster racial harmony (interview, 3 January 2016). The kampung spirit disappeared because of modernisation and mass resettlement to HDBs.

Asian Studies Academic Hoon Chang Yau emphasises the need to change the definition of what "unified national identity" means and to understand that Singaporeans can be "unified and diverse at the same time". Multicultural policies, he argues, have given the different races no incentive to get to know each other's cultures or languages. Policies have to change to allow open discussion on race matters, and these discussions need to extend to foreigners who are an increasing part of Singapore's population. In his words:

We need to have safe platforms for people to actually encounter, to interact with and to appreciate difference, and finally to borrow each other's differences...so that culture then organically be hybridised (interview, 20 October 2015).

Cultural hybridity has evolved in Singapore in the form of Singlish and food, both of which Singaporeans feel most passionate about principally in terms of national identity and belonging to the homeland (Gomes, 2015, p. 32). As Lindholm (2008) notes, there is an undeniable connection between the invention or recovery of authentic local cuisine and the development of national consciousness (p. 80). As a symbol of cultural identity, food brings both solidarity and separation, by bringing people together in the sharing of food and also by separating them culturally (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993, p. 129 – 30). However, the other side to this separation is hybridity, reflecting the interaction and fusion of different food cultures.

Food hybridisation leads to the blending of different cooking styles and ingredients, resulting from exchanges between different cultures (Martin, 2010). Singapore cuisine has many examples of food hybridisation. While Chinese, Indian and Malay cuisines are often essentialised with dishes attributed to distinct ethnic groups, in reality "the three types of cuisines appropriate from each other, creating far greater culinary variety through hybridisation" (Chua & Rajah, 2001). A specific example of such food hybridisation is Indian Mee Goreng, which is fried noodles influenced by Chinese and Malay dishes, an atypical Indian dish unique to Singapore (and perhaps Malaysia). In addition, Singapore food culture

also includes food localisation, where food is indigenised to suit local tastes. For example, the local coffee, ‘kopi’, is served with condensed milk instead of whole milk.

Singlish and local food culture show how cultural identity can be celebrated through hybridity and commonalities across the different ethnicities, reflecting a shared commonness that underlies the sense of national belonging which Kong (1999) defines as national identity. These examples show how multiculturalism in practice can develop naturally outside of multicultural policies, embodying what it means to be Singaporean.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter and the last have explored the construction of Singapore’s identity through the Government’s treatment of history, its efforts in nation-building and developing national ideology, with multiracialism and meritocracy as pillars. Such governance has engendered physical and cultural losses and created a culture where practice is dictated by policy. With multiracialism for example, multiculturalism in Singapore society is expressed and appreciated, but it is not fully lived, for it is in the living of such multiculturalism that it can be realised. As Kirpal Singh notes, the consideration or inclusion of minority races is an “afterthought” at all levels, from the government, to work and school (interview, 27 October 2015). For Hoon Chang Yau, multiracialism and meritocracy are “veils” that hide social inequalities (interview, 20 October 2015). Gomez (1997) articulated that while distinctiveness is promoted as a prerequisite for pluralism to work, a common ground is needed for multiculturalism to succeed. In Singapore, the common ground for multiculturalism is found in the pursuit of a supra-ethnic national identity while simultaneously recognising ethnicity (p. 55). While these two seem conflictual, the idea of having both may be less challenging if the Government was able to identify a shared commonness to define a supra-ethnic national identity. Instead, it discourages hybridity (with the exception of food culture), and the term ‘supra-ethnic national identity’ becomes just a shell to denote Singapore’s cultural pluralism.

I would argue that Singapore’s identity is then no longer a conflict between national identity and ethnic identity, but one between a political and cultural identity, which redefines the terms and clarifies the divide. With the acceptance of a hyphenated national-ethnic identity, the opposition between the two has become less of an issue. The dichotomy now lies between Singapore’s political identity, a political construct, and its cultural identity, which is partly

constructed and partly naturally evolved. Its political identity is a “strategic/political fabrication” (Cheng, 2004), where according to writer Catherine Lim (1994), Singapore was created in the “image and likeness” of the PAP (Tan, 2016, p. 236). In this application, the term ‘political identity’ is not taken in the traditional sense in terms of how citizens see themselves in relation to the field of politics. Instead, it refers to the identification of Singapore’s identity with the Government. I use it to replace the term ‘national identity’ because Singapore’s national identity encompasses multiculturalism which also falls under its cultural identity. My understanding of cultural identity is also wider than the current application of ethnic identity. Cultural identity, while rooted in multiracialism, also encompasses cultural hybrid practices that have developed organically outside of government prescripts. Such cultural identity extends beyond the state’s manufactured multicultural identity which encompasses the different ethnicities and cultures, but where they do not fuse, instead remaining unmerged with the others. In short, the cultural identity I envision does not see culture as ethnically delineated, but rather as an amalgamation of ethnicities and cultures, evident in Singapore’s “lived hybridity” (Chua, 1995).

As we shall see in the next two chapters, Singapore filmmakers, in constructing the Singapore identity on screen, have had to negotiate its political and cultural identities, while remaining seemingly authentic to audiences, both local and abroad. Addressing these identities for Singapore cinema is then about reflecting a non-cultural identification with the Government or cultural identification with the country, which could be both state-endorsed or otherwise. This translates more simply to depicting Singapore according to, or outside of official representations/discourse, and the issues faced by filmmakers in these constructions.

## *Chapter 4*

### *Identity Construction in Singapore Cinema: Challenges for Filmmakers*

Having explored Singapore's identity, I will now examine the relationship between Singapore identity and Singapore cinema across Chapters 4 and 5. Just as the impact of Singapore's history, government intervention and multiracialism have shaped Singapore's identity, so too have these factors shaped its cinema. Thus to address my second research question, this chapter will explore the development of Singapore cinema, the Government's control of the arts through censorship, and the problem of race and language in Singapore contemporary cinema resulting from the incorporation of multiracialism.

Chapter 5 will study how the above three factors challenge the notion of authenticity in Singapore cinema to address my third research question. The chapter will also tackle my fourth research question by considering a fourth challenge to authenticity in Singapore films: the negotiation of local and global forces. Through these chapters, we will see how Singapore cinema reflects Singapore's political and cultural identities and the tensions between them.

For both chapters, I will incorporate key ideas and discussions from existing literature and previous chapters, and include quotes and thoughts taken from the interviews I conducted in the production of my PhD documentary. Also, although the focus is on cinema, wherever applicable, examples will be taken from television since it is much more established in Singapore and has in various ways influenced the practices in the film industry. Taking examples from both will also allow for comparisons between film and television.

#### **Development of Singapore Cinema**

While Singapore as a nation was constructed in a relatively short period, its cinema took a much longer time to evolve. Rapid economic development throughout the nation-building years has defined and evolved Singapore's identity, but Singapore's cinema got left behind in the pursuit of national development.

Singapore filmmaking began in the mid-1920s to mid-1930s, reaching what is commonly regarded as the Golden Age in the years spanning 1947 to 1972, a period known as the Studio

Era due to the dominance of the Shaw and Cathay studios (Millet, 2006, p. 10). Subsequent to the golden age was a gap in filmmaking (1973 – 1990), a period of very little to no film production which Loh and Tan refer to as the “dark ages” (2017, p. 37). After this gap, from 1991 to the present day, a new wave of films have been produced, commonly referred to as revival or contemporary films.

These three distinct phases mark and reflect Singapore’s transformation from third world country to first world city-state. The golden age cinema belongs to pre-independence Singapore, revival cinema to post-independence Singapore, and the gap to the period in between, which saw intense development and nation-building. The turning point was Singapore’s independence in 1965, when cinema transitioned from its golden age to its dark age. Sim (2011) notes that the golden age of Singapore cinema is historicised and viewed separately from the current revival films (p. 358), which is unsurprising given they reflect two different countries. Pre-independence Singapore belonged to Malaya and post-independence Singapore is modern Singapore as we now know it.

The two filmmaking periods are distinguished not only by their respective contexts, but also in the formal differences between the films themselves in terms of genre, narrative, thematic concerns, style, language and even images of Singapore (Sim, 2011, p. 362; Lim, 2017, p. 32). Singapore’s golden age was dominated by Malay cinema and reflected a developing Singapore as it integrated into the Malaysian Federation. These films featured a ‘simpler’ Singapore, with narratives addressing the resistance to urbanisation and globalisation. By comparison, the contemporary revival films focus on a developed Singapore using primarily Chinese stories and addressing the social alienation resulting from economic progress and global capitalism. Colonialism’s significance to Singapore’s cultural identity is overlooked, even disregarded, in contemporary films (Sim, 2011, p. 358).

### Golden Age Cinema

The golden age of Singapore cinema was dominated by locally made Malay films, melodramas, horror films and musicals styled after Bollywood cinema (Gomes, 2015, p. 36). The star of the golden age was P. Ramlee, the iconic filmmaker, actor, singer and composer, whose films are still appreciated by today’s audiences. Reflecting Malay kampung life, Ramlee’s films provided the Malay community with an identifiable Malay identity in an ever increasingly multicultural, economically progressive and cosmopolitan Singapore and

Malaysia. His films entertained audiences throughout the periods of political uncertainty during the height of tensions with Malaysia and Singapore's subsequent expulsion in 1965 (Gomes, 2015, p. 37). Ramlee's work therefore served a national purpose, providing a bridge across the different ethnic communities. His films unified the different ethnicities because first, they reflected a common experience regardless of ethnicity – that of life in a modernising society; and second, the films used a common language – Malay – the lingua franca of the time. The absence of these two factors explains why contemporary cinema cannot unify today's audiences in the same way.

During Singapore's golden age, Singapore “dominated...quite a large part of the Asian film industry” (Millet, 2006, p. 12, 67), with the Shaw and Cathay-Keris film production studios producing around 300 commercially successful Malay language films, reportedly reaching numerous ethnic communities (Teo, 2017a, p. 3; Tan, 2010, p. 152; Tan et al, 2003). Aside from this dominance in the Malay movie industry, Singapore also controlled the bulk of the Chinese movie industry after Shaw and Cathay expanded their businesses into Hong Kong during the second half of the 1950s (Millet, 2006, p. 12). The studios became the driving force behind the revitalised film industry there, making hundreds of Chinese language movies. Ironically, while Singapore laid the foundation for the Hong Kong film industry, the latter would become one of its main competitors in later years, contributing to its decline in the 1970s and 1980s (Millet, 2006, p. 12).

Malay cinema was and still is Singapore's only transnational cinema. The films themselves incorporated music and dance styles from Malaysia and Indonesia, and circulated widely around the region (Edna Lim (Film Academic), interview, 4 December 2015). Furthermore, the film industry was multicultural, with Indian, Filipino and Malay directors, Chinese producers and financiers, and Malay and Indonesian actors trained in Bangawan, Malay opera (Tan et al, 2003). Such a multicultural mix does not exist in the film industry today.

After Singapore separated from Malaysia, many factors led to the decline of the golden age: the lack of sustained private investments for the studios; a militantly unionised workforce; the creation of protectionist trade barriers by neighbouring countries; competition from high-quality colour films coming from India and the Philippines; competition from television; and



an indifference to the arts and culture by the PAP<sup>10</sup> Government which also introduced increasingly strict media censorship (Cheah, 2002, p. 381; Millet, 2006, p. 64 – 67; Uhde & Uhde, 2000, p. 27; Lent, 2012, p. 15; Tan et al, 2003). Shaw and Cathay closed down their Singapore studios in 1967 and 1972 respectively, marking the end of an era of local filmmaking (Tan et al, 2003). Singapore then lost most of its industry talent, including auteur P. Ramlee, to Merdeka Film Productions in Malaysia. With the collapse of the studio system and talent migration, films were lost or sent to Malaysia. Thus, Singapore lost a significant part of its film history to Malaysia, a process that reoccurred with Hong Kong after the Shaw Brothers moved their production businesses there; their Singapore films again became subsumed, this time as part of Hong Kong cinema (Alfian, 2012, p. 36; Millet, 2006). Subsequently, Malayness as a “cultural reference” (Millet, 2006, p. 70) and the cinematic golden age were forgotten – even repressed – by Singapore’s official history.

### The Gap in Cinema History

In the almost 20-year gap separating the two active filmmaking periods, the Government’s focus was on continuous economic development and political stability. Cultural production and the arts were given the lowest priority during that time; art was regarded as an asset meant only for the elite. Singapore then was considered a ‘cultural desert’ (Kawasaki, 2004, p. 24).

In the years immediately following the studios’ closing, filmmaking output declined slowly and shifted away from Malay movies and heritage as Singapore became more Chinese-centric post-independence. A handful of more independently produced movies were shot in Chinese or English in the 1970s, paving the way for an industry that would, from the 1990s revival onwards, produce movies in these two languages (Millet, 2006, p. 11). In fact, the last Malay film was made in 1972 and it took 41 years for another, Sanif Olek’s *Sayang Disayang*, to be released.

Prior to 1972, actors in Singapore films were mostly Malay but after this period, were mainly Chinese. There was little representation then of the minorities in film, an underrepresentation which continues to this day (Millet, 2006, p. 11). The films of the 1990s and 2000s featured Chinese casts and were almost entirely made by Chinese producers and directors, a dramatic

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<sup>10</sup> People’s Action Party

shift from the multiracial crew behind the golden age films. For a cinema viewer who would know Singapore only through its movies, it would have seemed that the country's population changed from Malay to Chinese overnight (Millet, 2006, p. 11).

The complete death of a cinema for such a long period is extremely rare in the history of world cinema. Even countries that suffered major civil wars, such as Lebanon and Sri Lanka, or large-scale international wars in their territories such as Germany or Japan, or major financial crises, such as the US in 1929, continued to produce films. Moreover, the drought occurred when Singapore was enjoying peace, stability and double-digit economic growth (Millet, 2006, p. 11). This long break from filmmaking erased Singapore from the map of world cinema, at exactly the time that other regional film industries were burgeoning. Mainland China saw the rise of its Fifth Generation filmmakers while Hong Kong was riding high on its New Wave cinema (Millet, 2006, p. 11). It would prove an uphill task to re-engage with cinema, as filmmakers in Singapore from the mid-1990s onwards were to discover. Since independence, no Singapore film has enjoyed commercial success internationally. Only a handful of films have done well on the international festival circuit while 'cinema king' Jack Neo's films have had some moderate regional success. Such a hiatus in movie production is astounding considering that the Singapore film industry once ranked amongst the top in Asia, leading Southeast Asia from the late 1940s to the early 1960s (Millet, 2006, p. 11).

For Writer Ben Slater, the lack of film production during the gap is a huge cultural loss:

There is no documentation of the space and that time on film, both of which were changing dramatically. There are no post-nation-building stories of people being uprooted into new homes and watching their country transform so radically in ten to fifteen years (interview, 10 December 2015).

Director Daniel Hui believes the gap has had profound effects beyond the industry, contributing to national uncertainty about Singapore's identity:

We haven't had that cultural continuum of seeing ourselves on screen and hearing people who talk like us. There's a huge disconnect which we're trying to grapple with.

This is why identity and authenticity are recurring themes in Singapore films now (interview, 2 February 2016).

### Revival Cinema

While Singapore had lost part of its cinematic heritage, it ultimately revived because of Singaporean's love of cinema. Singaporeans have ranked among the world's most avid cinemagoers over the last sixty years and still remain so (Millet, 2006, p. 13). In the late 1970s to the late 1980s, although the industry was dead, amateur home movies and smaller films were produced in video clubs, which led to the revival of filmmaking in Singapore in the mid-1990s, spearheaded by directors such as Eric Khoo, Glen Goei, Jack Neo and others (Millet, 2006, p. 13). The revival was in fact the work of a totally new generation of filmmakers and producers, who revealed to the world a nation which had undergone dramatic transformation since its independence (Millet, 2006, p. 13).

The Singapore International Film Festival is credited as paving the way for the revival of film production in Singapore. Established in 1987, the festival influenced and gave exposure to the next generation of filmmakers in Singapore. Government strategies to upgrade its services sector in an economy that could no longer compete with low-wage and low-cost economies in the region also assisted with the revival (Tan, 2010, p. 152). In 1990, as part of the plan to make Singapore a global hub for the arts, the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts pushed for Singapore to become a regional hub for international film production and distribution, establishing state-of-the-art media facilities (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 131; Tan et al, 2003). Filmmaking and related media studies programmes at local tertiary institutions also flourished and students were supported to study filmmaking overseas (Tan et al, 2003). The Government also encouraged investment in film, offering attractive tax break packages to joint capital ventures, attracting film and media entrepreneurs seeking production opportunities, co-production deals and post-production facilities (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 132; Tan et al, 2003). Meanwhile stringent film censorship rules were 'liberalised', resulting in an age-based film classification system in 1991, which allowed for more product variety and led to the mushrooming of cineplexes, showing mostly overseas films (Tan et al, 2003).

For Film Academic Edna Lim, the revival films are the beginning of Singapore's national cinema:

The golden era reflected a Malayan sensibility – Singapore was not fully formed then – whereas the films of the 1990s depict a Singapore we can recognise as *Singapore*. The films of the golden age now seem quite foreign (interview, 4 December 2015).

Yet while being reflective of the present, revival films have been criticised for forgetting the past. Sim (2011) argues that revival films tend to overlook colonialism:

The historicisation and study of our cinema must expand its ambition and scope. Singapore's history of governance and cultural identity formation did not begin in 1959<sup>11</sup>, just as its film production did not only commence in the 1990s. Colonialism's imprint remains on the nation's institutions, iconography and space (p. 367).

According to Sim, film historians should begin to address the totality of the country's past in order to comprehend the present and that, even as the country advances in the global economy, there is a need to be more mindful of colonialism's hold on the national imagination (2011, p. 367). For example, one of the themes of recent films is social alienation, signified by their use of urban landscapes which speaks to the current Government's policies, but it is also "related to a much earlier encounter, a prior subjugation" (Sim, 2011, p. 368). Sim argues that treating colonialism more seriously as an important part of Singapore's history, culture and consciousness would address its continuing influence over the national imagination, while also bridging the roughly 20-year interregnum between the two eras of film production. Such an approach would resist the impulse to treat the two film eras separately in spite of what they have in common (Sim, 2011, p. 360). A common trope between the films of the two eras is the discourse of the 'Everyman'. P. Ramlee made a name for himself playing such a character in golden age films; one who negotiates cultural life in the kampung and a rapidly modernising society. Today, the everyman is seen in Jack Neo's films, this time opposing the state and what it represents.

While the lack of colonial address may be a weakness of contemporary films, there are two main contentions to this. First, as mentioned, the two film periods represent very different versions of Singapore and the body of works have little in common, compounded by the long gap in between their respective production. There are some connections as touched on above

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<sup>11</sup> Singapore became fully self-governing in 1959.

(see also Lim, 2017; Teo, 2017a; Teo, 2017b; Alfian, 2012), but there is a dramatic difference in the representation of Singapore in the two eras because of changes in time and space. Thus, Alfian (2012) suggests that any “traces” of golden age cinema in revival cinema exist as palimpsest, where one history is written over another. A Malayan history, often disavowed in official narratives of the Singapore Story, lies latent under the surface of contemporary Singapore films (p. 36 – 37).

The second contention is if we are to consider history in its totality in Singapore cinema, then why stop at colonialism as Sim suggests? Why not include Singapore’s pre-colonial history? Filmmakers tend to make films based on what is familiar to them which is why many shun history. Director Sanif Olek believes Malay filmmakers are expected to replicate P. Ramlee’s films, yet his work was made before independence when Singapore was still part of Malaya. Today’s filmmakers were born and raised in post-independent Singapore, with no concept of what Singapore was like when it belonged to Malaya (interview, 29 October 2015).

In Anderson’s seminal formulation (1983), nationhood and national identity are dependent on ‘imagined communities’ and exist as a system of cultural signification, where history becomes an essential foundation for national narratives. However, when history is incomplete, ambiguous and manipulated according to the state’s preferences, it is unsurprising that filmmakers disregard history and make films based on what they know, especially if the history they know is also in question. In short, the murkiness of Singapore’s history is reflected in the inadequate or fractured recollection of national narratives in contemporary cinema (Ng, 2008, p. 2). The issues with history raise questions about the authenticity of Singapore cinema: what has been lost because of the long gap in cinema’s history? Does the broken link to the past and disregard of certain histories make contemporary cinema any less authentic? These questions suggest that Singapore cinema’s uneven history contributes to the perceived inauthenticity of contemporary cinema – the idea that contemporary films are not telling “the whole story”.

The fragmentary development of Singapore cinema is key to understanding the challenges faced by contemporary films in addressing nationhood, a sense of identity and a continued sense of place and history. There was no cinema production to capture or document the time the nation underwent a metamorphosis. Cinema could well have provided an unbroken sense of history, but without it, Singaporeans struggled with their sense of identity, one that was

undeveloped prior to independence and after which, became forged through artificial means as a political construct. On Singapore's tenuous relationship with its past, Slater (2012) writes:

By privileging progress and ceaseless forward momentum, [Singapore] has plastered over the bits and pieces of history that don't find fit in with the current decor. "History" is only permitted to make an appearance in the form of propaganda for the Government's milestones, or as water-coloured or sepia-tinted nostalgia for humbler, simpler times (p. 51 – 52).

Singapore's collective or national memory loss is inevitably tied up with the politics of the country's birth and development – the Singapore Story. Other stories and voices, which inevitably complicate or challenge the narrative, have been written out. What has been censored and ignored is forgotten (Slater, 2012, p. 52).

The next section will discuss how the Singapore Government maintains control through censorship and how filmmakers negotiate around it.

## **Censorship**

Any form of censorship retards the growth of a nation because it restricts the minds of its population; it clouds the creativity of its artists and filmmakers who are handicapped by not being allowed to broach certain topics unless they're willing to be jailed or fined, or exposed and isolated as criminals (Martyn See (Director/Editor), interview, 29 October 2015).

Tan (2008) maintains that Singapore's national psyche is marked by survival anxieties and sustained by a Government determined to overcome vulnerabilities and achieve success, but often at the cost of human autonomy, individual creativity, and higher-order freedoms (p. 1). A culture of fear, based on the idea of 'enemies' that threaten Singapore's stability and achievements in economic and social development, has been used to sustain Singapore's authoritarianism since independence (Tan, 2008, p. 3). 'Enemies' include 'nature', 'foreign aggressors', 'extremists' and 'terrorists', and 'economic competitors'. Nature is an enemy which has not endowed Singapore with resources such as land space and drinking water,

making survival almost impossible. The other enemies threaten Singapore's conservatism, multicultural harmony and economic success (Tan, 2008, p. 3 – 4).

To tackle these enemies, the PAP Government has since 1959 wielded increasingly sophisticated authoritarian powers that encroach into the most private spaces of Singaporeans' lives (Tan, 2008, p. 4). Through the Internal Security Act (Cap. 143), the Government is able to detain indefinitely and without recourse to trial anyone suspected of action that threatens Singapore's security and the maintenance of public order, thus crushing any political opposition (Tan, 2008, p. 4). Through the Sedition Act (Cap. 290), Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (Cap. 167A) and Societies Act (Cap. 311), the state reins in anyone who threatens the government and the justice system, the different racial and religious communities, and national interest in general (Tan, 2008, p. 4). These government instruments aimed at restricting freedom of speech are expansive and illusory (Khoo, 2015), suppressing any impulses towards social change.

Yet such an authoritarian approach is accepted by most Singaporeans, who are risk-averse, pragmatic, and materialistic, desiring only to live in the stability and affluence afforded to them by the PAP whose track record remains the best guarantee of a comfortable life (Tan, 2008, p. 4 – 5). As expressed by Director Chai Yee Wei:

We have been brought up with a top-down approach – we're the authority and you do not question, I'm the teacher and you're the student. In school it's like that and in the army, it's reinforced – I'm of a higher rank, you just do whatever I say. So people get attuned to that kind of mindset whereby whatever the authorities say, it must be right and so, we do not question. And if things are done in a certain way, there must be a reason. I might not know the reason, but I will trust it. With this kind of culture where we do not question, it runs against the vein of developing art (interview, 21 October 2015).

What then is the function of art, including film, in such a culture of fear? How does art survive, let alone thrive in such a culture? According to Khoo (2015), culture in Singapore is located at the intersection of governmentality (the regulation of citizens' thoughts and behaviours), politics (as a result of considerable state funding for the arts) and industry (culture as a commodity to be used in the service of national branding). An externally

projected image of Singapore potentially threatens the internal processes of governmentality and politics, and hence is what the PAP seeks most forcefully to control. Culture in Singapore is prevented from existing as creative critical discourse. Tan (2008) references Herbert Marcuse to describe Singapore as a one-dimensional society. In Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* thesis, capitalism and industrialisation created false needs, which integrated individuals into the existing system of production and consumption via the mass media and contemporary modes of thought. This results in a "one-dimensional" universe of thought and behaviour, crippling the ability for critical thinking and oppositional behaviour (Kellner, 1991, p. xi). Critical thinking could threaten Singapore's existing power structure, questioning the bases of the Government's absolute authority, and thus actively discouraged (Tan, 2008, p. 34). According to Tan:

Real critical thinking in art and popular culture constantly faces the serious threat of being neutered, absorbed into the system, and transformed into docile commodities that serve that system and recirculate in the economy as attractive products marginally (even artificially) differentiated through an anti-establishment chic" (2008, p. 260 – 261).

In such an environment, both filmmakers and audiences tend towards films that "don't make you think too much" (Sherman Ong, Artist/Director, 20 December 2015).

Since independence, censorship has been used to sustain the culture of fear and to control how artists work in Singapore. As Uhde and Uhde note, censorship operated as a form of 'thought control' used to ban media that could "put ideas into the heads" of the people (2010, p. 175). The censorship regime was instrumental in the broad social governance of Singapore, preventing any threat to Singapore's political and social stability which were foundational for strong economic growth (Chua, 1997, p. 131). Censorship also served a political function to shield the PAP from dissident voices, but given that censorship guidelines were positioned as a moral regulatory practice for public consumption, the more politicised reason for censorship was downplayed (Lee, 2010, p. 28). Singapore gradually liberalised as the Government sought to attract foreign capital to develop its domestic cultural industries and promote Singapore as a "global city". As censorship was relaxed somewhat, creativity re-emerged and local film production revived (Uhde & Uhde, 2010, p. 174). In 1991, film censorship was replaced with the more liberal system of film classification. Before this, films were simply



passed, passed with cuts, or banned (Khoo, 2015). Following the practice in Australia and the UK, classification has now become a more acceptable way of achieving ‘thought control’ than an outright ban (Tan, 2016, p. 232 – 233). As such, film classification, while appearing to be a liberalising of the system, is just a less overt form of censorship.

In Singapore, films for commercial release are classified under six different ratings: G (general); PG (parental guidance); PG13 (parental guidance advised for children below 13); NC16 (no children below 16); M18 (for mature audiences aged 18 years and above); and R21 (restricted to persons aged 21 and above) (Khoo, 2015). In addition, there is also the NAR (Not Allowed for All Ratings) rating. According to the Film Classification Guidelines, “in exceptional cases, a film may not be allowed for all ratings when the content of the film undermines national interest or erodes the moral fabric of society” (IMDA, 2016). The NAR rating will be applied to films that are “deemed to undermine public order, national security and/or stability” (IMDA, 2016). This includes films that denigrate any race or religion, are pornographic or obscene in nature, promote and normalise homosexuality, or contain gratuitous depictions of extreme violence or cruelty (IMDA, 2016).

Notably, Singapore has the widest rating scale and highest maximum allowable rating in the world as noted by various industry practitioners:

We have the most ratings...And R21 films shouldn't have any cuts. We're the only country on earth that has a 21 rating. Most countries – it ends at 18 (Eric Khoo (Director), interview, 2 December 2015).

What's considered adult in Singapore? It's 21...which is weird because we enlist in the army at 18, so it means we can kill someone but not watch bare breasts on screen (Alfian bin Sa'at (Poet/Playwright), interview, 7 January 2016).

In addition to being subject to this intensive ratings system, filmmakers and artists also have to work within the political ‘out-of-bound’ (OB) markers in Singapore. “OB markers” is a local euphemism for politically sensitive issues where discussion in any public forum is off-limits to Singaporeans (Uhde & Uhde, 2000, p. 122). These OB markers have never been clearly defined and do not exist as a formal document (Khoo, 2015; Uhde & Uhde, 2000, p. 122). The OB areas are race and religion, politics, and alternative lifestyles, which includes

homosexuality, bestiality, incest, drug use and so forth (Alfian bin Sa'at, interview, 7 January 2016). OB boundaries have not shifted despite occasions when they have been tested and their position became discernible (Khoo, 2015). Those who overstep the boundaries, unknowingly or inadvertently, risk official repercussion since these markers, though informal, are presumed to be implicitly understood by all Singaporeans (Uhde & Uhde, 2000, p. 122).

The effect of the OB markers is self-censorship and the censorship of others. Visual Artist/Art Writer Lucy Davis argues that censorship manufactures its own consent – “If you are told every day right through school that you are a conservative, immature and volatile populace, you might be inclined to believe it” (2004b, p. 298). Thus, the sustained use of coercive instruments is unnecessary since widespread knowledge of their existence alone is sufficient to generate a climate of fear in which Singaporeans will regulate their own behaviour and practice modes of self-censorship (Khoo, 2015). As Director Martyn See asserts, “No one is born politically apathetic. It’s because of fear that people become apathetic” (interview, 29 October 2015). So, neither the ordinary “man on the street” nor those in positions of power are likely to challenge the status quo. Middle-class technocrats and the intelligentsia employed by the state likely align their personal well-being with the fate of the incumbent Government, unwilling to oppose it in any fundamental way (Tan, 2008, p. 6).

The mainstream media operates clearly within this system of censorship, or self-censorship as Tan puts it (2008, p. 18). Government instruments used to control mainstream media include the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act 2002, which allows the Minister to grant and withdraw press licenses as deemed fit, and the Broadcasting Act 1995, which authorises IMDA<sup>12</sup> to censor all broadcast media, including internet sites, videos, computer games, music, and films (Khoo, 2015). Singapore ranks in the bottom 15% in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index (Freeman, Duffy & Xu, 2016, p. 4; Leyl, 2015). The Government’s control over the mainstream media is so pervasive that members of opposition parties are all but invisible in Singapore’s public sphere while PAP members feature regularly (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 135 – 136).

Recent changes to the Films Act have further expanded the censorship powers of IMDA officers. Currently, only a limited number of IMDA officers – a Censor, Deputy/Assistant

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<sup>12</sup> Info-communications Media Development Authority

Censor, or Inspector of Films – are empowered to enter premises without a warrant, and conduct search and seizure over unlawful films, such as obscene or “party political films” (films that make biased references to political persons or matters in Singapore). Following the changes, these powers now extend to any classification or licensing officer, who may enter property without a warrant when investigating breaches of the Films Act, which also include the distribution or public exhibition of films that have not been approved (Seow, 2017; Au-Yong & Seow, 2017). Filmmaker Kirsten Tan is gravely concerned about these developments: “In theory, with provisions like these, an IMDA officer could enter anyone’s home to seize a documentary you are making” (quoted in Au-Yong & Seow, 2017). None of Singapore’s neighbours except the dictatorships in impoverished developing-world economies have controls on the media like Singapore (Barr, 2016, p. 13). While the state has shaped Singaporeans’ political sensibilities and sensitivities, it cannot ensure it will achieve a state of unquestioned compliance. The policing of boundaries is never absolute but is subject to negotiation and re-interpretation by the very people whom the state seeks to regulate with its policy net (Tan et al, 2003). It has been through this constant negotiation that artists and media practitioners manage censorship in Singapore.

#### Filmmakers’ Negotiation of Censorship

Jack Neo is one filmmaker who has been most successful in pushing boundaries. In one of his most popular films, *I Not Stupid*, he critiqued official government policy and its stance on English, using subtle humour and pathos (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 137). The film, a social commentary centred on the elitist education system that places undue pressure on Singaporean children to achieve academically, also derides benevolent authoritarianism. The protagonist’s overbearing mother, Mrs Khoo, functions as an allegory for the PAP nanny state (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 137). Neo himself said in an interview, “Just as the mother wants to run her kids’ lives, the Singaporean Government has been slow to let its own children grow up” (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 137).

By Singaporean standards, *I Not Stupid* is an audacious film. While Singapore officialdom might have found the satire a little unpalatable, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong openly praised the movie soon after its release at his 2002 National Day Rally Speech (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 137). A television series and film sequel have since followed the film, and both the film and its sequel have been exported regionally, thus challenging the Government’s stance that media products not made in standard English or Mandarin have little or no

transnational currency (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 137 – 138). Furthermore, since the release of *I Not Stupid*, Singapore's Ministry of Education has discontinued the divisive streaming system for primary school students, perhaps in response to the unpopular education policy highlighted in the film (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 138).

Generally, Jack Neo's films are genre pictures conveying the moralising theme of the triumphant underdog (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 138). They mostly have an acerbic satirical edge and contain social and political criticism couched in – and likely, as a result, protected by – low-brow humour (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 138; Tan, 2008, p. 147). Tan (2004a) argues that Neo deliberately uses comedy not only to create a bond among Singaporean audiences, but also to disguise his political commentaries as harmless fun.

Notably, the humour and characteristic happy endings in fact perform the hegemonic work of renewing uncritical faith in the system, positioning Neo in the role of 'court jester', knowing where and when to draw the line, allowing those he mocks ample room to save face (Tan, 2008, p. 260; Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 138). This particular 'win-win' situation, together with the fact that Neo is the most bankable media personality in Singapore, endears him to the state and powers that be (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 138). Furthermore, although *I Not Stupid* appears to be critical of the Government's pro-foreign talent policies and Singaporeans' political apathy, the film nevertheless continues to buy into – and in fact reinforces – the rooted belief in capitalist meritocracy, the prospects of self-improvement, and personal responsibility for success or failure (Tan, 2008, p. 149 – 150). Neo himself asserts that his "movies have a very positive message, no matter what. At the end of the day, they're not meant to subvert the social order" (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 10 August 2004).

Given his reputation for making films for the social good, Neo has been able for the most part to evade the heavy hand of censorship. Other filmmakers, however, have not been so fortunate. Royston Tan's *15*, a docu-drama about drug culture and real-life delinquent gangsters, gained notoriety both locally and internationally when the police labelled it "a threat to national security". At first, the censors banned the film, relenting only after Tan agreed to make certain prescribed cuts. Even then, the Restricted (Artist) (R(A)) rating (which has since been replaced by the R21 rating) ensured that the film would not be available for retail distribution and public broadcasting. Tan retaliated with a short called *Cut*, a musical film featuring a cast of 180, including well known personalities from Singapore's creative

community. Ironically, the film could not be censored as it did not contain any nudity, rude language, or any other objectionable content, but it made a mockery of the censors and the classification system (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 139).

Other filmmakers have reacted more subtly in tackling censorship. Documentary-maker Tan Pin Pin uses the notion of “shadow dance” to explain how local filmmakers can criticise without actually naming the object of critique; saying something without actually saying it (Tan & Fernando, 2006, p. 98). Her film, *Singapore GaGa*, an ode to the quirkiness of the Singaporean aural landscape, uses such a shadow dance. In the film, Tan seeks traces of a cultural identity other than the state’s official version using subtlety and humour to explore topics disapproved of by the Government (Tan & Fernando, 2006, p. 98). The film features buskers, street vendors, avant-garde musicians, Chinese dialect newsreaders and other characters in non-mainstream vocations who could be considered outsiders that go against convention, hence signifying a resistance to the system. Generally, Singapore’s arts practitioners have responded to censorship by using “pragmatic” strategies, through a combination of negotiation and, where possible, strategic positioning. Crying “censorship” is usually a last resort, since a rushed or pointed accusation made publicly can polarise an otherwise dynamic situation, leading to a hardening of positions on all sides (Rae, 2011, p. 119). However, pragmatic strategies have resulted in only limited and minor victories, since it is regarded as oppositional or negative to criticise the Government (Khoo, 2015).

For the filmmakers I interviewed, censorship has had negative and positive effects. Director Wee Li Lin notes on the former:

Censorship is an issue because it’s always at the back of our minds. Even if I say it doesn’t affect my films, subconsciously, it’s always there like a gridlock. On the other hand, it can make us want to do work that is intentionally countering that censorship, which is also no good...Doing things for shock value and being anti-establishment just for the sake of it (interview, 16 December 2015).

Director Kan Lumé believes that censorship can be positive, regarding it as “a frenemy...because you can’t live with it, but you can’t live without it”. Censorship “forces us to work smarter, to clarify what we’re doing and why we’re doing it”, not to over-indulge because of having too much freedom (interview, 9 January 2016).

Filmmakers also explained how they work around censorship. Director Chai Yee Wei's approach is to shoot whatever he wants, but to remain open to censorship. He does this by having a director's cut which he 'adjusts' according to target audiences. He explains:

Because I also feel sorry for my producers who cannot mass market the films if they have higher [classification] ratings. They won't be able to make their money back and they do have to invest a lot of money to let you do what you want to do, so the responsibility goes both ways (interview, 21 October 2015).

Artist/Director Sherman Ong works within the OB markers, "but the films are more layered. The layeredness goes beyond the OB markers" (interview, 20 December 2015). Director Boo Junfeng also works within the system. He explains:

The way I address the issues I'm concerned about – I tend not make them too polemical, not because of censorship. It's because personally, if I watch something, I would rather not hear an angry voice. Maybe because of this, the authorities feel there are angrier voices elsewhere they need to respond to, and so I have not had a film banned...yet (interview, 25 November 2015).

Censorship is part of Singapore's cinematic identity. Director/Editor Martyn See sums it up: Singapore's national identity "is a culture of self-censorship. It's endemic in the Singapore culture" (interview, 29 October 2015).

State regulation in Singapore clearly restricts the means of producing and consuming the arts amongst its citizenry (Zubillaga-Pow, 2015, p. 6). The latter is controlled through classification, censorship and the issuing of exhibition licenses, and the former, through state funding, which in turn encourages self-censorship. Ironically, the Singapore Film Commission (SFC), in charge of public funding for films, falls under the purview of IMDA, which also houses the Board of Film Censors, responsible for film classification. The implication here is filmmakers are encouraged to self-censor if they require state funding. Director Boo Junfeng explains that alternatively applying for foreign investment does not help, as such investors expect filmmakers to raise local funding first, given Singapore's reputation as a wealthy country. As he puts it:

How does it look if we apply for foreign funding without local backing? It's a delicate balance filmmakers need to strike between making the best possible film they can make without it being compromised (interview, 25 November 2015).

Throughout the funding application process, scripts and key production documents have to be vetted by SFC and given final approval before funding is granted. The filmmakers I interviewed all agreed that the funding process is arbitrary and highly subjective. In fact, IMDA outsources the funding decision-making process, which frees them of any accountability on the matter. Director Kan Lumé shares his experience when he applied for the New Talent Feature Grant, which supports film directors in producing their first feature film meant for theatrical release, festivals or broadcast. According to Lumé, there was enough funding for ten films, but only two were selected. One of the films that did not get selected – *Unlucky Plaza* – was produced independently and has since gone on to win awards at overseas festivals and has secured an international release (interview, 9 January 2016). Given the uncertainty of government support, most filmmakers try to work outside the system and not depend on state funding as much as possible (often to their own detriment and that of the industry). The Government continues to maintain, however, that it has provided considerable and continuous support to the film community.

When I asked Kenneth Tan, IMDA's Assistant Chief Executive, on the matter, he responded:

If you do take public funding, the understanding is that the local community benefits and that the funded work does not criticise the funding body, because which funding body would then want to support such filmmakers?...If I were invited to a dinner and I know the family doesn't eat a certain type of food, I wouldn't knowingly bring that food to the dinner (interview, 29 December 2015).

Unsurprisingly, the relationship between arts practitioners and the Government is one of courteous, mutual distrust (Chong, 2011). The Government knows that the arts contribute to making the country economically vibrant but does not necessarily approve of arts practitioners' methods. The arts community benefits from the Government's support but resents any artistic interference or censorship. Their interests do not always overlap (Freeman, Duffy & Xu, 2016, p. 3).

While the transition from censorship to classification signalled a move towards cultural liberalisation, there have been regressive moments of cultural repression (Tan, 2016, p. 233). The degree of liberalisation in fact is much debated. Director Kelvin Tong feels that censorship has loosened. He notes that people generally do not want to consume media that exist on the extreme margins, but what exists there today can very well be more mainstream in the near future, so societies do liberalise over time (interview, 28 December 2015). For other filmmakers, the situation with censorship is “two steps forward, one step back”. As Director Sun Koh explains:

Censorship has improved with the superficial things, for example, censoring swear words, but there is still censorship on substance, which is worse...So have we improved? Have we regressed? The nature of such things with the insecurity of every entity in power, it depends on which spot you hit...So it shifts and the shift is not always progress (interview, 12 January 2016).

This view is supported by Director Boo Junfeng who asserts that the censorship system needs to be transparent and censorship not arbitrarily applied. He notes that there are underhanded ways in which censorship is imposed. As filmmakers become more sophisticated in working around censorship, so too have censors become more savvy (interview, 25 November 2015). As Director Daniel Hui explains, today, less pressure is applied on filmmakers because the authorities know filmmakers tend to be vocal and will talk to the press, which reflects badly on the country. Rather, pressure is applied on institutions and programmers to avoid programming films that deal with sensitive subjects, thus discouraging films from being shown in the first place. Zimmerman (2000) states that censorship no longer focuses on the artistic merits of creative works, but rather on the infrastructures that exhibit them, targeting schools, film festivals, galleries and museums (p. 32). For Hui, this makes censorship worse than before, more insidious, because it is invisible to the public (interview, 2 February 2016).

While censorship may have appeared to have loosened, in fact, as the filmmakers suggest above, it has just taken on a different face. The authoritarian mode of cultural repression persists especially with the outright banning of films and other extreme measures of restriction.



## Banning of Films

While Singapore is not the only country in the world to have strict censorship guidelines, the nation has made a particular practice of banning films made by Singaporeans about Singapore (Khoo, 2015). Some of the films that have been banned include Tan Pin Pin's *Lurve Me Now* (1998), Royston Tan's *15* (2003) (the film was eventually given an R (A) rating after 27 cuts were made to it), Loo Zi-han and Kan Lumé's *Solos* (2007), and Ken Kwek's *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues* (2012), although this last film was reclassified R21 after it was re-edited (Khoo, 2015). These fiction films were banned because they crossed the OB markers on alternative lifestyles (sexual references, gangsterism, homosexuality) and race. Additionally, several documentaries by Martyn See have been banned for being party political films, including *Singapore Rebel* (2004), which has since be reclassified as M18, *Zahari's 17 years* (2006), and *Dr Lim Hock Siew* (2010) (Khoo, 2015). Ironically, the makers of these banned films have been and continue to be commissioned by the state to produce national projects or sell the Singapore brand name in other ways. Royston Tan and Tan Pin Pin were both recently involved in *7 Letters*, a film supported by IMDA to celebrate SG50<sup>13</sup>. Ken Kwek, Kan Lumé and Loo Zi-han continue to fly the Singapore flag overseas with their internationally acclaimed films. Despite making politically sensitive films on the side, Martyn See works on 'Singapore-friendly' films and television programmes every day in his job "as one of the most skilled editors in Singapore" (Kobayashi, 2012, p. 179).

Martyn See's experience, in particular, has been significant in pushing censorship boundaries. Over the years, political opponents have faced harassment, been sued for defamation, bankrupted and even jailed, with some having to resort to permanent self-exile (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 134 – 135). While most filmmakers are quick to deny that their work is, or can be read as, political, Martyn See works to make state repression visible through his films. In 2004, his film, *Singapore Rebel*, about opposition leader and Singapore Democratic Party chief Dr Chee Soo Juan, was banned for being biased and partisan and thus a party political film (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 135). See was called in for questioning by the police and asked to surrender his video camera and any unused footage for the documentary. He was under police investigation for fifteen months between 2005 and 2006, but ultimately was not charged (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 135; Khoo, 2015). See has maintained firmly that his film is about Dr Chee, the private citizen and thus, non-partisan (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 135).

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<sup>13</sup> Singapore's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence

In 2009, See resubmitted his film to the censors, following the broadcast of a television show on the PAP's Members of Parliament produced by the national broadcaster. See's resubmission on this basis led to a rethinking of what makes political content in films. Consequently, the Films Act was amended in 2009 to allow party political films which are deemed factual and objective, and do not dramatise or present a distorted view of politics in Singapore (Tan, 2016, p. 232; Khoo, 2015). Following this amendment, the ban on *Singapore Rebel* was lifted. While this outcome points to "a more relaxed political space" (Teo, 2009), the amendments to the Film Act actually strengthened restrictions on dramatised political productions (Gomes, 2015, p. 117). With such unsteady progress, filmmakers like See continue to fight, pushing OB markers through his political films. He maintains:

As long as the topic of political sensitivity is not talked about through the medium of film or any form of art, that retards our culture, the arts scene and industry in general...As a filmmaker, I'm not in the position to change [censorship] laws, but I am in the position to change minds, to empower other filmmakers to take a more courageous stand on the subject matters of their films. This, I can do in a very small part (interview, 29 October 2015).

The most recent film ban that gained much public attention is Tan Pin Pin's *To Singapore, With Love* (2013). Tan's film was banned in 2014 in an ironic turn of events, several months after being commissioned for *7 Letters*. IMDA took issue with what it viewed as the documentary's one-sided portrayal of Singapore's political exiles as innocent victims when, according to the Singapore Story, they had been members of the outlawed Communist Party of Malaya (Tan, 2016, p. 232). IMDA classified the film as NAR, describing it as distorted, untruthful and a threat to national security (Tan, 2016, p. 232). The ban was not outright, given the film is not considered a party political film. But the NAR rating prohibits the film from being screened theatrically, broadcasted on television and being distributed (Khoo, 2015).

The claim that Tan's film could undermine national security might seem disproportionate, but it bears the hallmarks of Singapore's "culture of excess", where manifestations of contemporary national anxieties have been nurtured, justifying the need for extreme measures to maintain social control (Tan, 2016, p. 242; Yao, 2007). Tan (2016) states that by banning the film, the Government showed that it operates on the outmoded principle of governing by

imposing ignorance, rather than promoting open discussion where “truth” may emerge (p. 242). Tan Pin Pin herself concluded:

The whole event clarified for me that we do not own our history. Films are banned or disappear, archives even those relating to events that happened more than fifty years ago are out of bounds, all to protect the official version of our history (quoted in Brenez, 2016, p. 4).

The film ban backfired through the ‘forbidden fruit effect’, prompting Singaporeans to travel overseas to various locations to watch the film in an act of civil disobedience. Various educational institutions in Singapore also screened it, taking advantage of the loopholes in the classification system to show the film for “educational purposes” (Tan, 2016, p. 242). The filmmaker also used these loopholes to encourage mass private screenings in people’s homes. While these covert means gave the film considerable attention, Tan would have preferred the film be allowed a broad public screening. She states, “I was hoping that the film would open up a national conversation to allow us to understand ourselves as a nation better” (quoted in Brenez, 2016, p. 3).

The ban on Tan’s film is just one in a series that solidified 2014 as the “year of bans and boycotts” (Oon, 2014). In July that year, the National Library Board sought to remove and pulp three children’s books featuring same-sex parents and other alternative family configurations from the National Library of Singapore. The decision was later reconsidered, with two of the books being moved to the adult section of the library instead of being destroyed. In March 2015, the infamous Amos Yee case emerged. A few days after founding father Lee Kuan Yew’s death, a 16-year-old Singaporean, Amos Yee, uploaded an 8-minute video on YouTube entitled *Lee Kwan Yew is Finally Dead!*, lambasting the former Prime Minister and making disparaging remarks about Christianity. Yee was arrested, charged and served 53 days in remand (Chelvan, 2015). The case attracted much public interest and divided the nation over the issue of freedom of speech. Months later when the case died down, IMDA still felt compelled to make the producers of a parody show, *Chestnuts 50: The UnbelYeevable Jubilee Edition*, remove around 40 minutes of a sketch inspired by Amos Yee or risk losing their arts entertainment license just hours before the opening performance (Tan, 2016, p. 246). Later in May 2015, Singapore’s National Arts Council revoked an S\$8000 publication grant awarded to comics artist Sonny Liew, because his graphic novel, *The Art of*

*Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, was deemed to contain “sensitive content”. The graphic novel features Lee Kuan Yew and other political figures in its satirical recounting of sixty years of Singapore’s history (Yong, 2015). The graphic novel has since gone on to win three awards including Best Writer/Artist at the Eisner Awards 2017, the “Oscars” of the comics industry, making Sonny Liew the first Singaporean to have such an achievement (Martin, 2017).

In the age of the internet and mediatisation, such reactive and extreme acts of censorship seem futile, yet the Government persists, making its presence felt through the banning of cultural artifacts (Oon, 2014). As Martyn See (2015) comments:

The Government knows that it cannot stop people from uploading banned films on the internet, so why ban films? It persists in banning films because the ban does create a culture of fear in the filmmaking community. It has a deterrent effect and it works (interview, 29 October 2015).

Indeed, the culture of fear is so prevalent that many filmmakers sacrifice authentic storytelling to remain on the good side of the censors. An example is the state-funded SG50 film *1965* (2015). The film, a retelling of the Singapore Story, delivered the propagandistic message that the fate of all Singaporeans was bound up with the steadfast leadership of Lee Kuan Yew (Tan, 2016, p. 244 – 245). Author Neil Humphreys explains why the true version of 1965 will never be seen on screen:

An authentic HBO-type interpretation of 1965 would be spectacular, but you’d have to look at the racism, the political intrigue, the backdoor deals between the PAP and the communists, the conflict between Singapore and Malaysia and all of it. It will never get made. It should get made and it would be spectacular, but it will never get made because of the OB markers (interview, 19 January 2016).

How filmmakers work around censorship in Singapore shows how they negotiate its political identity on screen. Hegemonic works like *1965* and Jack Neo’s films address Singapore’s political identity by positive identification with the Government while Martyn See, Tan Pin Pin and other independent filmmakers are more critical of the state, whether directly or indirectly. The next section will explore how filmmakers negotiate Singapore’s cultural identity given the incorporation of multiracialism.

## **Multiracialism on Screen**

The history of Singapore cinema and censorship have shaped Singapore's moving image culture, but the incorporation of Multiracialism, which has compounded the problem of race and language in Singapore cinema have had greater impact still. This section will discuss the racialisation of Singapore cinema in terms of the racial hegemony and lack of minority representation. It will also explore the cultural, economic, policy-related and other factors that have resulted in the language issues in Singapore cinema.

Given the OB marker on race and religion, race-related content is rarely seen on television and in films, which is peculiar for a multicultural country so steeped in the notion of race as basis for its identity. It is only in the last few years that television has started to produce telemovies addressing race matters, according to TV/Film Director T. T. Dhavamanni, who states, "With TV, multiracialism on screen is only two years old. Before this, we had token representations" (interview, 12 January 2016). In 2016, Singapore's main English news channel, Channel NewsAsia, took an unprecedented look at racial prejudice and privilege in a ground-breaking documentary, *Regardless of Race*. The documentary was followed in 2017 with another focusing on religion, *Regardless of Religion*. While these documentaries were thought-provoking and a step in the right direction, they were produced by the national broadcaster and hosted by Janil Puthuchery, a member of the PAP and of Parliament. In short, the films were allowed because they were PAP-endorsed.

Aside from these works, multiracialism is generally not dealt with seriously in terms of content but presented superficially, and replicating official policy, is CMIO-based. Cinema takes its cue from television which has dedicated channels allocated to the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities. Vernacular channels exist to promote and propagate the use of Singapore's official languages (Alfian, 2016). Programmes on each of these channels are culturally and linguistically specific and therefore limited to a given community. For example, it is rare for Chinese viewers to watch the Indian channel. Subtitling can help to ease this issue and make programmes more cross-culturally appealing, but the use of subtitles is inconsistent. They are not always used and when they are, they should be in English since that is the unifying language, but this is not always the case. The two Mandarin channels are mostly subtitled in Mandarin (only one includes English subtitles), even though the programmes are in Mandarin. This may assist in the learning of Mandarin but it also

reinforces the racial hegemony since the other vernacular channels subtitle much less in their own languages. The Indian channel subtitles in English and sometimes Tamil. The use of English may be to cater to the other Indian minorities whose mother tongue is not Tamil. The Malay channel either subtitles in Malay, sometimes in English or does not subtitle at all. Whether this is a conscious effort to counter the racial hegemony promoted by the Chinese channels, the fact remains that Malay is the national language and one would assume this should be encouraged, which may explain why Malay subtitles are used for Malay programmes. The English channel, Channel 5, subtitles in Mandarin and Malay, leaving out Tamil. On the surface, the vernacular channels seem necessary to protect linguistic rights in a multicultural society, but they are effectively monolingual, with inconsistent subtitling, producing monoethnic and monocultural worlds (Alfian, 2016).

The Chinese, Malay and Indian channels being culturally specific, rarely, if at all, depict Singapore's multiracialism. Channel 5 is the only channel that is 'multiracial' and in English to cater to all ethnicities. Even then, Channel 5 programmes and films like *Army Daze* and *One Leg Kicking* openly echo state-sanctioned multiculturalism, with themes of communal harmony and homogeneity reflecting a hegemonically-determined Singapore identity (Gomes, 2010). Even in multiracial portrayals on Channel 5, minorities are either playing a supportive role to their ethnic Chinese counterparts or assuming racially stereotypical roles (Tan, 2004b). Using ethnic stereotypes on screen helps Singaporeans cope with their anxieties about their ethnic Other (Gomes, 2015, p. 68 – 69). The typecasting of bi-racial actors as Chinese characters also helps to assuage anxieties, making them more identifiable and accessible to local audiences. For example, Singapore's most well-known TV personality, Gurmit Singh, is Indian-Chinese-Japanese but has made a career out of playing Ethnic Chinese characters in film and television (Gomes, 2015, p. 75). Further perpetuating the racial hegemony, the national broadcaster, Mediacorp, tends to privilege the Chinese community in nation-wide broadcasts. The Mediacorp New Year Countdown in 2013 heavily featured Chinese songs and actors making wishes in Mandarin. Alfian (2016) notes that those who grew up on a diet of the Chinese channels would have found nothing wrong with this, taking for granted that this is the norm in Singapore. He states that television, which could have been a civic instrument reinforcing the deep, horizontal comradeship Singaporeans have with fellow citizens of all stripes, is instead an accessory to social insulation, isolating everyone in their monocultural worlds.

Singapore cinema, like television, is divided along racial lines. The majority of films are Chinese-dominated, featuring predominantly Chinese actors speaking in Mandarin, peppered with dialects, English and Singlish. Due to the languages used, these films generally appeal mainly to Chinese Singaporeans. Comparatively few local films are purely in English, and almost none are in Malay or Tamil. Thus, Singapore's multiracialism is adapted in CMIO terms, productions fall along the racial framework, and the tendency to cater to the ethnic majority prevails.

To sum up, there are two main approaches in dealing with multiculturalism on screen. The first is depictions of state-endorsed multiculturalism, which appear inauthentic because they exist to fulfill the state's requirements rather than candidly reflecting multiculturalism on the ground, where hybridity and the sharing of cultures is the norm. The second approach is to avoid multicultural representation altogether, for both economic and cultural reasons. Marketing films which feature mixed ethnicities or languages is extremely challenging given the cultural homogeneity of film markets. English Literature Academic Kirpal Singh explains the cultural factor:

The characters on screen tend to revolve around the same racial group. Filmmakers avoid involving other races because it's too much hassle. There's a need to be culturally sensitive, so they prefer to play it safe (interview, 27 October 2015).

When the SG50 film *7 Letters*, an anthology by seven of Singapore's most illustrious filmmakers, was produced, questions were asked why no Malay filmmaker was approached as one of the seven, given this was a state-supported project intended to celebrate Singapore's multiculturalism. Six out of the seven directors are Chinese and the remaining one is Indian. I asked a Malay director, who shall remain anonymous as requested, to share his thoughts on the matter:

At first, I was unaffected that *7 Letters* did not involve Malay filmmakers. But when more people asked me about it, it made me think...how is this multicultural? But then again, it doesn't really matter because after all, we are all Singaporeans and the

essence of being Singaporean allows us to tell each other's stories, regardless of language and ethnicity (interview, 2015<sup>14</sup>).

While his answer was politically correct, he did share with me some information off the record which may suggest this is yet another case of Malay marginalisation. While the truth remains unknown, interestingly, even without any Malay directors involved in the project, four out of the seven films are Malay-driven or Malaysia-related stories.

My interviewees generally agreed that multicultural representation is an ideal but rarely translates into a realistic portrayal without seeming forced. In other words, the CMIO structure is so entrenched in the way Singaporeans regard each other that it has affected their ability to project the true multiculturalism or melting pot practices that exist in reality. As Producer Lau Chee Nien expresses, to represent all Singaporeans fairly is to be politically correct for the sake of being politically correct (interview, 21 December 2015).

### The Chinese and Racial Hegemony

Despite officially prescribed discourses of multiracialism, the media industry caters predominantly to the ethnic Chinese majority in terms of opportunities, programming and publicity. The two Chinese-language channels, Channel 8 and Channel U, possess wider local viewership and therefore greater advertising revenue and celebrity exposure (Liew et al, 2016, p. 3). Singaporean Chinese artists have career options in Chinese-language television as well as the Chinese-dominated local film industry. Comprising predominantly Singaporean Chinese filmmakers in both the independent and commercial sectors, national cinema in Singapore has been plugged into a profitable transnational Chinese market with more Sino-centric inclinations (Liew et al, 2016, p. 4). Consequently, the work opportunities for ethnic minorities have been limited in this racially segmented television market, with Malay and Indian artists generally confined to working respectively in Suria (the Malay channel) and Vasantham (the Indian channel). There is limited opportunity for performers to transcend their ethnicity, with exceptions like *Singapore Idol*, a reality television programme dominated by Malay-Muslim contestants (Liew et al, 2016, p. 4).

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<sup>14</sup> Exact date withheld to protect the interviewee's identity.



While the Chinese are the demographic majority in Singapore, they also often feel a sense of cultural erosion like the minority groups. Tan Pin Pin's films show us that there are ethnic Chinese who themselves feel displaced in Singapore's version of Chinese culture and identity; such displacement has occurred with the rise of English-educated elites and their domination of the Government, the dispersion of various Chinese dialects through the 'Speak Mandarin' campaign, and the perceived threat presented by the entry of a new mainland Chinese workforce (Gomes, 2015, p. 98). While many Singaporeans can trace their lineage to mainland China, they do not consider themselves emotionally connected to the mainland Chinese due to differences in political ideology between Singapore and China (Gomes, 2015, p. 99).

The disconnect between Singaporean Chinese and China is reflected in the ambivalent or negative attitudes that Singaporeans hold towards mainland Chinese migrants. Yet, it is this 'Us versus Them' mindset that has actually galvanised the Singaporean Chinese to be more united, even blurring the 'division' between English and Mandarin-speaking Chinese Singaporeans. The sense of the Chinese majority being more united is felt more keenly, and is reflected in Singapore cinema, which is becoming more Chinese than ever before with filmmakers pushing for more dialects to be allowed in their films. However, the dominance of Chinese cinema is also a result of economic and cultural factors. As expressed by Director Daniel Hui:

We have this rich cinema heritage which is very much overlooked. Cinema today is Chinese-dominated and is positioned in the Hong Kong–Taiwan–China continuum, which is erroneous because we are Southeast Asian. The rise of Chinese cinema is not caused by the demise of the Malay cinema, but the Chinese today have more economic power and so the cinema reflects this, neglecting the other races (interview, 2 February 2016).

#### Lack of Minority Representation

As mentioned, Channel 5 adheres to state-sanctioned multiculturalism. According to Writer/Director Goh Ming Siu, while film has no requirement to cast minority races, Channel 5 is mandated to have minority representation through a very strict ratio. He states that all Channel 5 programmes must feature Chinese, Malay and Indians. Eurasians, though, are not essential in the screen cultural make-up. Goh argues that because of market factors, minority

actors get very few roles, so they have to find other full-time jobs, which prevent them from taking up major roles. Thus, the majority of roles go to Chinese actors, perpetuating a cycle where minorities continue to be underrepresented. To add to the complication, Mediacorp has certain rules which worsen the situation. For example, to avoid negative portrayal, villains cannot be played by minority characters, which further deprives them of substantial roles (Goh Ming Siu, interview, 29 October 2015).

Like much of local television, Singapore cinema has been suffering from a lack of minority representation and has been Chinese-dominated since independence. Since then, only two Tamil films (Eric Khoo's *My Magic* and T. T. Dhavamanni's *Gurushetram – 24 Hours of Anger*) and two Malay feature films (Sanif Olek's *Sayang Disayang* and M. Raihan Halim's *Banting*) have been locally produced. The contemporary film landscape then differs sharply from that of the golden age, which had more multicultural production crews and drew diverse audiences. As described earlier, the golden age films often had Chinese producers, Indian directors and Malay actors. Spoken in Malay, these films appealed to all races because Malay was the common language at the time and the actors were regionally popular Malay stars. In contrast, none of the contemporary films use Malay. Instead the films now use mostly Mandarin, with some local Chinese dialects, English, Singlish and their permutations and combinations. While seemingly reflecting the country's multicultural character, this language mixture also suggests the dominance of Mandarin and to a lesser extent, English, and the marginal role Malay and Tamil play in contemporary Singapore society (Tan et al, 2003). Filmmaker Colin Goh commented that the revival films make Singapore on film look like "some amorphous Chinese city" prompting him to direct *Talking Cock – The Movie* (2002) with "a multiracial cast picked from the street" (Ho, 2002; Tan, 2001).

There are three possible reasons why cinema has become less 'multicultural' since the golden age: First, following the bilingual policy, the replacement of English with Malay as the common language did not follow through in cinema. This could be due to the fact that English is an inherited foreign language which has yet to find cultural identification in Singapore. The problem of English in Singapore cinema is further discussed below. Without a national language in its cinema, Singapore films have struggled to appeal across the different ethnicities. Second, the Asian values policy promoted Chinese language and culture over that of the other races, reinforcing the dominance of the Chinese in cinema. Third, the implementation of CMIO raised racial consciousness, but also emphasised racial differences

and reinforced racial boundaries. With the emphasis on difference rather than diversity, filmmakers generally prefer to work within their own ethnic circles due to cultural familiarity and also to avoid negotiating cultural sensitivities when working cross-culturally. The policies above also came at a time when Singapore cinema was heading towards oblivion. The revival cinema that emerged in the early 1990s, therefore, did not chart or reflect these changes in Singapore, but rather developed as a result of these changes. Director Zhao Danyao offers another reason: the filmmakers' resistance to being multiculturally representative is a rebellion against the Government's insistence on multiracial representation in the mass media (interview, 3 November 2015).

Only in recent years has local cinema become more inclusive. Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* tells the story of a Chinese family, but he has Indian actress, Jo Kukathas, in a dramatic role as a school principal (Alfian, 2016). Chen insists he is not making a special effort to be inclusive, rather his film reflects an authentic Singapore. In another of his films, set in Singapore in the 1970s, there is a scene with a 'sarong buaian', a traditional baby cloth hammock, using the sarong (cloth) commonly worn by men throughout Southeast and South Asia. While the story is a Chinese one, Chen used the sarong, a marker of Malay culture, not as a token representation of Malayness but because such cultural borrowing was his experience growing up in the 1970s and 1980s (interview, 23 November 2015). More recently, Director Boo Junfeng, while casting Malay leads in his film, *Apprentice*, grappled with the risk of producing a homegrown film whose main audience might have to depend on subtitles. Yet he took that risk, and the film (containing Malay and English) performed credibly at the local box office (Alfian, 2016).

Minority filmmakers, such as K. Rajagopal, Sanif Olek and Raihan Halim have paved the way in spotlighting minorities and encouraging more stories on these communities. Alfian (2016) notes that if Singapore were truly a multicultural society, there would be nothing remarkable about what these filmmakers have done. However, against "persistent blackfacing, slurs, invisibilities and humiliations, any recognition that minorities exist, that they are essentially Singaporean" is a move in the right direction. As Director Daniel Hui expresses:

You can't really cure cinema without curing real life. Our society in reality is racially segregated and the films reflect this reality. The solution is not with cinema, but to

change this racial segregation in society (interview, 2 February 2016).

### Lack of Minority Cinemas

Producing a wide range of local content and also airing regional films in their vernacular languages, the television channels, Suria and Vasantham, have provided the airspace for more meaningful representations and articulations for the Singaporean Malay and Indian communities respectively (Liew et al, 2016, p. 4). However, both channels, whose existence support a multicultural framework, are often reduced to monoculturalism.

While television does cater to the Malay community in a limited fashion, the same cannot be said for cinema. Despite once dominating Southeast Asian cinema during the golden age, Malay cinema is now almost non-existent in Singapore. Film Academic Edna Lim laments that much has been forgotten about the films and stars of the golden era; that this cinematic history is only known among the Malay community who still watch P. Ramlee films during Hari Raya<sup>15</sup> (interview, 4 December 2015).

Singapore's small domestic market and even smaller audience base for minority cinemas have resulted in the lack of Malay cinema. There seems little pressure to increase its output. Television seems to adequately meet the entertainment needs for the Malay community, so there is less demand for locally made Malay cinema. The community can also access Malay cinema from Malaysia and Indonesia, and Singapore Malay cinema cannot compete with these more dominant cinemas. Moreover, very few non-Malays watch Malay films, if any. As expressed by Director Sanif Olek:

Singapore films don't reflect the multiracial component. This is why I make films about my community. As a Singaporean, my films have a Singapore voice, but as a Malay Singaporean, I find it very hard to get the mainstream [Chinese] audience to watch my films, unless there is a mainstream [Chinese] cast (interview, 29 October 2015).

Additionally, my Malay interviewees point out that there is a conscious, but unspoken playing down of Malay culture which works to maintain Chinese racial hegemony. Malays

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<sup>15</sup> Hari Raya is otherwise known as Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan and celebrated by Muslims worldwide.

themselves ask whether films with ‘Malay issues’ are of interest to the larger society and given ‘Malay issues’ fall under the OB area of ‘Race’, whether such films would survive censorship (Badron bin Adnan and Farhana bte Ja'afar, interview, 26 December 2015). Thus, without a sizeable audience, local Malay cinema struggles to survive financially. Sanif Olek notes that unlike during the golden era, Malay filmmakers are not given funding or opportunities, and are only supported if the film is for charity or religious purposes (interview, 29 October 2015). Given these obstacles, Malay filmmakers are less inclined to make Malay films, despite knowing that having no Malay cinema is a cultural loss. As Editor Md Hakimi bin Jamil states: “It’s not about downplaying cultural identity, but it’s about re-educating people. You have to get the tribe in first, before making a change” (interview, 20 January 2016).

The market for Indian media, like the Malay one, is also very small given the size of the Indian population base, and its heterogeneity. Indian print and broadcast media in Singapore is predominantly in Tamil. The influx of non-Tamil-speaking Indian migrants in recent decades has made it a practical necessity to televise films and soap operas in Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada languages. As such, the local Indian community may be anxious to identify with Tamil consciousness. Hence, the allocation of weekday and weekend evening prime slots to local Tamil productions appears to reinforce the position of the official language (Liew et al, 2016, p. 11). From a global economic perspective, too, India has risen as an Asian superpower, so ties with India reinforce Singapore’s regional and global positioning, hence the desire to maintain a transnational connection through local Tamil television (Liew et al, 2016, p. 12).

The rise in Indian migrants and media in other Indian languages have not yet translated to a rise in locally made Indian cinema. The same challenges that plague Malay cinema apply to Indian cinema, namely a small and divided domestic market and the inability to compete with the ‘world giant’ film industry of India. As Director K. Rajagopal notes, “Indians in Singapore don’t even appreciate local Indian cinema. They compare the films to Indian cinema from India” (interview, 7 December 2015). My interviewees expressed two opposing positions on local Indian cinema. The first, from a cultural perspective, sees the importance of cultivating Indian filmmaking to promote an already marginalised community (K. Rajagopal, Director, 7 December 2015). The second comes from an economic perspective which argues that the community is too small to support Indian filmmaking. Those sharing this view regard

themselves as Singaporean rather than Indian filmmakers, preferring not to be limited to just producing Indian films and television programmes (T. T. Dhavamanni, TV/Film Director, 12 January 2016).

Like the other minorities, Eurasians are also rarely seen in Singapore films and television. When they do appear, it is either to fulfill the multicultural requirement or to represent some form of ‘otherness’. Gomes (2015) asserts that it is easier for Singapore cinema to make the Eurasian rather than any other ethnicity a gay character, seen for example with *Army Daze’s* Kenny Pereira (p. 81). Relegated to the “Others” category under CMIO, as the smallest minority group within the framework and hybridised, Eurasians are considered to be at the extreme end of otherness in Singapore. This might explain why it is easier to associate one form of Otherness (being Eurasian) with another (homosexuality).

Singapore cinema’s address of multiracialism can only cope within specific ethnic parameters where the complexities of ethnicities outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus are either circumvented or portrayed reductively or stereotypically. Simplistic and superficial portrayals of ethnic minorities are often dismissed as humour, thus maintaining a mirage of racial harmony and a peaceful status quo (Gomes, 2015, 82).

Given the economic challenges facing minority cinema, there is clearly a need for more government initiatives to support these cinemas (interviews: Juan Foo, 14 December 2015 & David Lee, 5 January 2016). However, under Singapore’s meritocracy, public film funding is disbursed based on merit requiring films to have wide audience appeal and the potential for investment recoupment. This continues to advantage films made by, and for, the Chinese community. The ethnic minorities thus continue to struggle to find a place in Singapore cinema.

### Racialisation of Singapore Cinema

Like Singapore society, Singapore cinema is racialised according to CMIO. Instead of Singapore cinema, we have Singapore-Chinese, Singapore-Malay and Singapore-Indian cinemas. The hyphenated identity has overtaken a single overarching national identity and race is used to differentiate the different cinemas. These cinemas cater to their respective ethnic groups and each ethnic group is not expected to patronise the films of other groups (Teo, 2017b, p 77 – 78). For Director K. Rajagopal, the hyphenated cinema will prevail

because Singaporeans are still distinctly separated by race and filmmakers will tell stories about the culture they know best. He maintains that Singapore cinema will only exist if there is “a good mix of races, languages and characters” in the films, but if a film is “80% Indian, then it’s an Indian film – A Singaporean-Indian film”. As such, he does not think there is such a thing as ‘Singapore cinema’ and questions whether such a cinema can ever be profitable (interview, 7 December 2015). Producer Lau Chee Nien (2015) takes an opposing view, disagreeing with the idea of hyphenated identities for Singapore cinema believing it should be all-inclusive and all-encompassing. He acknowledges that Singapore Chinese films generally do not include Malays or Indians because they are hard to market in Greater China, but he questions whether anyone has actually tried bringing multilingual films to these countries. Despite globalisation and transnational film circulation, global film markets are still relatively homogeneous. While Singapore likes to see itself as a multicultural role model in the world, it has kept to tried and tested formulas in film business and not pushed boundaries in marketing its multiculturalism, whether authentically represented or otherwise.

Linguistic differences in the population compound the racialisation of Singapore cinema. Singapore cinema in its current form may not present the full multicultural reality of Singapore, but as hyphenated ethnic-national cinemas, may sell better in different parts of the world. Singapore-Chinese cinema can be targeted in the Greater China market; Singapore-Malay cinema in the Malaysia-Indonesia market and Singapore-Indian cinema in the Greater India market. However, against these major competitors, where does Singapore cinema stand? How will it distinguish itself from its competitors? Ironically, Singapore cinema would need to leverage on its multiculturalism to differentiate itself from its competitors.

Singapore is unique because of its cultural and geographic positioning – as a Chinese country in a Malay region, which is multiracial because of a diasporic history. However, its uniqueness makes its cinema belong nowhere. Singapore cinema does not fit in the Chinese nor Malay nor Indian continua. Even if it is an English-speaking cinema, it will never fit with any Western continuum. Singapore cinema is quite literally in ‘no man’s land’ and culturally and economically, it will always struggle. The multiplicity of languages in Singapore further complicates the situation.

## Language on Screen

On the one hand, you can say it's wonderful that you have so many different races, nationalities and languages here, but on the other hand, you don't really have a language which is cohesive, which is actually bringing the country together (Glen Goei (Director), interview, 11 December 2015).

As this quote suggests, the absence of a common language denies Singapore cinema a cultural identity and more importantly, a sense of being unified as a body of work that is clearly defined as 'Singapore cinema'.

Despite the periodic inclusion of Chinese dialects and English, the emphasis on Chinese languages within cinema illustrates Singapore's racial hegemony. Furthermore, the use of outlawed Chinese dialects rather than today's official languages, Malay and Tamil, speaks to the continued marginalisation of these communities. However, for Director Kelvin Tong, the sound of Singapore cinema is very natural because it is impossible to make cinema fall along racial percentage lines. The fact that Singapore is multilingual is difficult for cinema because a film can only reach the specific language group the film is in (interview, 28 December 2015). As Producer Lau Chee Nien puts it, "we don't know how to translate this use of multiple languages into a commercial product yet" (interview, 21 December 2015).

Neither English nor Mandarin are Singaporeans' true mother tongues but are inherited languages made official by language policies. As expressed by my interviewees:

We speak English but we don't speak the best English. We speak Singlish which foreigners find hard to understand. So if you put that on film, it may turn off people. We speak Mandarin, but we don't speak the best Mandarin. The best Mandarin speakers are in China and Taiwan. Again, we will lose out...(Martyn See, Director, 29 October 2015).

Even the Chinese in our films is in proper Mandarin, but we don't speak in proper Mandarin...The average Singaporean relies on Mandarin with English words. That is why it actually feels less authentic when films are in good, proper Mandarin because we never had that. Authenticity lies in the language register of the films. Also, the



authorities have been quite schizophrenic in their language policies – it keeps changing – so the filmmakers who have gone through the education system are also schizophrenic as to what language they want to use (Sherman Ong, Artist/Director, 20 December 2015).

### English

Despite being the common language in Singapore, English in Singapore films is problematic both for local and international audiences due to cultural, economic, socio-cultural, and authenticity-related factors. Film Academic Edna Lim explains the cultural aspect:

Chinese can capture local flavour in a way that English somehow can't. It may have to do with the fact that we all speak English differently. We have mixed feelings towards English. On the one hand, we require our films or television in English to have English be spoken properly. But on the other hand, we're uncomfortable with that – we're more comfortable with Singlish but to see Singlish in its crude form represented on screen makes us cringe a little bit as well. Chinese, especially dialect, seems able to arrest something that's local, familiar and comfortable, and therefore, seems more authentic (interview, 4 December 2015).

Economically, English films are simply not financially viable in Singapore. Director Kelvin Tong points out that audiences have plenty of choice in terms of English-language films and most gravitate towards Hollywood films. In comparison, Chinese films have little competition, unless there is a Jack Neo film screening at the same time. Tong notes that there is also a pent-up demand for dialect films in the cinema since dialects are banned on television. Therefore because of market competition, Mandarin and dialect films will always do better than English films in Singapore (interview, 28 December 2015).

Tong's evaluation is proven by box office numbers. Singapore English films have not only been unprofitable, almost all have not even recouped on their production budgets, as is shown in the data comparing estimated production budgets with box office receipts: *The Teenage Textbook Movie* (1998, estimated budget S\$500,000; Singapore box office S\$680,000), *Chicken Rice War* (2000, S\$880,000; S\$400,000), *Gone Shopping* (2007, S\$650,000; S\$28,000), *The Leap Years* (2008, S\$3 million; S\$1 million); *Kallang Roar The Movie* (2008, S\$1 million; S\$93,000) and *The Blue Mansion* (2009, S\$2.8 million; S\$192,000) (Lui, 2014).

Since 2013, there have been only a handful of independent films or documentaries made in English. More recent films like *Ah Boys To Men 2* and *Ilo Ilo* incorporate a significant amount of English dialogue within a mostly Mandarin story (Lui, 2014).

There is also a socio-cultural reason why English films are not successful. As explained by Producer Juan Foo:

The majority of English-speaking audience don't identify themselves with Singapore films and culture. They're the toughest audience to please on all counts of media. They identify much more with Western than local media. They're very disdainful of and disconnected from local media. It's something we have to grapple with as a contemporary modern nation, because we're not used to seeing ourselves on screen. We have grown up with Western media and that's where our identification lies (interview, 14 December 2015).

Judging by box office numbers, it appears that while Singaporeans love movies from Hollywood or the UK, they do not want to see Singaporeans speaking the same language as these films. Melvin Ang, Executive Director of production company mm2, who has produced both English-language and Chinese-language films, believes that local audiences compare the production value of a film with others that use the same language. Local Chinese-language films are therefore judged against those from Taiwan and China, while local English-language films are compared with their Hollywood counterparts. As China and Taiwan producers tend to spend the same amount on a film as Singapore companies, Chinese-language films, with some notable exceptions, tend to be of the same standard in production values. However, there is a vast cost difference between Singapore films and those from Hollywood (Lui, 2014). Similarly, local films that try to graft a Hollywood formula into a Singapore context with an English-speaking cast also fail because they cannot compare to Hollywood movies which have become ingrained as the 'gold standard'. Local audiences would rather watch 'the real thing' than Hollywood wannabes.

Herein the authenticity factor comes into play. The use of English feels inauthentic to Asians not only because it is a foreign tongue within Asia, but because its proper usage is also in question since it is a foreign tongue. Westerners appear to have the same perceptions concerning the authenticity factor. According to industry veterans:

A lot of distributors and cinema-owners in Europe and America say they cannot sell Asian films in English because people don't get it. People will watch kungfu or wuxia films, but why would they watch Asian people speaking English? (Glen Goei (Director), interview, 11 December 2015).

To the West, any Asian film is an art film, so when a Chinese film goes to the West, it should be very Chinese, very cultural, very authentic for the Western audience to learn about Asian culture. It's not to see a Chinese speaking English (Chan Pui Yin (Producer), interview, 13 January 2016).

English-speaking audiences in the rest of the world seem to be more receptive to foreign films using their mother tongue (Eric Khoo (Director). Quoted in Lui, 2014).

Because of such cultural expectations, Glen Goei declares that he will “never make a Singapore film in English again” because most Singaporeans do not think of English as their mother tongue and Singapore English films can never compete with Hollywood films (interview, 11 December 2015). Other directors like Daniel Hui think that using economics as an excuse is a “cop out”. The authenticity factor explains why Singapore English films do not appeal overseas, but Singapore Chinese films are also a hard sell in Asia, mostly because of the competition from Greater China. Hui argues that in Greater China, Singapore Chinese films will have as much trouble selling because “they don't see us as part of their continuum” (interview, 2 February 2016).

Perhaps the case with Eric Khoo's film *Be With Me* can sum up the problem with English in Singapore cinema. In 2005, the film was disqualified from entering the Best Foreign Language Film category at the 2006 Academy Awards on the grounds that it contained “too much English”. An Academy spokesperson attempted to explain this decision with what was apparently obvious, that “English is not a foreign language” (BBC News, 2005). Such a declaration seems contradictory in an age of cultural migration, hybridity, diaspora and globalisation, but it indicates the continued ambivalence English holds in the making of a cultural identity (Chan, 2008, p. 97).

What then are the implications for post-colonial nations like Singapore whose first language is English and does this mean a Singapore film in English can never qualify for Best Foreign

Language Film at the Academy Awards? Ironically, Khoo's film is, in effect, mostly silent (Chan, 2008, p. 97). The film uses a mix of English, Hokkien and Mandarin, but contains less than three minutes of spoken dialogue. Academy members apparently used a stopwatch (Goldstein, 2006) and determined that English was the most used language out of the three minutes (Chan, 2008, p. 100 – 101). Singapore films in English still do not qualify for the Oscars, and Singapore films, with both cultural and linguistic complications, will continue to be disadvantaged as such. Writer Brian Hu expressed the problem perfectly: "...poor Singapore. The country has a hard-enough time already trying to settle on its official language(s) and now the Oscars come in and try to define it for them" (quoted in Hendrix, 2005).

### Singlish

Singlish plays a significant part in Singaporean cultural identity and national solidarity (Gomes, 2015, p. 150). Functioning as a unifying agent for Singaporeans who come from different cultural walks of life, it allows Singaporeans to identify with each other and to identify themselves as Singaporean. Singlish, however, is more than just a tool for unity. Rather it also serves as a form of resistance, an unconscious collective expression of civil disobedience against an autocratic government which disapproves of the patois (Gomes, 2015, p. 151, 172). Despite being markers of Singapore identity, Singlish is discouraged while Chinese dialects are disallowed in Singapore media. Both Singlish and dialects lay dormant from the 1960s until the mid-1990s, so local audiences were elated with their resurgence in revival cinema (Chan, 2008, p. 100). At the same time, the very presence of disowned languages in these films serves as an unwelcome reminder about the state's failure in language policing (Tan et al, 2003).

While all of the languages spoken in Singapore are imported, Singlish is the product of colonial Singapore, the fusion of English, Malay, Mandarin, Chinese dialects and other immigrant languages, including those used by Indian settlers. Over time, creolisation occurred and Singlish stabilised as an independent English creole, which the different races then picked up 'natively', making Singlish authentically Singaporean (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 136). The main reason for the official disapproval of Singlish is that it is incomprehensible to non-Singaporeans, thus its usage limits the expansion of the local film and television market into the rest of the world (Chan, 2008, p. 102; Tan, 2004b, p. 296). Yet, the use of Singlish in films allows for the linguistic diversity that underlies a collective Singaporean cultural

identity, rather than one defined as Chinese, Malay, or Indian (Chan, 2008, p. 100). As Siddique points out “it is Singlish, rather than Standard English, that functions as a cultural broker language that mediates between the different races” (2002, p. 165 – 166). Against cinemas of the world, too, Singlish distinguishes the Singapore film as something of ‘our own’ (Ho, 2007, p. 313). The decline of the standard of English in Singapore since the 1990s has been attributed to the Speak Mandarin campaign and the rise of Singlish. Ho (2007) attributes this rise to the effort made by Singaporeans to counter their anxiety with linguistic colonisation, to contend with the discomfort of speaking in a tongue which does not ‘belong’ to them (p. 313).

The Government largely blamed the media for the rise of Singlish and several popular television shows thus paid the price. *The Ra Ra Show* (1993) was a comedy skit and chat show in the style of *Saturday Night Live*. Although very popular, the show was short-lived and ended its run after only ten months, being deemed too liberal with its sexual innuendo and use of Singlish (Wee, 2013). *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* (1997 – 2007) is Singapore’s most successful and longest-running English-language sitcom to date (Chen, 2014). The show centres on iconic character, Phua Chu Kang, an eccentric contractor, and his dysfunctional family. Despite its immense popularity, the show was put under pressure by the Government to use proper English instead of Singlish although its usage defined the character and his humour. According to Director Wee Li Lin, who was an Assistant Director on the show, the authorities issued a mandate forbidding Phua Chu Kang to continue using Singlish. Changes to the script were made to have Phua Chu Kang learn proper English, which “killed the charm and magic of the series”. For Wee, this is just one example showing how Singaporeans “have a lot of hang-ups about Singlish especially on TV” which should be relooked at “because it’s a real shame that we are not expressing ourselves in Singlish or dialect on TV” (interview, 16 December 2015). Today, Singlish continues to exist in English television programmes, but to a lesser extent than what was used in the earlier shows. Also, the use of Singlish is balanced with the use of proper English. A good example is *The Noose* (2007 – 2016), a popular local news show parody, which features some news reporters who speak good English on air but Singlish off the air, as well as other characters speaking Singlish.

State guidelines for language use in film appears more relaxed than for television, but are also more arbitrary (Chan, 2008, p. 100). Many local films have been pushing boundaries using Singlish and dialects. However, the case of *Talking Cock – The Movie* (2002) is a stark

reminder of how a film can be ‘punished’ for overusing Singlish. The film satirises local current affairs and politics, highlighting the importance of supporting free speech in Singapore. Ironically, however, the film was slapped with an R(A) rating for excessive use of Singlish (“Talking cock” is Singlish for “talking nonsense”). Upon appeal, the film was later rated NC16, which is still disproportionately high for a film without sex scenes, violence or any other unsuitable content for young people (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 137).

Aside from dealing with the censors, filmmakers are hesitant to use Singlish in their films because of the uncertain relationship Singaporeans have with Singlish. As a patois, Singlish is often both a source of cultural pride and embarrassment, and so far, there appears to be no consistency in what the right amount of Singlish is – whether it works with the audience depends largely on its treatment and reception (Chan, 2008, p. 102). Furthermore, Singlish is situational, creative and constantly evolving, which accounts for its dynamism. To script and enact what is essentially spontaneous and organic poses the challenge of using Singlish in films (Ho, 2007, p. 323). Too often, the displays of Singlish speech on film exude pronounced awkwardness (Ho, 2007, p. 313). Ho suggests the awkwardness results from the uneasy reception of Singlish, the endemic self-consciousness of its delivery, and its exaggeration (as a kind of postcolonial overcompensation) in scripts beyond the levels of everyday Singlish. Looking at the largely naturalised usage of Mandarin and dialects in Singapore films, the burden of Singlish is perhaps a matter of overcoming a kind of self-consciousness that comes with the anxiety of excessively performing one’s identity (Ho, 2007, p. 323). As Artist/Director Sherman Ong explains:

We are still not comfortable with the depiction of Singlish in the cinematic landscape, but that’s what makes Singapore *Singapore*. There’s always this tendency to speak Singlish off camera, and then on camera, you speak proper English. So there’s this disjuncture, this separation, and so it’s not authentic, because the language register used is not real. It’s not what the ground is speaking. Some people do speak Queen’s English, but the majority speaks a kind of pigeon English, which is what’s authentic. We need to embrace that and embrace the fact that eventually, the Singapore film will need English subtitles even though the characters are speaking English – then that will be authentic and interesting (interview, 20 Dec 2015).

Currently, filmmakers seem to be taking the cue from television and either using less Singlish, less crude forms of Singlish or balancing it with proper English. Filmmakers are deeply aware of how difficult it is to get the amount and tone of Singlish just right on film, otherwise the films can appear inauthentic and lose local audiences. Filmmakers also know that if their films are in Singlish, they may not find audiences overseas and hence financial success. In trying to compromise, filmmakers try to retain authenticity by keeping a certain degree of Singlish, but moderating its usage to further a film's international appeal (Lui, 2014).

### Mandarin and Chinese Dialects

Emigrants from southern China who settled in the colony in the latter half of the 19th century brought Chinese dialects to Singapore (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 136). Believing that dialects would impede the country's economic prosperity and international competitiveness (Tan et al, 2003), the Government embarked on a campaign to promote Mandarin in 1979. In so doing, it sought to eradicate dialects from the public sphere, despite their being the mother tongues of the diasporic Chinese. Dialects are not allowed on television and only partially allowed in films. Actor/Director Alaric Tay expressed how this affects filmmakers:

How can we tell an authentically Singaporean story without using dialect when the character speaks dialect? Do we want him to speak English or Chinese simply because those are the policies in place for Singapore feature films or do we want to tell authentic Singaporean stories? (Interview, 19 October 2015).

In fact, the rules governing the use of dialects in films are vague and arbitrary. A quota is applied to all Chinese films (including those from overseas) screened in Singapore. According to the Singapore Film Society's Vice Chairman David Lee, there cannot be more than 70% of screen time spoken in Chinese dialect (interview, 5 January 2016). Yet, filmmakers understand the range to be between 30% and 50%. The quota is not stated explicitly anywhere. Lee acknowledges that the dialect quota is problematic for filmmakers, let alone how arbitrarily it is applied. He explains:

This is a big issue even for a filmmaker like Jack Neo because audiences love his movies because they can hear authentic dialects being spoken. He has to defend his integrity as a filmmaker, to be able to make the work he wants to make. Why does he have to correct a line because the quota has been exceeded? It's ridiculous...Nowhere

in the world has there been a restriction not just on language, but on your own language...We're not trying to challenge history or the current [political] status quo. We're not trying to start a revolution. We just want to have the right to include what we believe is part of our identity and that is still being spoken today (interview, 5 January 2016).

With the repression of dialects, the problem of English and the devaluing of Malay and Tamil, Mandarin has become the language of Singapore cinema. This has to do with economic reasons, fuelled by the influence of television. Singaporeans have grown up with imported Chinese-language television programmes mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan (dubbed in Mandarin for the Singapore audience) as well as locally made Mandarin programmes, which have a longer history than locally made English programmes. As such, today, Channel 8, the Mandarin channel, is the most popular channel. Film Academic Edna Lim explains that local Chinese films are offshoots of television and because these are successful, the trend of making Chinese films has continued (interview, 4 December 2015).

The problem of language will always dog Singapore cinema. All variations face challenges: English because of a lack of economic viability and a sense of authenticity; Singlish because it is difficult to get right on screen and because it is incomprehensible outside of Singapore; and Dialect, Malay and Tamil because they appeal only to their respective cultural communities. Mandarin suffers this too, but to a lesser extent by virtue of its larger audience base. Singlish and dialects face the added burden of censorship despite being regarded the most authentic languages in Singapore. The ethnicity and language issues in Singapore cinema show the challenges faced by filmmakers in addressing Singapore's cultural identity. By and large, a CMIO approach is adopted and there is little resistance to the state's projection of Singapore's cultural identity. Filmmakers attempting to reflect a more authentic multicultural reality that is true to life face cultural and economic obstacles. Such a reality should include the multiplicity and hybridity of languages in Singapore, yet this is not the case given Singapore's Chinese-dominated cinema. The language issue encapsulates the question of authenticity in Singapore films: What does it say about Singapore's identity when something as integral to identity as language is contested in Singapore cinema? The next chapter will reflect on how the challenges discussed here contribute to the problem of authenticity in Singapore films.



## *Chapter 5*

### *Identity Construction in Singapore Cinema: Authenticity in Singapore Films*

As a continuation of the last chapter, this chapter will explore how Singapore films strive to be ‘authentically Singaporean’ given the various challenges to authentic portrayal. As Singapore cinema seeks to be both national and transnational, the question of authenticity in Singapore films is paramount yet problematic.

With a broken link to the past, ongoing censorship and without consensus over the language of Singapore cinema and no clear cultural identity, how can Singapore films be authentic? In addressing my third research question on how Singapore films strive to be ‘authentically Singaporean’, I return to the notion of authenticity. The term is heavily contested. Just as Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ thesis shows that nations are not any the less for the revelations that they are imagined (Anderson, 2006), authenticity also retains its sociopolitical efficacy even though we know it is constructed (Yang, 2014, p. 415 – 416). Lindholm (2008) and Friedman (1994) argue that the fact that national collectives are constructed does not make them any less real to those whose identity is tied to their belonging to such a collective. While authenticity is negotiable and identity itself is in constant construction, identity when defined by a national collective is not negotiable and is regarded as authentic. Singapore’s identity is forged out of Singaporeans’ sense of belonging, a result of a political identity constructed by the Government as well as a cultural identity that has mostly evolved organically from immigration and integration. Both the political and cultural identity of Singapore can be considered ‘authentic’ because both define how Singaporeans live. Yet, the challenges of negotiating these identities on screen explain why the production of an authentic Singapore national cinema seems impossible.

As discussed in the last chapter, the difficulty in presenting multiracialism on screen and the multiplicity of languages have made it exceedingly hard for filmmakers to strive for authenticity in their films. Furthermore, the break in Singapore’s cinematic history and the lack of continuity in cinema tradition renders contemporary cinema incomplete, contributing also to its perceived inauthenticity. Other countries with long cinematic histories celebrate cinematic tradition and continuity by referencing past films. Singapore cinema has not been able to do this given its lost history. The disregard for Singapore’s history or the hegemonic

treatment of it reinforces the lack of authenticity in contemporary films.

Censorship is another hindrance to authentic representation on screen. How can Singapore films be authentic if the OB markers prevent them from properly addressing the ‘national’ or the notion of Singapore identity? Most of the components of identity (identity constituting gender, ethnicity, religion, language, social class, sexuality, politics and economics) are considered to be OB areas. Vannini and Williams (2009) describe authenticity as an accepted ideal. For Singapore identity and culture, this is understood as its multicultural society, a hybridisation of languages in the form of Singlish, and its rule by a soft authoritarian government, which showcases the positive and hides the negative aspects of the country. Films that work within the OB markers will not reflect any of this lived reality honestly or accurately, and films that go beyond the OB markers in providing a more truthful representation risk getting censored and even banned. Either way, portraying an authentic Singapore is problematic. As Director Zhao Danyao puts it:

*15* was banned. Other films by Tan Pin Pin are also banned. So if you ask me if Singapore films are reflecting society, they are, but audiences don’t get to see them...So our local filmmakers are finding the topics they want to touch on and they are reflecting the Singapore society or identity in their films, but it’s just the approach – do we need to be that harsh? I don’t think it’s necessary because nobody likes a slap, but everybody likes a frank talk (interview, 3 November 2015).

However, even “frank talk” is not easily achieved in such a restrictive society where the OB boundaries are not clearly defined. Given the OB markers, multiculturalism has been very difficult to present authentically. It is either depicted as politically correct or completely absent, favouring a culturally exclusive representation of one ethnicity or another. Depictions falling in the middle of these two extremes are rare, although they are growing, indicating a move towards a more realistic, authentic reflection of Singapore society.

Given the above challenges, should filmmakers continue to pursue authenticity in their work? Film Academic Edna Lim argues that the quest for authenticity is futile:

What may be authentic to the filmmaker may be inauthentic to others. So it’s more important to look at what’s being constructed and performed than what’s being

reflected. Because with reflections, we assume that there's something stable to reflect, but this is not the case (interview, 4 December 2015).

Lim is referencing Judith Butler's concept of identity as a performance, as 'fictional' products of 'regimes of power/knowledge' or 'power/discourse' (Butler, 1990, p. xi). Identities do not pre-exist these regimes but are performative products of them (Jagger, 2008, p. 17). Thus, gender is a kind of enforced cultural performance that is performative, producing the illusion of having an inner core. Gender identity then becomes a cultural effect, a product of particular signifying practices (Jagger, 2008, p. 20 – 21). Although Butler refers to gender, her theories can be applied to national identity which can also be seen as performative, an act, which is not to be confused with the notion of performance in the theatrical sense. National identity is an act that involves 'sustained social performances', the repetition of socially established meanings. National identity is performed in Singapore through the daily reciting of the national pledge in schools and the annual staging of the national day parade, the ritualised repetitions of which produce the illusion of stable fixed identity. This recalls Hobsbawm's and Ranger's (1983) concept of the "invention of traditions" where the repetition of such social performances builds and becomes tradition.

If identity is a construction and a performance, so too are films, which interpret these performances and re-perform them in the pursuit of identity construction. Authenticity thus finds importance in these re-performances because in most cases, particularly for narrative, real-life based stories, the filmmakers' end goal is the construction of an identity that is perceived as authentic, that seems real to those who are part of that identity. Authenticity is an ungraspable ideal, but because it is an ideal, filmmakers will aspire to a sense of authenticity because this is what engages and moves audiences, especially if they identify with the filmmaker's portrayal. Given the challenges to authentic address on screen, how do Singapore filmmakers find authenticity in their films? For Director Anthony Chen, authenticity lies in the filmmakers being true to themselves and what they know. In his words:

My process is about starting from inside and going out. It's about looking at the characters and situations and finding the emotions. When you're authentic about these interactions, everything else falls into place. Although *Ilo Ilo* is such an issue-based film, I didn't start with the issues. I started with the story and the issues came in later. Cinema is not the right medium to pass judgment over certain issues, it shouldn't be

moralistic. Cinema is a great medium to question the big problems of life, but I'm not sure it's the right medium to give you answers (interview, 23 November 2015).

Despite the filmmakers' efforts, they face a highly critical local audience. As Director Daniel Hui expresses:

Americans love their own films, even if not all American films resonate with them. Why is this not the case for Singaporeans? Why is our threshold for authenticity so impossibly high such that no Singapore film can resonate with Singaporeans? (Interview, 2 February 2016).

Hui's point comes across when considering the negative reaction Singaporeans had towards newly released Hollywood film *Crazy Rich Asians* (which is set in Singapore) as it did not feel authentic in its representation of Singapore, leading Journalist May Seah (2018) to comment:

So, naturally, we don't want stories that seem to be about us but aren't really about us – we want stories that are properly us. At the same time, we go out of our way to say unsupportive things about films and TV shows that are made by us, for us, which have no chance of growing or developing without our support. I have to admit that I'm a little confused. What do we want, exactly?

Authenticity in Singapore films is clearly challenged by many factors. Most fundamentally, the quest for authenticity in Singapore cinema mirrors the nation's own search for authenticity in defining its identity, one that continually negotiates local and global forces as Singapore strives to maintain its economic position in the world without losing itself culturally. This local/global conflict is the struggle between rootedness/tradition and cosmopolitanism/modernity in Singapore's identity. Singapore's identity is caught between what Hall (1992) referred to as 'Tradition' and 'Translation'. In gravitating towards tradition, Singapore desires to recover the unities and certainties which are felt as being lost. Contradictorily, with an economy dependent on global markets, its identity is subject to the play of history, politics, representation and difference, tending towards translation (p. 309). As Chong (2015) puts it, the Singapore identity is divided between the conflicting voices of the nation-state and the global city. Golden age Malay cinema was perhaps better at managing

these conflicting voices, producing films that were both national and transnational – given it was supported by the capital of modernity and sustained by the tradition of Malay performances (Teo, 2017b, p. 81). However, the tensions between the local and global challenge contemporary Singapore cinema, impacting on both the production process and audience reception. In the former, distinctions are made between films produced for a local market and for the global market, including the film’s language. In the latter, considerations on cultural authenticity factor in – what seems authentic to foreign audiences may not be authentic to local ones. In discussing these issues, I address my last research question on whether Singapore films can be both authentic and universal, to appeal to both local and foreign audiences.

### **Film Production: Stay Local or Go Global?**

Singapore faces pressures to remain relevant and competitive in a globalising world, as does its cinema which struggles to find a place in world cinema. For both the country and its cinema, being competitive globally is a matter of national survival. Yet, how do Singapore filmmakers make internationally appealing films without losing local audiences? The ‘Singapore’ that is presented to the Singaporean audience is different from the ‘Singapore’ that is projected to the international audience, evident in the tensions between the state’s performance of Singapore identity and independent films’ “counter performance” of the said identity. These counter performances are seen in films which question or subvert the hegemonic presentation of Singapore.

#### The Heartlanders/Cosmopolitans: Mainstream Versus Arthouse Films

At the heart of Singapore’s search for an authentic identity is the conflict between rootedness and cosmopolitanism. Robbins (1998) described cosmopolitanism as a way of being in the world detached from “the bonds, commitments and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives” (p. 1). While previously seen as opposing patriotism and parochialism (Malcomson, 1998, p. 233; Anderson, 1998, p. 267, 272), cosmopolitanism today is discussed as a ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ (Robbins, 1998), which creates links between nation and state and nationalism and cosmopolitanism. ‘Rooted cosmopolitanism’ aptly describes Singapore’s engagement with the local/global binary.

Singapore’s version of cosmopolitanism is economically driven to maintain its position in the

global marketplace. Yet, the nation needs nationalists to ensure the sovereignty of Singapore. Singaporeans, thus, are called to support a cosmopolitanism that is based on patriotic sentiments, assuming an identity that is both cosmopolitan and patriotic (Chang, 2012, p. 691, 702). Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong highlighted two types of Singaporeans, the Heartlanders and Cosmopolitans, in his 1999 National Day Rally Speech. Referencing America's blue-collars workers, the heartlanders refer to the working-class majority who make their living in Singapore; whose orientation and interest are local rather than international; whose skills are not marketable beyond Singapore (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 128). In contrast, the cosmopolitans are highly educated and well paid white-collar workers who produce goods and services for the global market. They work from Singapore as a base but are comfortable anywhere in the world (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 128). The cosmopolitan is privileged over the heartlander, reflecting institutionalised social divisions along the lines of class, language, education and occupation in Singapore (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 128). Yet, these categories are articulated as mutually supportive, instead of polarised or oppositional (Alfian, 2012, p. 43). As noted in a speech delivered in 2000 by Goh Chok Tong: "The heartlanders nurture the cosmopolitans, while the cosmopolitans create the opportunities that benefit the heartlanders" (Wong, 2005, p. 68).

The heartlanders and the cosmopolitans are reflected respectively in two types of nationalists – Cultural Nationalists and Technocratic Nationalists – representing ideological tendencies informing contemporary cinema (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 127 – 128). Cultural nationalism yields content that evokes a sense of cultural resonance and national distinction while technocratic nationalism sees Singapore primarily as a globally connected marketplace of ideas and commodities. Thus, film is conceived as merchandise for transnational transaction, rather than as having cultural currency (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 127 – 128).

While the two tendencies are at odds with each other, they are not always mutually exclusive. Both cultural and technocratic nationalists have a vested interest in the nation's self-image and are concerned with national specificity in Singaporean films. However, their approaches, perspectives and emphases differ starkly (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 128). The two tendencies expose a tension between local production and address on one hand (cultural nationalism), and the Government's prioritised export strategies on the other (technocratic nationalism) (Khoo, 2006, p. 82). Singapore filmmakers struggle between authentic (personal) storytelling that addresses local interests and an official (state-sponsored) discourse of

internationalisation. The resulting tensions are complicated by having to negotiate government funding agencies and censors who maintain tight control over the brand image of Singapore (Khoo, 2006, p. 82). Herein lies the negotiation between Singapore's cultural and political identities which filmmakers have to grapple with. Addressing its cultural identity on film will involve using Singlish and a myriad of Singapore's languages, depicting different ethnicities and Singapore's heterogeneous (undefined) culture, and discussing local issues, all of which would be difficult to sell overseas. Addressing Singapore's political identity would showcase a more internationally familiar image of Singapore as a global city but would be culturally vacant, thus alienating both local and international audiences.

Tan and Fernando argue that Jack Neo's *Money No Enough* and Glen Goei's *Forever Fever* in 1998 exemplify cultural and technocratic nationalism respectively. Both films accelerated the revival of contemporary Singapore cinema and made local film history, but in different ways (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 129, 131). *Money No Enough*, a biting satire about money-obsessed Singaporeans starring Jack Neo, became the country's highest-grossing local film, earning S\$6.02 million at the box office, a record held for fourteen years until it was beaten by another Neo film, *Ah Boys To Men* (2012) (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 129; Chan, 2016a). *Money No Enough* requires a high level of specific local knowledge; its strong sense of national specificity along with its use of Singlish and Chinese dialects (unheard of at the time) all correspond to cultural nationalism (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 129 – 131). On the other hand, *Forever Fever*, a film about a loser who joins a disco-dancing contest to win the big cash prize to achieve his dreams, became the first local film to break into the international film scene, reportedly earning S\$4.5 million in worldwide distribution rights. The film, however, did not perform well at the local box office, earning only 13% of what *Money No Enough* generated. Conversely, despite being a phenomenal hit at home, *Money No Enough* was less successful overseas (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 129). The appeal of cosmopolitanism and theme of Westernisation that endeared *Forever Fever* to a wider audience outside Singapore locates the film closer to technocratic nationalism, reinforced by its international success as a film commodity (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 129).

The segregation of films along the cultural and technocratic nationalist divide has continued ever since the success of *Money No Enough* and *Forever Fever*. Singapore films have to be made for either a local market or a global one, because of differing audience tastes and because films that have tried to be both local and global fail to engage either. With these

different markets in mind, Singapore films tend to be either very commercial for local audiences or very arty for international ones – it is very difficult for a film to appeal to both (Kenneth Tan (IMDA’s Assistant Chief Executive, interview, 29 December 2015). Within Singapore, the heartlanders and cosmopolitans have very different tastes, reflecting the ideological and social divide between them. The commercial films appeal to mass local audiences, the heartlanders, who have been brought up watching commercial Hollywood fare and who appreciate local flavour provided by Singapore mainstream films as an alternative. Themes that resonate with the heartlanders include the struggles of those who cannot cope with Singapore’s unforgiving education system, the plight of the underclass in highly competitive and status-conscious Singapore, the suppression of dialects and the privileging of Mandarin by the Government, amongst others (Lim, 2012, p. 13 – 14). Such films are considered too insular for the innovative, outward-looking cosmopolitans who prefer films with more universal themes and a more alternative, stylised and even experimental filmmaking style. Hence, independent arthouse films appeal more to them.

Singapore’s most eminent filmmakers, Jack Neo and Eric Khoo, come to mind when discussing the heartlander/cosmopolitan film divide. Neo’s films champion the heartlander, given they are socially conservative and commercially oriented. Khoo’s films have arthouse sensibilities and are radically subversive, thus tending to appeal more to cosmopolitans (Tan, 2008). Neither, in their extreme positions, provides an accurate reflection of Singapore life, thus failing to convey a true sense of Singapore identity in their films. As Tan (2008) explains, while Neo’s films do use dialects and address social issues, the films display excessive commercialism and reinforce social stereotypes. Khoo’s films are lauded for being more critical of Singapore’s official narrative, but they have also been accused of ‘aestheticising poverty’. Khoo is susceptible to such critique being the son of one of Singapore’s richest tycoons (Tan, 2008). Seen as removed from the subjects he films, Khoo’s films can be said to give the sense of an outsider looking in to Singapore society, while Neo’s films seem to give the insider’s view, making them more resonant with local audiences.

### Regimes of Authenticity

Indisputably, Jack Neo is Singapore’s most popular and populist filmmaker; his likeability stemming from the “regime of authenticity” (Duara, 1998) offered in his romanticisation of the heartlander identity. Neo’s ‘heartlander hero’ has become a popular symbol of national identity in Singapore, seen as a rooted and territorial social persona in contrast to the



variability of globalisation (Chong, 2011, p. 880). According to Duara (1998), the sacredness of the nation hinges on its regimes of authenticity where timelessness and the politics of embodiment are key to an authentic national identity.

Neo's heartlander heroes are predominantly Chinese men who are lowly educated, speak in dialect or Mandarin and are often portrayed as victims of global capitalism and/or the state's education, bilingualism and foreign talent policies. Residing in HDB<sup>16</sup> flats, they hold blue-collar or low-paying white-collar jobs, tend to be conservative and steeped in Confucian values. Their main concerns are their livelihood and children's education rather than abstract notions of artistic or political realms (Chong, 2011, p. 892). In short, Neo's heartlander hero represents the everyman in Singapore, which explains why the films have struck a chord with Singaporeans. Neo is to contemporary cinema what P. Ramlee was to golden age cinema. Both championed the discourse of the everyman in their films.

Chong (2011) suggests that Neo further accentuates his heartlanders' authenticity by pitting them against middle-class English-educated and English-speaking characters, reflecting the opposition between the heartlander and cosmopolitan. By emphasising this duality, Neo echoes the sentiments of the Chinese-speaking majority who may feel that their nation-building sacrifices have been overlooked by the English-speaking elite whose achievements dominate the Singapore Story (p. 895). But while Neo's films do exude authenticity, non-Chinese Singaporeans are excluded from his representation and address. The regime of authenticity offered by Neo's heartlander identity is then invalid because it leaves the multi-ethnic make-up of Singapore in an uncomfortable position, with the minorities awkwardly unacknowledged (Yang, 2014, p. 417, 418).

#### "Middle Ground Films"

Given Jack Neo and Eric Khoo fall on opposing ends of the spectrum, one may ask why there cannot be a compromise, having films which are both culturally resonant and universally appealing – "middle ground films". According to several of my interviewees, making such middle ground films is problematic.

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<sup>16</sup> Housing Development Board

We haven't found the middle ground because it is very dangerous. People have tried making middle ground films in English, but they've failed because these films are neither here nor there and therefore, very difficult to market (Kelvin Tong, Director, 28 December 2015).

We don't have the middle ground because there are not enough producers and the market is really small. There is a lack of producers who will QC [quality control] both sides, who will bring the artistic value of films and the craft of business-making together to fill the middle ground gap. Also, the middle ground in Singapore is occupied by Hollywood films and films from elsewhere (Juan Foo, Producer, 14 December 2015).

Co-productions like *The Truth about Jane and Sam* (1999) and *2000 AD* (2000), which were shot locally and regionally with local and regional stars, illustrate some of the problems of middle ground films. They attempted to be both local and global and ended being neither, underperforming at the box office. Given the problem of middle ground films, it seems that Singapore filmmakers have to make a choice between staying local or going global. As expressed by Producer Juan Foo:

While we're struggling here culturally with our identity, Singapore as a nation has grown so cosmopolitan that foreigners want to be associated with the Singapore brand. Even Hollywood wants to come here and shoot. And this is because of our image as successful, cutting edge etc, but these are all facades for the foreign eye... Whether our own people appreciate telling these stories, I'm not very sure. The stories that can touch the heartland would be the underdog stories, so there's the issue of the market and whose story you want to tell. Do you want to tell the story for the foreigner or for your own people? Again, it's a constant struggle for our filmmakers (interview, 14 December 2015).

The choice is evidently not an easy one. The filmmakers I interviewed had a range of strategies – some preferred to take the local route, emphasising the importance of first developing a strong national cinema. Jack Neo wants to show that Singapore filmmakers can create films by connecting well to local themes. When this is achieved, then Singapore cinema can entertain global aspirations (interview, 15 February 2016). Chai Yee Wei shares

Neo's view. He notes that Thai, Japanese and Korean films are very distinct culturally and they travel because they are primarily good films. With Singapore films on the other hand, "we start with the mentality of how we can market our films internationally even before we consider how to make good films to begin with" (interview, 21 October 2015).

For other interviewees, internationalising Singapore cinema was more of a priority. Singaporeans tend to be socialised to constantly seek foreign endorsement or approval; one of the consequences of the culture of fear where Singapore is perceived as vulnerable and dependent on globalisation. As Artist/Director Ho Tzu Nyen notes, certain cultural products have value only when they are approved by the world outside of Singapore, so "we still look for affirmation outside of our own society" (interview, 13 January 2016). Writer Neil Humphries agrees, stating that Singaporeans have developed an inferiority complex as a result of constant declarations by the Government that "in all industries, we must import foreign talent because we are not good enough." Reinforcing the locally-held belief that anything foreign is better, Humphries shares that as an author, despite being foreign himself, he had to leave Singapore and become a writer in Australia before being "given critical kudos in Singapore" (interview, 19 January 2016). Director Sanif Olek suggests Singaporeans still carry historical hang-ups; a post-colonial thinking where foreign endorsement is needed before there is self-approval (interview, 29 October 2015).

The filmmakers' concerns here are valid given the use of international standards as a benchmark for various sectors in Singapore, including the arts. For example, the Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ) system and Creative Industries WSQ framework have been developed to nurture artistic talent to "facilitate the delivery of innovative and cutting-edge products to global markets" (NAC, 2008, p. 36). Benchmarking against international standards gives more value to international art forms and works over local ones, and manifests prejudice against local art forms (Chang, 2012, p. 699 – 700). Such bias also raises the issue of authenticity as the Singapore Government's blind favouritism towards foreign arts talents and work shows that these are considered more authentic (Yang, 2014, p. 430). Singaporeans' bias against local art has implications not only for film production, but also audience reception.

## Local Audience Reception for Singapore Films

Local audiences in Singapore tend to respond to and support what they deem as authentic. Thus, filmmakers have to strive for authenticity if their works are to attract audiences. However, there seems to be a disconnect between audiences seeking authenticity in films and filmmakers who struggle to make their films authentic given the challenges discussed earlier. The disconnect is worsened because economic factors come into play which threaten Singapore cinema as a national cinema, forcing it to be a transnational cinema (see Chapter 1). Authenticity becomes more problematic – what is considered authentic by Singaporeans will be given up for what is considered authentically Singaporean by foreigners.

Singapore has the highest theatre density per unit of area in the world and registers among the world's top five per capita cinema attendances (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). Yet, Singapore has not developed a self-sufficient national cinema commensurate with its high attendance (Uhde & Uhde, 2000). Theatrical releases in Singapore are principally foreign features, and only a few local titles each year serve as exceptions (Fu & Lee, 2008, p. 7).

With the exception of most of Jack Neo's films, Singapore films are not particularly successful in Singapore. Two issues come to mind: First, are local films bad (or from another angle, inauthentic) and is this why they have no audiences? Or because they have no audiences, the films remain bad/inauthentic? Second, audiences are drawn to Neo's films because of their authenticity. Why then is he the only filmmaker who is able to capture authenticity to the satisfaction of local audiences? Why is it that other filmmakers who follow his 'template' cannot replicate his success? The second issue requires further research beyond the scope here, but I would suggest that it has to do with Neo's reputation as a veteran in both Singapore television and film. Audiences have grown up with Neo from his early days on television and form a significant fan base when he progressed to film. The breakout success of *Money No Enough* cemented Neo's position as 'King of Singapore cinema', and other filmmakers who have tried to use his 'formula' are regarded as copycats.

As for the first issue, there have been authentic but bad films (some Jack Neo's films) as well as bad and inauthentic films (some of the co-productions) made in the past which put off audiences. However, there have also been authentic, award-winning local films made which did not do well at the local box office (*Singapore Dreaming* (2006), amongst others). Thus, I

am inclined to put the blame on the audience, which also perpetuates the production of mediocre films due to the lack of demand for local content. As Film Academic Edna Lim notes, “Our own cinema is not visible to our own people” (interview, 4 December 2015). Director Daniel Hui makes an interesting point on the perpetuation of mediocre films:

I think it’s extremely sad that audiences here feel they cannot relate to Singaporean films but they feel like they can relate to foreign films. People say Singapore films are terrible. Yes, this may be true but in the same token, there are even more terrible Hollywood films. And why are these terrible Hollywood films getting more money than the terrible Singapore films? So for the independent filmmaker, I don’t really see any chance of our films being accepted (interview, 2 February 2016).

Singaporeans are not interested in films about their own culture – but besides the ‘natural’ bias towards Hollywood, issues of language and authenticity complicate their engagement. There are also issues of national specificity. Willemsen (2006, p. 36) argues that films that address national specificity constitute national cinema; they engage critically with the tensions that shape a nation’s cultural configurations. There are three reasons why national specificity is problematic in Singapore cinema. First, films which question or critique Singapore’s state of rule would be censored or banned, limiting their exposure. Second, the culture of fear and the discouragement of critical thinking and questioning of authority have made Singaporeans generally apathetic, which explains why Singaporeans have little interest to watch films that question the status quo. Often, these films require critical thinking not easily found in a one-dimensional society. Recalling Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* Thesis, films and television programmes are reduced to the terms of the one-dimensional society in which they are produced and consumed. “They bear the hallmarks of mass production, standardisation, and pseudo-individualisation; and in turn produce retrogressive and infantilised audiences hungry for light entertainment to prepare them for the next day’s labour” (Tan, 2008, p. 3). Third, national specificity has cultural connotations. If Singapore films are to have Singaporean specificity, how does this work culturally for Singapore? Is it specific to the Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, other minority or hybrid ethnicity? Or is it specific to Singaporean culture, however that may be defined?

Besides the problem of audiences, the exhibitors prefer to screen the much more profitable Hollywood films than local productions. Daniel Hui feels that the situation will change if “the

audience comes and proves the cinema chains wrong but no, it's a vicious cycle" (interview, 2 February 2016). The problem in terms of exhibition, according to IMDA's Assistant Chief Executive Kenneth Tan, is that Singapore is still "acutely under screened". He explains that eleven new feature films open theatrically every week in the country, but twice that number, mostly international films, cannot find space in the cinemas and are thus not imported. There is "a lot of product that is waiting for capacity to actually be showcased" (interview, 29 December 2015). For Senior Web Producer Randy Tanudibrata, the problem is exacerbated because Singapore does not even have "locals-only" kind of theatres (interview, 20 December 2015). Sumitra Sachidanandan from Public Healthcare suggests that tickets for local films could be priced lower than international films since they are made on smaller budgets. She also recommends screening more local movies on television so that audiences will have greater exposure, generating further interest in local films (interview, 3 November 2015). Jack Neo's movies are televised especially around Chinese New Year (albeit more on cable television rather than national television), but this is an exception. Many of the independent films find no air time because, according to Producer Juan Foo, they are either too obscure, their producers have not negotiated a television deal, or television networks do not pay enough for distribution so producers are turned off from television distribution. Foo states that local television stations tend to accord lower value to local films, thinking that they should not have to pay the producers to screen their films. A lot of "leeway bargaining" occurs, resulting in very few local films being broadcast on television (interview, 14 December 2015).

### **International Audience Reception for Singapore Films**

Aside from a handful of independent films which have enjoyed festival success and moderate commercial success overseas, Singapore mainstream and independent films by and large have yet to find major commercial success overseas, despite this being the goal from the early days of the revival. Singapore has yet to produce a 'commercial indie' film that is both critically acclaimed and has commercial success. The success of Singapore cinema as a transnational cinema will depend on the audience reception regionally and internationally. How can Singapore filmmakers present Singapore authentically in their films in a way that does not alienate foreign audiences?

Singapore Film Society Chairman Kenneth Tan believes that distributors are searching for unique cultural content. If a movie can be replicated elsewhere, why should distributors want

it? (Lee, 2006, p. 5). Yet as Writer/Director Han Yew Kwang notes, it is difficult to sell Singapore culture when it is unclear what that culture is (interview, 21 December 2015). In a sense, America has the same cultural challenges as Singapore. It is just as difficult to define American culture (what is American culture?) as it is to define Singapore culture. America is also culturally heterogeneous, also a diasporic, migrant country. Yet, Hollywood has succeeded in both local and international markets, and has been able to produce huge blockbusters and commercial indie films. Of course, Singapore did not dominate the world culturally like the US did, nor is it a world superpower. But culture-wise, what is it that America can sell in their films that Singapore cannot?

Miriam Hansen's (1999) investigation of Classical Hollywood cinema which explored its success in the global arena is useful here. Using her theory of vernacular modernism, which refers to the everyday aesthetics produced by modernisation and its products, Hansen suggests Hollywood offered the "first global vernacular" with "transnational and translatable resonance" (p. 60) and was able to provide a "collective experience of modernisation and modernity" to mass audiences both at home and abroad (2000, p. 10). American cinema was successful because it globalised modernity, which was universal, and was the first to do so. It has since capitalised on this and has become the canon against which all other cinemas benchmark themselves.

The difficulty in defining Singapore culture has challenged its being regarded as authentic. This challenge is compounded by the varying degrees of authenticity expected by local and foreign audiences based on how Singapore is projected differently at home and abroad. If Singaporean authenticity is deemed too foreign for the West for example, would it be more accepted in neighbouring countries which are culturally more similar? All other factors being equal, audiences intrinsically prefer domestic productions and are more receptive to productions from familiar cultures. Content crafted from a similar culture can be understood and appreciated more effortlessly. Close cultural proximity thus promotes inter-country media traffic (Straubhaar, 1991) and has been deemed responsible for the flourishing television trade within regions with shared languages, interlinked histories, and overlapping cultural peculiarities (Falkenheim, 2000; Wilkinson, 1996). This suggests that authentic Singapore films should do well regionally given the commonalities. However, Southeast Asia is one of the most culturally heterogeneous regions in the world with more differences than similarities, thus making regional distribution a challenge. Despite difficulties in both international and

regional distribution, Singapore cinema is a transnational cinema by necessity, due to the very limited home market and film ecosystem. How it can be a transnational cinema without being any less of a national cinema is the key question.

### **Singapore Films as Authentic and Universal**

It has been established that authenticity in Singapore films is important to both local and international audiences. However, filmmakers still need to target different markets (local or international), taking into consideration production and audience reception, particularly the varying degrees of authenticity required by different audiences, for example with the use of Singlish. Will this always be the case or can Singapore films find ways to be both authentic and universal?

In addressing this last research question, it must be acknowledged that growing national cinema is important for cultural reasons, but developing transnational cinema is equally important for economic reasons and to position Singapore cinema's place in world cinema. Ideally, Singapore films should endeavour to appeal both locally and internationally, but this has been challenging as seen with middle ground films or commercial indies. Examples of middle ground films that have had some success include *The Maid* (2005), *881* (2007) and *Ilo Ilo* (2013). These films all made over a million dollars at the local box office and either won awards at international festivals or secured overseas distribution. *Ilo Ilo* is Singapore's most recent success story, being the first Singapore feature film to win the Caméra d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival, and Best Film and Best New Director awards, amongst others, at the Golden Horse Film Festival and Awards (Loh, 2013a; Loh, 2013b). These accolades, both from the East and West, affirmed the global recognition of Singapore cinema. More films seem to be following in the footsteps of *Ilo Ilo – Apprentice* (2016) and *A Yellow Bird* (2016) were both screened at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, and *Pop Aye* (2017) won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Screenwriting at the Sundance Film Festival (Chan, 2016b; Cheah, 2018). These recent successes show that Singapore cinema may be trying to bridge the gap between local and global markets. Although it has taken a long time for Singapore films to reach this local/global equilibrium, if future films continue the trend of strong storytelling, good production values and a commitment to authenticity, Singapore cinema may just become the national and transnational cinema it has always wanted to be.



## Conclusion

Singapore film and its engagement with the socio-cultural and political status quo has come to play a significant role in communicating the importance of peripheral voices and perspectives within the discourse of nationalism (Millet, 2006, p. 94). With Singapore films flourishing in recent years, Singapore cinema has become instrumental in documenting the variant attitudes towards Singapore and what it means to be Singaporean (Ng, 2008, p. 12). Addressing the national will always be problematic for Singapore cinema, due to many reasons, some of which have been detailed here and in Chapter 4. According to Lim (2012), film bears multiple functions: it serves as a way of reconciling with the past or preserving tradition from the tide of modernity; it is a medium through which socio-historical memory is constructed and contested; it is a vehicle for the projection of national identity and the assertion of national pride; it is an instrument of propaganda and resistance; and it is a mode through which neoliberal capitalism extends itself (p. 4). For Singapore, however, these functions are not that straightforward. The long gap in Singapore film history and the major changes the country has undergone during that period have not allowed cinema to reconcile with the past or preserve tradition. The social amnesia caused by these rapid changes undocumented by cinema and the state's control of how history should be remembered prevents Singapore cinema from constructing and contesting socio-historical memory. Contemporary Singapore cinema can begin to do this now for the present and future but will always be hindered by censorship. While Singapore cinema is not an instrument of propaganda, neither is it an instrument of resistance – the acts of resistance in the arts community are still few and far between; the majority of arts practitioners still “playing it safe”. Through the local/global binary, Singapore cinema is a mode through which neoliberal capitalism extends itself, but in so doing, has to negotiate cultural authenticity. Cinema is slowly moving away from the CMIO-mode of representation to a more hybrid, culturally integrated experience which is more authentic to Singapore's multiculturalism. Given time, Singapore cinema can finally become a vehicle for the projection of national identity and the assertion of national pride.

## ***Chapter 6***

### ***My Creative Practice: Documentary Production***

Having discussed my research from a theoretical aspect, I will now focus on its creative practice aspect and examine how my documentary informs and is informed by my research. In part, my analysis is a form of auto-ethnography as I share my personal experience in producing the film, connecting it to my wider exploration of identity in Singapore cinema. I will discuss the production process as it has unfolded and as a reflective exercise. The chapter will explore issues of representation, reflexivity and authenticity. Some attention will be given to censorship as inevitably in Singapore, governmental pressures impact all creative processes, including my own. In reflecting on my creative practice, I will incorporate key ideas from existing literature, and include interview material from my documentary.

To understand the relationship between the binary dissertation and documentary, I use Milech and Schilo's (2004) research question model. In this model, both the exegetical and the creative component of the research project hinges on a research question posed and refined by the researcher across the course of his/her research. Both the written and the creative component of the project are conceptualised as *independent answers to the same research question* – independent because each component of the project is conducted in the “language” of its research mode, related because each “answers” a single research question. Thus, the two components of the research are neither ambiguously related, nor does one undermine the autonomy of the other (Milech & Schilo, 2004). The critical advantage to this model is it resists the theory/practice, artist/scholar divide. Recognising creative production *as* research, it respects the authority of the disciplines that produce creative works (Milech & Schilo, 2004). In the context of my project, both my thesis and film address my research questions. However due to film duration constraints, the film addresses the research questions based on only one focus area (Multiracialism), out of four identified in the thesis.

Incorporating creative practice is part of the qualitative research used in my project. As such, the interviews conducted for my documentary have a dual function, serving as material for my documentary and as qualitative research interviews for my thesis. The documentary interview shares certain core features as qualitative semi-structured interviews: first, the interactional exchange of dialogue; second, the use of a thematic, topic-centred, narrative

approach with a fluid and flexible structure; and third, the production of situated knowledge through interaction and the focusing on relevant contexts (Mason, 2002, p. 62).

The creative practice methodology I use is a new approach called Screen Production Enquiry (SPE) introduced by Kerrigan et al (2015), which involves the production of a film as part of research, informed by theoretical perspectives and achieved by continuous practice and reflection by a researcher/filmmaker (p. 106). This methodology appropriately describes the approach I have undertaken and being new, it allows for flexibility in application and development as a distinct methodology that can be widely used for creative practice in screen production. There are more established methodologies like Participatory Action Research (PAR), which involves examining and improving current action (Wadsworth, 1998), and Practitioner-Based Enquiry (PBE), a process in which practitioners “enquire into their own practices to produce assessable reports and artifacts” (Murray & Lawrence, 2000, p. 10). However, I chose SPE as it allows researchers to defend their insider’s perspective by declaring their ontology, arguing for their epistemology and defending their chosen method, filmmaking or screenwriting (Kerrigan, 2018, p. 25), which aligns most closely with my approach.

I chose to do a documentary instead of a narrative film to have the “insider’s perspective” which Kerrigan (2018) alludes to. The very nature of film production makes the researcher an insider into his/her own research because of how the research is used and expressed creatively through a visual medium, which is likely to reach a larger audience than a traditional thesis. The documentary form also allows more of an insider’s perspective than a narrative film in terms of the filmmaker’s presence and position. I ‘appear’ in the documentary through my voice which can be heard in interviews and through my engagement with those being filmed. As I shot and edited the film myself, I made creative choices along the way which reflect my personal voice and position on the subject matter. As Pasolini (1980) articulated, “it is impossible to perceive reality as it happens if not from a single point of view, and this point of view is always that of a perceiving subject” (p. 5). Chanan (2008) adds that with this single view, there are other things that are left out, having not been recorded, or edited out during postproduction. So, the resulting documentary is only one version of the film it might have been (p. 123). Therein lies the authorship of the filmmaker. My presence and positioning would be less apparent in a narrative film because it is unlikely that I would appear, and I would have less authorship over the work given the cast and crew and the more collaborative

approach in narrative films. Finally, the documentary film allows me to answer my research questions directly, which may not be possible with a narrative film.

The distinguished anthropologist Margaret Mead (1963) detailed several advantages to using cameras in social research. First, cameras allow detailed recordings of facts, providing a more comprehensive presentation of lifestyles and conditions. Second, they allow the transportation and presentation of artifacts, transgressing the borders of time and space. Third, they can catch facts and processes that are too fast or complex for the human eye. Fourth, cameras also allow neutral recordings of action and are less selective than written observations. Lastly, media artifacts are available for re-analysis by others. Nonetheless, the subjectivity of the filmmaker still calls for reflexivity because while images convey ‘truth’, how much are they marked by the interpretation of those who take or regard them? (Denzin, 1989, p. 213 – 214; Flick, 2009, p. 241). The filmmaker’s reflexivity can be expressed by Hall’s (1986) question: “How to get information on film and how to get information off film” (quoted in Denzin, 1989, p. 210). This question will be answered later in the chapter as I explore how my creative practice has contributed to my research.

My documentary is interview-based, without narration, and like the thesis, structured in two broad sections to address my research questions. However, whereas my thesis discusses four focus areas that impact on Singapore’s identity and cinema, the film concentrates on only one area – Multiracialism – specifically on race and language. The first section of the film addresses Singapore’s identity through the negotiation of race and language. The second section focuses on how race and language factor in Singapore cinema, providing insight into the challenge of constructing the Singapore identity on screen. The film includes a diverse range of interviews, online material, news archives, archival photographs and footage of historical Singapore, new photographs and footage of contemporary Singapore, as well as photographs and video clips from Singapore television and films.

The work is particularly timely because of SG50<sup>17</sup>. After fifty years of independence, Singaporeans are reflecting on how far the country has come and the benefits and costs of this success. SG50 has also precipitated Singaporeans’ looking forward to the next fifty years, questioning the future of the country – whether it will even survive given its ever-present

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<sup>17</sup> Singapore’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence

internal limitations and external threats, not to mention the uncertain future political leadership of the country given the passing of Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew in 2015, the same year as SG50. In the same vein, the film reflects on Singapore's past and present and questions its future, addressing national concerns and questioning the strength of the Singapore identity. This is further examined through the lens of Singapore cinema which has struggled to construct the Singapore identity on screen. The challenges filmmakers face are due to historical, political, economic, cultural and social factors, some of which I have discussed in previous chapters and will explore here through my own experience.

In terms of Bill Nichols' six Modes of Documentary, my film uses the Participatory Mode. In 2014 when I first produced a preview version of the film, I used the Expository Mode with a narration. However, when I began my production proper, I decided it was better to use the participatory mode instead because with a subject as broad as 'identity', I felt that it would be more important to hear multiple and diverse voices rather than present a single, more 'authoritative' position. Yet as Hilary Putnam (1990) argued, there cannot, even in principle, be such a thing as God's-eye view, a view that is the one true objective account. Any view is a view from some perspective, shaped by the filmmaker and location, amongst other factors (Maxwell, 2013, p. 46). So while I do not assume the authoritative voice through the expository mode, my own values and perspectives do shape the documentary, reflecting my authorship of the work.

The collective expression of identity by the various individuals interviewed was also personalised as each had his/her own story or reflections on identity to share. It is thus more compelling to hear these individual stories rather than summarise them into an overall narration. This participatory approach also made the film more reflexive in the sense that the interviews became conversations between the interviewees and myself, where ideas and influence went both ways. Unlike having a dominant perspective with the expository voice-of-God narration, the conversational approach allows for dual perspectives from both parties. Having dual perspectives allows for what Willig (2001) describes as personal reflexivity, which involves giving consideration to how our beliefs, interests, experiences and identities might have impacted upon the research. My personal reflexivity is seen through the interviews which became exchanges where my own views and experiences were expressed, thus shaping the interviews (only a small portion of these exchanges appear in the film because of film duration constraints). For Nichols, reflexivity can also be political, where the

viewer's consciousness is raised to a collective awareness and dominant ideology is questioned (1991, p. 69). Political reflexivity is in play in the editing of my film which presents an alternative version of Singapore's official narrative. For example, the film de-emphasises the modern, world-class physical infrastructure that the Government seeks to promote. Instead, it features the more banal, everyday places that are part of Singaporeans' lives, such as HDB<sup>18</sup> neighbourhoods and hawker centres. Political reflexivity is also evident in the questions that the film raises about racial harmony. While the projection of racial harmony in multicultural Singapore aligns with the state's official narrative, the film shows a more racially segregated reality.

Tolman and Brydon-Miller (2001) advocate interpretive and participatory action methods in qualitative research, relational methods that acknowledge and actively involve the relationships between researchers and participants, as well as their respective subjectivities (p. 5). They believe that qualitative research should be participatory – working collaboratively with research participants to generate knowledge that is useful to the participants and the researcher, contributing to personal and social transformation (p. 3 – 4). The participatory form is important to the purpose and function of my film as an exploration and questioning of Singapore's identity and its construction in cinema, which comes through in the interviews. Furthermore, in producing my own film, I experienced the ongoing challenges that Singapore filmmakers face in negotiating the Singapore identity on screen, for example, issues to do with language, censorship and historical and cultural losses, which are detailed further below.

## **Contextual Analysis**

### Historical Context

In reflecting on my creative practice, I will now discuss the documentary's historical, physical, artistic, social, and theoretical contexts. The first four contexts will be addressed using a production studies approach, and through the last one, some theoretical aspects around the work will be examined. The historical context of the work is significant – the film was produced around the time of SG50 when there were many films and tribute videos, most of which were state-endorsed, made to celebrate Singapore's milestone. While my film may appear celebratory given its subject matter, it is a deeper inquiry into the identity of Singapore

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<sup>18</sup> Housing Development Board

as a people and country. The film thus raises sensitive issues about race and Singapore's multiculturalism, which would not typically be featured in state-endorsed films about Singapore especially during SG50, given state control and censorship. Yet, the hard questions need to be addressed as Singapore looks ahead to the next fifty years and beyond. So, my film is a timely exploration of Singapore's identity, both a reflection of the nation's past and the identity that has been created, as well as a contemplation of its future and how Singapore's identity may well change.

### Physical Context

The film was shot mostly in Singapore, with additional filming done in various other countries to supplement the interviews. Given I was based in Auckland, shooting could only be done in Singapore during specific timeframes in 2015, 2016 and 2017, so in fact I missed most of the SG50 events. Thus, even though I have been shooting consistently over the last four years, the production does suffer from gaps when I missed certain events/activities.

The film also faced other physical challenges, one being the constant construction that exists in Singapore. The country suffers from a lack of 'place identity'. According to Relph (1976) and Norberg-Schulz (1980, p. 23), every place has *genius loci* or the spirit of place, representing not just "a mere flow of phenomena, but has a structure and incorporates meanings". Place identity can help to provide a sense of stability and continuity to construct and preserve our identity (Yuen, 2005, p. 201 – 202). As Lang (1994) observed, old buildings give us a sense of history and permanence. We would like to know not only where we are but also when we are and how 'now' relates to time past and ahead (Yuen, 2005, p. 202).

In the post-independence years, in a bid to drive its economy to its present status of advanced industrialising nation, Singapore embarked on a drastic redevelopment programme, demolishing "the old (the Third World, the working-class, the unsightly, the unhygienic, the unsafe, the unfashionable, the not-yet-best-in-the-world)" and replacing it with "the new (the First World, the upgraded middle-class, the spectacular, the clean and green, the secure, the trendy, the best-in-the-world)" in an endless project of nation building (Tan, 2008, p. 221 – 222). Places are symbolic markers of personal and social meanings, histories, and attachments, but rapid modernisation has left every marker transient and forgettable (Tan, 2008, p. 222). This is reinforced by Author Neil Humphreys, who expresses that the constant "rebuilding, revamping and renovating" is turning Singapore into "literally an island of

building sites”. In his words:

This constant fluid state of building flux...It makes it impossible literally and metaphorically to plant roots in a building site. How can you form an identity in a building site? (Interview, 19 January 2016)

Humphreys’ concern is echoed in Tan’s (2012b) assessment that identity is threatened by a constant state of change. This transience results in the loss of a sense of belonging, identity, community, ancestry, and even history itself (p. 160). Thus, for Artist/Director Sherman Ong, Singaporeans lack a sense of rootedness because of the loss of place identity. He states:

I think identity actually rests with this sense of belonging to a space, but here, the landscape changes almost every three months, and that erodes a large chunk [of identity]...it’s a kind of enforced amnesia on the population...That’s why nostalgia is so big in Singapore because things are disappearing, and people are just clinging on to this idea of the past being more golden than the present (interview, 20 December 2015).

Several human geographers have elaborated on the negative consequences of a lack of place attachment or rootlessness and placelessness (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1980), evident in the desire of many Singaporeans to migrate despite Singapore’s success and world standing. For Singaporeans like myself who continue to live in Singapore, the sense of displacement is ever present, felt even more in the shooting of my film. Film producer Juan Foo expresses the challenge we have as filmmakers in Singapore. He states that rapid change is making it “increasingly difficult to have continuity and consistency of the cinematic landscapes that are depicted in Singapore film”. Without recognisable locales, the “elusive ‘essence’ of the city” that is integral to storytelling is lost (Foo, 2003, p. 31). During my shoot, it was constantly at the back of my mind that places I was shooting may not exist in a few years’ time. For example, I shot an interview at Dakota Crescent, one of Singapore’s oldest public housing estates, in December 2015, and the estate was demolished for redevelopment at the end of 2016. The same happened with Rochor Centre, another historical estate, where I shot an interview in January 2016 and the area was demolished at the end of that year. Also, I shot Singapore’s oldest flea market, Sungei Road Thieves’ Market, in April 2017, three months before it closed in July for redevelopment. These are just a few examples, but it shows why I



felt the constant sense of displacement and that I was on a deadline – if I missed capturing something on camera, there may not be further opportunities to shoot it again. This was quite unnerving for me as a filmmaker and I can understand the impact of constant reconstruction on Singapore’s filmmakers.

Furthermore, there is significant cultural loss (especially emphasised on film) when historical buildings or places with rich heritage are replaced with infrastructure that is standard in any global city. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to feature the indigenous or cultural aspects of Singapore on film given these physical changes. Singapore on film now projects a modern, Western-oriented city-state, less so an Asian city, let alone a multiracial one. The need for place and cultural identity associated with physical infrastructure is particularly salient for Singapore given that it does not have natural landscapes that identify other countries, for example, the Alps in Switzerland or the wide-open spaces of New Zealand. Without historical buildings that speak to its colonial past and without culturally distinct neighbourhoods that reflect the cultural ghettos that used to exist, Singapore looks like any generic city on screen. As such, Singapore films tend to be criticised for not being culturally recognisable in the way that Japanese or Indian films are. While these examples have strong distinct (homogeneous) cultures, Singapore’s specific heterogeneity, especially in the implementation of CMIO in society, should translate in its physical appearance such that Singapore would also appear culturally distinct on screen.

Another physical challenge the film faced is the lack of suitable locations for shooting interviews. Wherever possible, I tried to interview my subjects in their natural environment, either at home or at work, but this was not always possible as many of my interviewees do not have an office, especially the filmmakers. Going to their homes also seemed invasive, and was not appropriate especially for the interviewees who were strangers to me. I also did not want to spend what limited production budget I had on renting out spaces for interviews, so I chose to shoot outdoors as much as possible. Aside from budget issues, this is my preferred option anyway because of aesthetics and lighting. Having done the preview documentary, I found that the outdoor interviews looked better with outdoor scenery and seemed more natural. The indoor interviews looked more staged and required more work in terms of set dressing and lighting. So, I opted for outdoor shoots wherever possible, but this meant that I was at the mercy of the weather, crowds and external noise, and I needed to be aware when filming permits were required. In fact, filming permits are needed for most public spaces in

Singapore, including parks. As the application processes for such permits are long, I decided to forego applying for them and just “shoot and run”. Most of my outdoor shoots are in parks and some of the interviews were slightly affected by wind and rain, passersby and unwanted external noise, but most of the footage is usable.

### Artistic Context

There has not yet been a Singapore film like mine focusing on the relationship between identity and cinema; nor has any work brought most of Singapore’s filmmakers and arts creatives together in one film. As such, I am covering some new ground with this film. So far, documentaries have been made on either Singapore or its cinema, but not on both together. These documentaries tend to be expository (state-produced works) or poetic (for example, *Singapore Gaga*), and there is a clear distinction between works that support the hegemonic agenda and films that question it. My film, given its subject matter and participatory style, sits in the middle – neither a pro nor anti-hegemonic film, but one that sees the challenges on both sides and asks how we can work together to do better. This being said, the film is based on my perspective and stance as a filmmaker, so the film will reflect this position which may appear at odds with the hegemonic one.

Production-wise, I faced the same challenges that all documentary-makers face when working alone, on a tight budget and strict timeline. As such, the artistic context of the work is that of an independent production, and my shooting style and creative sensibilities reflect this. Some of the production challenges include the gruelling schedule, lack of camera crew, equipment breakdowns, and a dependence on public transport. Most of these problems stemmed from my small production budget (the film is funded by a NZ\$5000 grant from the University’s Faculty of Arts Doctoral Research Fund). Artistically and technically, the film both benefits and suffers from having a one-person crew throughout the entire production. A positive aspect is that the director has complete control over the film, is actively shaping it through his/her own doing (production), and thus can achieve his/her aesthetic vision for it. The negative one is given the collaborative nature of filmmaking, the film does not benefit from the sharing and input of creative ideas from others. Working alone during production meant that I had to perform three roles for every interview: Director of Photography, Sound Recordist and Interviewer. This required significant multi-tasking as I had to do both the technical and non-technical work at every interview. This multi-tasking resulted in some shots being soft focus, not framed well or lacking in production design. However, these production mistakes offered

opportunities to learn and improve my craft.

### Social Context

The social context of the film, framed by SG50, is that of a society keen on reflecting on the past and celebrating Singapore's achievements, but that is also questioning the viability of the 'Singapore Model' for the future. Having been largely politically apathetic and satisfied with the status quo throughout the nation-building years, Singaporeans are now starting to question what has gone wrong and what comes next. Questions have emerged about policies concerning the implementation of multiracialism and language education, raising issues on race, language and identity politics, which are the focus in my film. However, these are all extremely sensitive areas that are considered taboo and are not openly discussed in Singapore, let alone on film. As such, the documentary offers new research directions, using a medium that is considered off-limits to such topics.

In the last decade, however, there have been small changes on the Government's part. After not performing as well as it did in previous elections, the Government is now making an effort to show a 'softer' side, encouraging conversations on previously out of bounds issues such as those listed above. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the national broadcaster recently produced two documentaries, *Regardless of Race* and *Regardless of Religion*. While these productions signify the state's willingness to open previously closed discussions on sensitive topics, the programmes themselves support the hegemonic position and there is a sense of cautiousness about them – people appear to be very careful about what they say. It is in this climate that I am producing my film and while I am pushing the boundaries of the discussion, I do not know how far I can go. The uncertainty on what constitutes crossing the line is part of filmmaking in Singapore and for that matter, any art practice. I have thus undertaken some risks and experienced some fear as I have proceeded with my film.

To elaborate on working in this culture of fear/censorship, first, in several interviews, while discussing a sensitive issue, it was not uncommon for the interviewee to mention or joke about whether he/she would get arrested for saying certain things. Besides this, some also jokingly suggested using the 'mosaic effect' during editing to cover their faces. The humour expressed belies an inherent fear participants have of the Government. While most of my interviewees appeared open and forthright in their interviews, one can never tell the extent to which self-censorship is being exercised. I also had to obtain filming clearance from the

superiors of three of my interviewees as they work for various government bodies. For these interviews, when the topic did touch on the Government, the interviewees either sidestepped or declined to answer the question. Of all the interviews, these were the only ones that clearly felt controlled and self-censored.

Second, I did not have filming permits for any of the external locations I used, and initially was not too concerned given they are all public spaces. However, several negative experiences made me increasingly anxious as the shoot progressed. On three separate occasions, I was told to stop filming, the first two times by security personnel and the last, by a member of the public. In the second encounter, the security guard even insisted that I delete my footage in front of him. This was quite extreme given that I was not filming a government building or other sensitive site. In the last instance, a passerby was unhappy that I ‘captured’ him in my filming and was physically aggressive. What is striking is that these encounters occurred in public spaces and my filming was not of a suspicious or covert nature. I could easily pass off as a tourist just filming random shots of Singapore. However, the reactions to the filming speak to the extensive state control and culture of fear that exists in Singapore.

Third, I was not allowed to use any photos of the Prime Minister including those in the National Archives, supposedly available for educational use. After seeking permission from the Archives to use the photos, I still had to write formally to the Prime Minister’s Office, indicating purpose of usage and providing the actual script with which the photos are to be used. Despite going through this process (which itself acts as a deterrent), my request was rejected. I was initially unsure what visuals I should use in my film for references to the Prime Minister or the Government in general but eventually found a workaround.

Fourth, there are key filmmakers, Royston Tan and Tan Pin Pin, two of the seven directors behind the *7 Letters* Anthology, who declined to be interviewed for what I believe are political reasons. *7 Letters* is an omnibus of seven short films produced as a tribute to SG50. Given its context, I initially hoped to cover its making and include it in my own film. However, I had to forego this idea when I failed to get interviews with the two directors. The remaining five do appear in my film. Royston Tan, who spearheaded *7 Letters*, is one of Singapore’s most prominent directors. He initially agreed to be interviewed, but later withdrew because he was not comfortable with my interview questions (he was the only filmmaker who asked for them in advance). This may have to do with the fact that some of

my questions are politically sensitive and given his major involvement in a hegemonic state-funded project like *7 Letters*, his participation could have been seen as a conflict of interest and could jeopardise or, at least, raise questions about his political allegiance. Tan Pin Pin does not do video interviews in general and I believe she also wanted to keep a low profile, especially since the banning of her film *To Singapore With Love*. Finally, I did a written interview with her, which although not ideal, is better than nothing.

Fifth, I contacted the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) (a government authority) to ask a seemingly general and harmless question about the festive street decorations in Orchard Road (Singapore's main shopping belt) and whether it was the practice to display the decorations for the main cultural event/festival of all four of Singapore's main ethnic groups (i.e. is there equal representation of each ethnic group in the public display of festive decorations?) I noticed that there were only decorations displayed during Christmas and Chinese New Year, and none for the other minority groups' cultural festivals. STB took a long time to respond to my query. When they finally responded, they asked for the purpose of my query and if they could reply by telephone (despite my query being on email). I insisted on an email reply because I wanted their answer in writing. Very interestingly, they gave a very measured and politically correct reply, but also added a disclaimer that I should seek their permission if I were to use any part of the email reply in my thesis. This again gives an idea of the extent of state control.

Working in such a controlled culture has impacted on my own filmmaking approach and process. There are some advantages. I have learnt to work fast when shooting in public places so as to avoid being questioned. I have also learnt to be creative in finding other ways to shoot or get access to something if conventional methods fail. For example, for footage/photographs that I was not able to shoot myself, I sourced for them on the internet and contacted the copyright owners of the media to get access. The disadvantages include lack of access to resources as discussed above and fear, which was a constant companion throughout the production of my film. While shooting, I had to often question whether I would get into trouble for shooting something. While editing, I had to keep asking myself whether I should self-censor – whether my film would get banned simply because it touches on the OB areas. While I have not consciously self-censored myself through the process of filmmaking, I do worry about taking risks with how freely the film raises sensitive issues, and ultimately whether the film will clear the censors. I initially applied for government funding for my PhD

project but failed to get it. While this was initially disappointing, I am now glad because getting financial support from the Government would have involved their assuming creative control over my project. I would not have the freedom to make my own film. With their support, the film would have been entirely different, a hegemonic project that may not have fulfilled the requirements of advanced independent research.

Given the controlled conditions, it was especially challenging for me interviewing complete strangers. They were, however, selected because they were either experts in the field or suitable industry personnel. As the tight schedule did not allow time for pre-interview meetings, I had to go into all the interviews cold. Not having pre-interview meetings could have a negative impact. Drawing on Maxwell (2013), I was not able to learn my participants' perceptions and understanding of me and my research, possibly hindering the development of useful and ethically appropriate relationships with them (p. 93). Strangers are unlikely to suddenly open up on camera about personal and sensitive topics like identity and politics. Thus, I learned the importance of just making initial conversation first, getting to know the interviewees, getting them to trust me before starting the interview. This is why each interview easily ran for two hours or more. Usually the first half an hour would be used for 'warming up' the subject. While this seems like a waste of time, it is absolutely necessary, allowing the interviewees to relax and me to attain in-depth interviews. Through building trust, I was able to get insider, off-the-record information from some interviews. In short, the social aspects involved in conducting these interviews are equally as important as the interviews themselves. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) reinforce this, encouraging researchers to treat relationships as connections rather than tools for gaining access to data (p. 135). Stressing the importance of trust, intimacy, and reciprocity, they argue that "relationships that are complex, fluid, symmetric, and reciprocal – that are shaped by both researchers and actors – reflect a more responsible ethical stance and are likely to yield deeper data and better social science" (p. 137 – 138).

### Theoretical Context

#### Representation

Moving from a production studies approach to considering the theoretical context of the work, I will focus now on representation, reflexivity and authenticity. Hall described representation as the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system

which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning. Already, this definition carries the important premise that things – people, objects, events, experiences – do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning. It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify (1997, p. 61). Meaning is not just derived from what something is ‘about’, it is also ‘read’ or ‘interpreted’ (Hall, 1997, p. 32, 59). This active process of interpretation explains the burden of representation faced by filmmakers. For me, first, on a general level, how do I represent the notion of Singapore identity when identity is itself so abstract and in the Singapore context, so difficult to define? Breaking down identity to smaller categories like race, religion, politics and so forth does not make it easier because each of these categories is just as broad, subjective and difficult to depict. For example, how does one visually represent ‘multiculturalism’ or language policies? Representation is not simply about capturing ‘reality’: a documentary often seeks to persuade. Although a documentary will claim that the situation it covers is actually happening, or has actually happened, the film may also examine abstract ideas or concepts (Chapman, 2009, p. 29). What appears on the screen, then, can be “a complex transaction between a variety of contending interests” (Nolley, 1997, p. 268). As such, there is never one ideal form of representation: it is never definitive, but always ongoing and historically contingent (Chapman, 2009, p. 29).

Second, there is both a thematic and space/time disconnection, given I shot the interviews first and the visual coverage, or cutaways later. Although based on the meanings conveyed within the audio track, the cutaways are usually unrelated to the interviewees, shot in a different place and time and subject to my own interpretation of the interviews. So in terms of representation, the thematic and space/time disconnect could either work in favour of the story or against it. More often than not, the disconnect works because the filmmaker has time to construct a narrative and shoot accordingly based on the audio track, yielding a more compelling story than if everything had to be shot together in a given (limited) space and time.

Where the disconnect does not work, however, is in the recalling of historical events. According to Chapman (2009), documentary is almost always dealing with the past as a reconstruction or re-enactment of another time or place in history (p. 31), which brings me to the third challenge in representation – portraying the historical elements in the narrative. The film addresses historical events such as the race riots of the 1950s and 1960s which, in the

absence of actual footage of the riots, could be represented through re-enactments or archival photographs, both of which I used. As Chapman notes, there are numerous problems in depicting the past. There is a narrative to construct, perhaps with paintings, locations, artifacts, or using visual symbolism and actors. The way these elements are brought together presents a challenge for the study of representation and even if they work to construct the past, there is still the challenge of magnitude (2009, p. 30 – 31). As Nichols (1991) articulated, history is the referent of documentary which always stands outside the filmic text, “always referred to but never captured” (p. 142). It is also always the case that the ‘present’ that appears in the documentary becomes the ‘past’ by the time it is presented to an audience.

Chapman (2009, p. 31) also notes that there is always a difference between a representation and what is being represented because representation is performative. Bruzzi argues that “all documentaries are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable, and informed by issues of performance and performativity” (2006, p. 1). Documentaries are increasingly employing dramatic effects and image manipulation to argue their point, and the further they move from established conventions of the observational and expository form, the more performative their approach (Smaill, 2010, p. 19). While my film does not employ visual effects or dramatic image manipulation, I can see the performativity both in the interviews and the cutaway footage. For the interviews, the first layer of performance is for the camera. As Rabinowitz (1994) noted, the “identities and ideas of the subject are constructed as performances – for the self, for others, for the camera” (p. 166). People tend to put their “best face forward” when cameras are present – a tendency fostered by social conditioning where throughout history, people took photographs as an expression of self-presentation to others. So even in the most ‘real’ situations, people are already ‘performing’ if there are cameras around, styling themselves a certain way, managing body language and facial expressions, and monitoring what is being said.

The second layer of performance lies in the interaction with the researcher. As Smaill (2010) notes, the ‘social actors’ (Nichols’ term for documentary subjects which implies their playing themselves) in the diegesis offer the most compelling point of engagement for the audience, and these performances should not be read as unmediated presentations of a self that are not subordinated to the filmmaker’s vision (p. 20). Yet to simply understand these representations of subjectivity as outcomes of the production process is to overlook how this process can function as a dialogue space between filmmaker and the filmed. While the finished



documentary is ultimately out of the control of those depicted, the performance indicates a negotiation between the capacity for the subject to speak and the context in which that speech is enabled (p. 20). During the interviews, I did not coerce the interviewees in any way and they were free to speak as they wished. Nonetheless the interviewees were already ‘directed’ by my line of questioning, knowing what to discuss, elaborate on or ignore. Furthermore, they were interacting with me, responding to my reactions to them, which generated subjective performances specific to our interactions. This was especially apparent in interviews where I knew the interviewee personally. How they responded to me was quite different from the interviewees I did not know.

Smaill expands on this point, stating that individuals have social capacities and capabilities and differ in terms of how they are influenced by the norms and values they are subjected to (2010, p. 20). Subjects are subordinated to power in ways that both subject the self to that power and produce social agents. Butler expressed this as a contradiction: “Subjection consists precisely in the fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (1997, p. 2). The power play is different for people who know each other and for those who are strangers. The same goes for the people from different social strata. Harding refers to the power relationship between the researcher and the respondent as positionality (2013, p. 36). The power play between interviewer and interviewee manifests itself in the interview, and differs across all interviews, depending on the relationship between the two. While I conducted myself in the same professional yet personal approach for all the interviews, my attitude may have been different when I interviewed a high-ranking government officer compared to when I interviewed a domestic helper. Burman (2001) cautions that the dominant humanitarian/democratic agenda of qualitative research (such as documentary interviews), including such goals as equality and participation, are easily co-opted into perpetuating existing power relationships. She asserts, “The progressive...character of research is always ultimately a matter of politics, not technique” (p. 270 – 271). Therefore, for Smaill, herein lies the filmmaker’s responsibility – to acknowledge the position of the other, to conduct oneself in the most appropriate way as a member of the body politic (2010, p. 20). Filmmakers, despite having control over what they film, must not feel above those they film. Mutual respect and equality should be the end goal for participant engagement.

## Reflexivity

Representation within a documentary can also include that of the filmmaker even if he/she hardly appears physically on screen, which raises the issue of reflexivity, defined as a tradition “in which the producer is publicly concerned with the relationship between self, process and product” (Ruby, 1977, p. 10). Reflexive strategies in documentary endeavour to question or undermine realism itself and heighten the viewer’s awareness of his/her relationship to the text and the world the text represents (Smaill, 2010, p. 123). These reflexive strategies imply that the documentary-maker may act as an interpreter of reality rather than an objective recorder of the real world, creating a triangulation between audience, representation and represented (Nichols, 1991, p. 232).

I did not set out to make a reflexive documentary. From Nichols’ taxonomy of modes, I used the participatory mode. However, as Smaill rightly points out, documentary production often throws up a confluence of modes in a single text, frequently skirting straightforward divisions (2010, p. 114). She explains that recent documentaries have a political agenda even when they do not use *vérité* or expository styles to achieve forms of social intervention like in earlier phases of political filmmaking. These works offer “a new mode of reflexivity” that “borrows from previous traditions while presenting a fresh voice”. They are the creations of a “doco-auteur who is aligned with and produced by both the overt, performative crafting of the documentary argument and the ethos of political intervention that signals an investment in the well-being of the collective” (2010, p. 116).

It is this investment in the collective that I set out to make this film in the first place – to gain a better understanding of our collective identity as Singaporeans and to share my learning journey with others, so that they too may gain some insight. Not that I see myself as a doco-auteur, but using the participatory mode, I involved myself in the film, crafting the film from within the text. As King and Horrocks (2010, p. 129) reinforce, the participatory mode is reflexive as qualitative interviewing is itself a highly personal activity that necessitates critical self-reflection. In their words:

When we make the decision to use qualitative interviewing as a method of data collection, we are stepping forward to embrace our own personal (often face-to-face) involvement in the activity of the research.

It is thus critical that qualitative researchers engage in self-reflection, asking questions such as “How might my presence and reactions have influenced the participants?” or “Did I say too much or too little which affected how the participants responded?” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 129). Wilkinson (1988, p. 493) agrees, stating that at its simplest, reflexivity can be considered to be ‘disciplined self-reflection’. To what extent were my interviews affected by the fact that I knew some of my interviewees and not others? Did the power play between us impact on the content or ways of expression? Having used the conversational style of interviewing, how much of my own input affected the exchange? These issues can be considered ‘validity threats’ (researcher bias and influence), along with how my own values could negatively influence the conduct of the study. I managed these validity threats by using the same set of interview questions for everyone and using the same interactional approach. During the interviews, I was careful not to impose my own opinions and avoided leading questions. My conversational interviewing style, too, resulted in rich data which can only benefit my research.

The participatory mode also allowed me to hold the middle ground – to be inside and outside the film, both objective and subjective. Given the social and political sensitivities involved, I have to appear objective and tried to do this by featuring people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. I also interviewed representatives from government bodies to include their views. However, even without spelling out a political agenda, my subjectivity is also expressed through the selection of interviews and cutaways, and in how they are edited together. This is where the reflexivity in the work lies. As Nichols (1995) stated, in documentary-making, “the art of observing, responding and listening must be combined with the art of shaping, interpreting or arguing”.

According to Chapman, there are several ways that a filmmaker might manipulate the production process for particular expressive ends: by using scripts or actors; by appearing themselves in the recording; by using camera style and techniques to express their point of view and not simply recording; or by using editing to distort or communicate their point of view (2009, p. 126). I did employ some of these strategies, for example, my voice is heard in the interviews; my engagement with participants is apparent in various scenes; my photographs are used; and all the footage was shot by me, reflecting my point of view. According to Pauwels (2004), when a filmmaker arrives in a different community with a camera, they themselves become “positioned subjects” who are operating within a limited

“scopic regime” and the technologies they apply are culturally moulded (p. 41). All these factors are influences which need to be taken into account – and to do so within the film itself is referred to as ‘reflexivity’ (Chapman, 2009 p. 117).

Furthermore, Guba and Lincoln (2005) argue that reflexivity involves reflecting critically on the self as researcher, and that researchers bring multiple selves to their research. Reinharz (1997) expanded on this by saying that these different selves can be categorised into three major groups: researcher-based selves, brought selves (the selves that socially, historically and personally create our standpoint), and situationally-created selves. For example, when we interview, we bring our understandings of how people exist in the world (for me, my social constructionist self), we bring our political agendas (my feminist, liberal self), our caring roles (my daughter self), and our professional selves (my academic, filmmaker self). We also situationally create different selves in the field – being a member of a group, being a friend, being sympathetic (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 135).

However, despite being ‘in’ the film, I was very conscious about not showing myself too much in it for two reasons: first, so as not to dilute the main narrative and second, to avoid being narcissistic. Too much reflexivity can create an impression of overt narcissism, while undermining the audience’s capacity to understand the subject matter through the viewing experience – Michael Moore’s films have been criticised for falling into this trap (Chapman, 2009, p. 124). Dziga Vertov, on the other hand, is reflexive about the filmmaking process, not the self. Vertov believed that a visual consciousness (raised by film style) would enable people to see the world in a different, more truthful way. As such, the filmmaker appears on screen only as a worker who is part of the process (Chapman, 2009, p. 121). This describes how I feel about my own involvement in the film, even though I do not employ an overt visual style like Vertov. My presence is part of the process, and reflexivity emerges more from editing than shooting.

### Self-Reflexive Editing Devices

Some of the self-reflexive editing devices I used are detailed below.

#### *Inclusion of the filmmaker in the film*

The most overt self-reflexive device in documentary film is the inclusion of the filmmaker in the film. While this is expected given my use of the participatory mode, it is still an example

of reflexivity. As discussed, I used several strategies which made my presence in the film evident. Such strategies are useful in positioning the filmmaker as encoder of the text or “authoring agent, opening this very function to examination” (Nichols, 1991, p. 58).

#### *Inclusion of interactions between subjects and filmmaker or filmmaking equipment*

According to Maasdrorp (2012, p. 60), such interactions could include shots of the subject directly addressing the filmmaker or the audience, commenting on the filmmaking process, or accidentally or intentionally interacting with the filmmaking equipment – all of which can be seen in my film, calling attention to the film process for the audience, giving a sense of “being in the moment” with the subject.

#### *Inclusion of visible equipment*

The appearance of production equipment in mainstream films, such as hand-held or pole-mounted microphones or light stands in the frame, are considered filming mistakes and are generally avoided. However, in self-reflexive documentaries, it is possible to include shots that show the filming equipment and crew, since revealing the filming tools is an effective strategy for acknowledging and referring to the filming process within the body of the text (Maasdrorp, 2012, p. 64). In some of my interviews, the interviewees had to handle the shotgun microphone themselves, drawing attention to the filmmaking process.

#### *Categorical structure*

My film uses the categorical form, where interviews and visuals relating to particular topics are edited together in separate, clearly delineated sections of the film. Each topic in the film functions as a ‘chapter’ of the film, for example, there is a chapter on *Multiracialism*, another on *CMIO*, another on *Singapore Languages* and so on. Each chapter is clearly demarcated through a title showing the topic of the chapter, with brief background information. The use of clearly demarcated categories places overt emphasis on the structure of the film, and can therefore be deemed self-reflexive (Maasdrorp, 2012, p. 72 – 73).

Through the employment of such self-reflexive editing devices, the reflexive filmmaker demonstrates that documentary is a construct, which implies self-consciousness. Chapman (2009, p. 116) questions whether this can be considered reflexivity? Being reflexive and being self-conscious are not synonymous. Ruby (1980) differentiated them as follows: the former requires the filmmaker “to be sufficiently self-conscious to know what aspects of self” to

reveal to an audience so they may understand the process employed and the resultant product, and “know that the revelation itself is purposive, intentional, and not merely narcissistic or accidentally revealing. Self-reference, on the other hand, is not autobiographical or reflexive. It is the allegorical or metaphorical use of self” (p. 156).

Self-reference and reflexivity are thus not the same, and self-referentiality in a documentary can actually result in the perception of diminished realism, because the mediated nature of the discourse is given priority (Chapman, 2009, p. 122, 131). By contrast, the reflexive use of self may heighten realism because the filmmaker is seen in the frame as part of the subjects/action being filmed, bearing witness to whatever is happening, making it more genuine. Again, this explains how I chose to ‘appear’ in the film – to be part of the process, to work within the text, but not be the subject of the film.

### Authenticity

The last area I will address in terms of the theoretical context of the work is authenticity. This is particularly important because one of my research questions concerns the authentic representation of Singapore’s identity in Singapore cinema. As I make my own Singapore film, I have to ask myself whether I have been ‘authentically representing’ Singapore and its people in my film. Have I been capturing ‘truth’? Johnston deemed that “it is idealist mystification to believe that ‘truth’ can be captured by the camera or that the conditions of a film’s production (for example, a film made by women) can of itself reflect the conditions of its production...new meaning has to be manufactured within the text of the film” (1973, p. 28). Yet more recently, Juhasz (2004, p. 92) speculates that if the production process “feels non-hierarchical, multicultural, feminist, or collective, could this create some of that feeling in the viewer?” Indeed, the ‘truth’ that is captured from my perspective is subject to different interpretations when viewed by an audience, and rendered even more subjective with reflexive editing that changes the original intent of shots. In other words, there are several layers of interpretation to the ‘truth’ that is being produced through my film. First is my own interpretation of a topic which influences how I choose to shoot it. The second layer comes with the editing process, where I re-interpret what I shot, possibly subverting it to convey a different message. The last layer of interpretation comes from the audience who will each respond differently to the film based on their individual perspectives and values.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I identified the following four factors which challenge the notion of authenticity in Singapore cinema: First, the uneven history of Singapore cinema; second, state control and censorship; third, multiracialism; and fourth, the negotiation of local and global forces. I have already discussed state control and censorship above, so now I will briefly share my experiences with the remaining three factors. First, the history of Singapore cinema concerns primarily narrative films. Documentary filmmaking in Singapore is relatively new and there is no rich documentary film tradition to draw from. My subject matter of looking at Singapore identity from the perspective of its cinema is also new, hence the film is free from ‘historical baggage’. However, I did encounter challenges when trying to depict the past – for example, it is difficult to access golden age film clips because many of the films have been lost. Singapore’s fast changing infrastructure also makes it hard to capture ‘old Singapore’. As such, I do feel that what I managed to capture now is also a form of archive, especially with places that I shot in my film no longer around.

Second, in terms of multiracial representation, I did make an effort to feature a diverse range of people – of different races, ages and social backgrounds. However, I found myself adopting ‘racialised lenses’ especially when filming cutaway footages – I ended up filming people based on their ethnicities, sometimes just to use as a cutaway to a race-related statement. In other words, I found myself working within the CMIO framework and shooting along ethnic boundaries. This was particularly apparent to me only at the editing stage when I realised that in most of the group interviews, the participants were Chinese. I had played into the racial hegemony discourse without quite realising it. It just seemed convenient and I now understand why other filmmakers find it hard to have minority representation in their works. My film is also mostly in English, with some Singlish and Mandarin. Malay and Tamil are not used at all. Given the heavy use of interviews in my film, the use of English works. However, the use of one language fails to read as ‘multiracial’. Instead of narration, I use English text in the film to provide background information. I could have chosen to be more multicultural and incorporate Singapore’s three other official languages. However, the end result may be overwhelming, echoing the CMIO approach in hegemonic works. The intent to be multicultural may also be undermined because of the promotion of CMIO rather than multiculturalism per se. As a commentary about the underrepresentation of minority languages in Singapore films, my own film, although unintended, literally demonstrates this, reinforcing the language bias that plagues Singapore cinema.

Third, in terms of cinema's negotiation of local and global forces, Singapore filmmakers have to make distinctions between films produced for a local market and for the global market. I replicated this in the course of my own production. I originally intended my film to be viewable by all audiences, but realised later in the process that my film should be shot and edited differently depending on my target audience. In the end, I decided to produce the film for an international audience, which means content that is already familiar to Singaporeans had to be explained. I do not know if this will affect the film's reception to a local audience, but a choice had to be made and I went with the option of wider audience outreach.

Finally, ethics also comes into play in authentic representations on screen. As Chapman (2009, p. 164) questions, if 'informed consent' acts as the filmmaker's moral defense, how much does this process constrain 'artistic freedom'? The implication is that complying with ethics requirements may impair authentic representation, because people know what they are in for. It is perhaps more authentic and 'real' to capture them when they are unaware of being filmed or less aware of the premises of the film. However, this goes against ethics requirements. So what takes precedence? Retaining artistic freedom and being authentic, or keeping to ethics requirements? Here, I have tried to compromise, being true to my filming but also respecting the rights and privacy of those I film. Chapman puts it succinctly, noting that a dichotomy exists in documentary where as a form of factual representation, it respects authenticity, yet simultaneously recognises the impossibility of aiming for 'truth' in the presentation of 'reality' (2009, p. 178). For me, the critical lesson is that authenticity is fluid and is a construct, and so too is my film. Authenticity is not represented but constructed in film. If filmmakers are true to themselves in the construction of their films, their personal 'truth' should come through in the work. I was worried my film might get banned given its engagement with OB issues. If the film does get banned, perhaps this is a sign that it has communicated a certain 'truth'.

In sharing my creative practice here, both theoretically and from a production studies approach, I seek to contribute to our understanding of research-led practice in screen production research. In documenting the benefits and challenges involved in documentary-making as part of research, and how it contributes to scholarship, I hope it will be helpful for others keen on pursuing creative practice research.



## *Chapter 7*

### *Conclusion*

This thesis set out to answer a three-part research question: First, how is Singapore's identity defined given its complexities as a multicultural diasporic country? Second, given these complexities, how do filmmakers construct this identity in Singapore cinema? Third, how do Singaporean filmmakers negotiate speaking to local audiences while at the same time, addressing the global marketplace? In my conclusion, I will offer up answers to these continuously knotty concerns.

As this study has shown, Singapore's national identity has been built on three main blocks: Singapore's history, Singapore Government's interventions, and the concept of Multiracialism. While these building blocks have shown how Singapore identity has been formulated as a political construct, that is, a forging of Singapore's political identity, the inclusion of multiracialism speaks also to the development of a cultural identity. This cultural identity not only constitutes multiracialism as policy and practice, but has also engendered a societal response that has evolved naturally, a Singaporean culture that has evolved on the ground. An understanding of Singapore's political and cultural identities addresses the first part of the research question.

My research has also explored the four challenges faced by filmmakers who try to construct Singapore's identity on film, challenges which also contribute to the perceived inauthenticity of Singapore films. These challenges include the interrupted history of Singapore cinema; the Government's control of the arts through censorship; the problem of race and language on screen resulting from the incorporation of multiracialism; and the negotiation of local and global forces that Singapore cinema must navigate to be viable. Revisiting these issues in the discussion of Singapore's national cinema and its relationship with Singapore identity addresses the last two parts of the research question.

#### **Singapore's Political Identity**

Singapore's identity has been forged as a dichotomy, stretched between being a political construct and an organic outcome of cultural hybridity; between its political and cultural

identity. As Hill and Lian argued, Singaporeans “inhabit two cultural worlds, the non-political ethnic and the non-ethnic political” (1995, p. 104). The “non-political ethnic” refers to Singapore’s cultural identity which is perceived to be authentic because it is organic, evolved from the ground up. The “non-ethnic political” refers to Singapore’s political identity, generally regarded by Singaporeans as constructed by the state, and hence inauthentic.

As outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, Singapore’s political identity was created alongside the country’s formation as an independent nation-state. That the Singapore nation was not intended to exist has marked it from the very moment of its birth. It lacked various attributes common to modern nations, such as a shared history, ethnic homogeneity and a common language. As expressed by Director Kelvin Tong: “Singapore is an artifice. Unlike a lot of other countries, we didn’t come about in a very organic fashion...Singapore has always been an invention, a test-tube experiment” (interview, 28 December 2015). It might be said that, as a nation, Singapore lacked a sense of constitutive authenticity (Yang, 2014, p. 409), which is reinforced in Koolhaas’s (1995) observation about Singapore – that it is “managed by a regime that has excluded accident and randomness: even its nature is entirely remade. It is pure intention: if there is chaos, it is authored chaos; if it is ugly, it is designed ugliness; if it is absurd, it is willed absurdity” (p. 1011). Gibson (1993) referred to Singapore as “Disneyland with the death penalty”, a comparison that Tan (2008) agrees with. He states that like Disneyland, Singapore “achieves happiness for its people by creating theme-park lives where danger and success are stage-managed like roller-coaster rides”, and where consumerist and materialistic obsessions remove the motivation to think more critically and politically. Politics, it seems, is redundant – even dangerous – in utopia (p. 242). Such an authoritarian modernity feeds the repression of primal desires and drives, yielding a disciplined and self-sacrificing citizen-workforce (Tan, 2010, p. 160). For Gibson (1993), Singapore had the “look and feel of a very large corporation” – restrained, humourless, conformist and lacking any real creativity. But some disagree – Artist/Photographer Hong Huazheng sees the “corporation” label as a positive instead of a negative:

So what if we’re a corporation? What’s wrong with that? If it works for us, it works for us. Would you rather have an unstable country where maybe culturally, you’re more robust, you have institutional monarchy, but every day, you worry about your children’s education, you worry about safety...Do you want to live in a place where public transport is not reliable, where people go on strike once every few months, and

you worry about your pension, you worry about your decade-long recession as we see in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries? Do you want people to be able to carry guns to school? On the other hand, you have, for lack of a better word, a state-like corporation – Singapore (interview, 18 January 2016).

Singapore has been socially engineered in a very deliberate way by the Government and indeed functions like a corporation, which has impacted on its national psyche and identity. As expressed by my interviewees:

Some say that Singapore is artificial...well if you don't contrive the situation, how can you get the outcomes? You can either get the outcomes through natural development, which is ideal and everybody's happy, but it takes a long time. So if you want the outcomes another way, the faster way, you contrive the situation, you get it (Colin Pereira (Retired (Former Principal)), interview, 3 January 2016).

Everything here has a very fixed structure, a protocol, it is like wherever you go, you have this formula to follow...From the culture to the policies to the laws, everything, it seems very much planned out. It seems like a lot of things we're doing everyday was in somebody else's plan (Nguyen Thanh Ha (Undergraduate), interview, 29 November 2015).

Through such social engineering and the extent to which the Government has shaped Singapore's identity, it is recognised that Singapore's identity cannot really be separated from the state. Singapore's politically constructed identity has crystallised because for about forty years, Singapore's Government has been regarded as extraordinary by its own people and by the international community, having achieved much since independence. The Government's success is considered as the nation's success, bolstering the Singaporean collective identity as nationalist, linked to both country and the Government (Gomes, 2015, 162). As Director Boo Junfeng explains:

Singaporeans define identity in a very national way. We are a small country... and as with most small countries, the need for a definition of who you are in the world is more pronounced. When you have little else culturally to anchor yourself, when you're speaking English as your first but not native language, when you're so exposed

to the pop cultures of the world, one of the most natural things that you find yourself attached to would be the national identity that had been imbued in you when you were growing up (interview, 25 November 2015).

The Government's extensive influence on its people has culminated in various national traits (which have also become cultural traits) such as anxiety, pragmatism, and the 'siege mentality', which manifests most commonly in 'kiasuism'. 'Kiasu' is the Hokkien term literally meaning "afraid to lose" and it is used to characterise a range of selfish and inconsiderate behaviours that fail to take into account the needs of others (Peterson, 2001, p. 15). These traits have emerged from the pursuit of capitalism and economic success, reinforced by the Government which keeps reminding Singaporeans to continue working hard to stay ahead of neighbouring countries deemed to be "hostile, hazardous and seductively languorous" (Tan, 2010, p. 160). Ironically, it is Singapore's starkly successful image which has been a cause of political tension in its relationships with its neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia (Tan, 2010, p. 157). Singapore's siege mentality has been particularly influential on the Singapore psyche. As Actor Brendon Fernandez explains:

There's a sense that it doesn't matter how good I am today, it can very quickly be taken away from you tomorrow...So we must not be complacent...We're an overachiever with a sense of not achieving enough (interview, 16 December 2015).

The siege mentality has come to define not only Singapore's attitudes to defense (important given the Government's claims of external threats), but also its own sense of place in the world. This siege mentality unites the people, giving them both an imaginary and concrete sense of national purpose (Tan, 2008, p. 11), but has also created a culture of fear in Singapore, which works against the idea of Singapore as a robust nation. Artist/Photographer Hong Huazheng defines a robust nation as one "which is able to argue issues deep and long in a holistic way without stressing the social and cultural fabric" (interview, 18 January 2016). Instead, censorship, film bans and other means of control that silence dissenting voices rule the day.

These limitations, along with certain policy failings in the recent decade, reflect the public's increasingly negative perception of the Government, which is now seen as fallible, rigid and out of touch (Barr, 2016, p. 11). Singapore is now a society facing growing pains as it

confronts its national identity outside of government prescripts (Gomes, 2015, p. 159). When Singapore gained independence, the Singapore identity conceived by the Government was forged on the country's vulnerability and the need to stay globally relevant to survive. Such a conception of identity shaped public policy in very concrete ways, evident in the building of the nation. The political construct of Singapore's identity is thus built on the themes of crisis, vulnerability, survival, meritocracy, pragmatism and continuous progress (Koh, 2005, p. 75). Singapore's identity is defined by the nation's problems ("Rhetoric of Vulnerability" (Alfian, 2016)) and overcoming them ("Ideology of Pragmatism" (Tan, 2012a)).

Such a national identity, constructed on the basis of ideological pragmatism and economic realism, has significant drawbacks (Yang, 2014, p. 413). As Chang (2012, p. 703) questions, can economic performance as a collective achievement ultimately reflect national character? Can collectivity and rootedness be expected when a nation's people are increasingly engaged in transnational activities and encouraged to be cosmopolitan? The construction of Singapore's identity has resulted in cultural losses in traditions, language, and places of heritage and meaning. Additionally, meritocracy and elitism in education and employment have encouraged a competitive individualistic ethos, at the cost of social empathy and solidarity, thus weakening social bonds (Yang, 2014, p. 414; Kluver & Weber, 2003, p. 380). Indeed, as Yang (2014) articulates, Singapore's national identity problem represents a "Catch 22" situation: Because of the country's cultural heterogeneity, the Government emphasises a national identity that is more pragmatic than cultural. Yet, the cultural elements are necessary to maintain social bonds, but when authentic cultural traditions are invoked, they threaten to disunite Singaporeans, further entrenching ethnic and cultural divisions in Singapore society. Put simply, the problem is the lack of a uniquely "Singaporean" cultural authenticity (p. 414).

### **Singapore's Cultural Identity**

What then is "Singaporean cultural authenticity"? In essence, what is Singaporean culture or what does it mean to be Singaporean? As discussed in Chapter 3, Singapore's cultural identity is founded on multiracialism, but this identity also includes a Singaporean culture that has evolved naturally from ground up, both in response (i.e. food culture) and resistance (i.e. Singlish) to the Government's prescript of multiracialism. Borrowing from Lee's articulation on Chineseness, Singaporeanness is as many things to as many people, and the meanings attached to it vary across time (2015, p. 2). However, most Singaporeans would agree that

Singaporeanness in the form of shared living experiences (HDB<sup>19</sup> living, education, National Service<sup>20</sup> and so forth), Singlish, food and unique cultural traits reflect our cultural identity, which is an organic outcome of cultural hybridity and living in Singapore.

Singaporeanness unites the different races by not singling out any specific race. It is all encompassing, representative and unifying, and therefore seen as authentic, leading scholars to comment that Singaporean society has developed a “rojak” everyday life culture (Chua, 1995; Velayutham, 2007, p. 3). Rojak is a mixed fruit and vegetable salad dish commonly found in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore (Deruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 1). The term “Rojak” is Malay for mixture and aptly describes the amalgamation and diversity that constitutes Singapore culture (Deruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 1, 3). Singaporeanness in its sociocultural hybridity is thus at odds with the state’s essentialist construction of a national identity, which is ironic because the state has always wanted an all-encompassing national identity for Singapore. Through economic progress and policies encouraging national cohesion, the state has tried to “capture the Singapore heartbeat and programme the Singapore heartware” (Siddique Harvey, 2017, p. 85), but culture cannot be programmed. It has to be given time to evolve naturally. Singapore culture, given its infancy, is still developing.

The distinctiveness of Singaporeans is their hybridity, which makes Singapore the “odd man” out (Devan, 2007). Singapore’s identity, it would appear, is more “East Asian” (like Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan) and “Western” (like the US) than “Southeast Asian”, making it seem an anomaly (Tan, 2010, p. 157). Artist/Curator Khairuddin bin Hori offers a counter perspective – one that looks at Singapore not as a stand-alone nation but as part of the Nusantara<sup>21</sup> and a larger global network:

Today I’ve become Singaporean because of the unique conditions, growing up here, going through the education system and national service, but you understand actually – by DNA, by a sense of rootedness, by a sense of history – that you are not a product of this land, it didn’t begin here. It began somewhere else. And you can’t just forget or disregard this and say, “I’m totally Singapore, I never had associations with Java,

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<sup>19</sup> Housing Development Board

<sup>20</sup> Conscription

<sup>21</sup> The Malay archipelago

China or India. I prefer to identify myself with this mix of identities. It means that it is boundless, it gives me power. I'm not restricted just by being a Malay or a Singaporean, but I'm part of this even larger society that has a very rich history. Through this, I also become less concerned with issues of race because you embrace all (interview, 22 January 2016).

### **Singapore's Identity**

In addressing the first part of the research question, I have found that Singapore's identity encompasses both its political and cultural identities and is expressed in the tensions between the two. I also conclude that there are two positions in considering Singapore's identity. One perspective regards the past as more authentic than the present given cultural traditions were stronger then. This suggests Singapore's cultural identity has diminished over time while its political identity has remained constant and now holds dominance. Such a view which idealises the past recalls one of two ways identity can be defined according to Hall (2004), where identity is fixed, unchanging, tied to a collective with a shared history and cultural codes (p. 387). In line with this, Singapore International Film Festival Director Zhang Wenjie laments the cultural loss of language and places in Singapore. For him, Singapore is in a "very uneasy state of being" because the past has been lost and "we're also uncomfortable with this present." Because of how fast Singapore changes, people who remember the past do not recognise the present, hence the fragmented identity faced by Singaporeans (Zhang Wenjie, interview, 5 January 2016). For Author Neil Humphreys, the drastic changes Singapore is undergoing threatens its very identity. In his words:

We're losing the housing estates we grew up in, we're losing the heritage centres, buildings or schools that we are familiar with, and it's those intangible everyday things that are slowly being eroded that slowly erases that Singaporean identity (interview, 19 January 2016).

These sentiments recall Singapore's national amnesia which has resulted from the Government's control of history and continuous urban development. The latter has also kept the country in a constant state of change, resulting in a loss in 'place identity' and social memory. The extent of government intervention explains the dominance of Singapore's political identity.

The second perspective believes Singapore's political and cultural identities co-exist and recognises Singapore's identity as fluid and dynamic, and therefore authentic because Singapore has always been changing. This recalls Hall's (2004) second analysis of identity, where identity undergoes constant transformation, subject to the continuous influence of history, culture, and power (p. 388). Actor/Director Alaric Tay supports this view, suggesting that the Singapore identity is two-pronged. First, it is a constant – fifty years ago, Singapore was a migrant nation and a land of opportunity for different cultures and today, that still stands. Second, within this constant, there is, however, evolution in the Singapore identity because the kinds of people coming to Singapore are constantly changing (Alaric Tay, interview, 19 October 2015). As ICT Academic Connor Graham reiterates:

The Singaporean identity – there's part of it that's moving and there's part of it that's staying still, and this sense of moving and changing is part of what it is to be Singaporean. You are in this context of change (interview, 4 December 2015).

In such a context of change, it can be argued that Singapore's approach to managing its increasingly diverse population, with the rise of foreigners in Singapore, also needs to change, facilitating better integration of foreigners. Ho (2015) suggests the blurring or even abolishing of CMIO to welcome the multiple identities that comprise Singapore society today; the former I support. The CMIO model helped to create common ground between the different ethnicities but has oversimplified Singapore's diversity, and given immigration trends, is no longer tenable. The racial hegemony, challenges faced by minorities and language issues all reflect the inadequacies of CMIO. Ho states that the less people are pigeon-holed, the more chances there are for a cohesive diversity. Cohesive diversity is a unique marker of the Singapore identity and might be best expressed by Persian poet Rumi: "You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean, in a drop" (Ho, 2015).

### **Singapore's National Cinema**

If the Singapore identity is a negotiation between its political and cultural identities, then Singapore's national cinema is a body of work that expresses this tension, as seen with both mainstream and independent local films. Singapore's cultural identity or Singaporeanness has been played up more in mainstream films, which have endeared Singaporeans to these films. Singaporeanness is constructed in contemporary mainstream films by featuring the



'heartlander hero' or 'Everyman' and the cultural signifiers of food and language, all of which are epitomised in Jack Neo's films. As referenced in Chapters 4 and 5, the everyman is the everyday Singaporean recognised by local audiences, who displays essentialised or imagined Singapore-specific behaviour such as racial stereotypes and the over-the-top use of Singlish (Gomes, 2015, p. 35). Yet this figure is also able to represent and express the everyday concerns of ordinary Singaporeans, seen as a symbol of resistance to the state and its performance of the Singapore Story.

Herein, the tensions between Singapore's political and cultural identities are expressed and negotiated in cinema. In fact, these tensions have always been reflected in Singapore cinema. The discourse of the everyman dominated Golden Age cinema, with P. Ramlee championing the everyman character in his films. While the disconnect between golden age and contemporary cinema is clear, the link between them is the use of the everyman who resists the control and changes that the state represents, whose narrative is used as counter performance to the state's performance of the Singapore Story. For example, P. Ramlee's everyman resisted the changes that came with modernisation while Jack Neo's everyman resisted the changes that came with globalisation, reflecting what the nation was undergoing in the different eras. The counter performing narratives found in Neo's work are also prominent in many independent films featuring characters and environments which are the antithesis of the model Singapore promoted by the Government, for example, films like *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys* which highlight Singapore's underbelly. However, the Singaporeanness is less overt in these films, which do not necessarily feature the everyman character, use Singlish or display Singaporean cultural traits like kiasuism. However, by showing a different side to Singapore through marginalised characters or subversive storylines, the films address national specificity in a way that resonates with overseas audiences, unlike Neo's films which are more localised.

While the everyman discourse shows how films negotiate between Singapore's political and cultural identities, any further negotiation is hindered by the challenges of constructing Singapore's political or cultural identity on screen due to censorship and multiracialism respectively. Censorship constrains the expression of Singapore's political identity because anything considered political is out of bounds. The most prevalent form of censorship in Singapore is self-censorship, sustained by the culture of fear born out of the vulnerability rhetoric. Multiracialism also limits the expression of Singapore's cultural identity because of

the difficulties associated with multicultural representation on screen and the complications of race and language in the city-state. Multiculturalism on screen is addressed either through the CMIO approach or is completely absent. The former is state-endorsed and is seen on television and in other hegemonic works, and as such, is the approach shunned by most filmmakers who prefer more realistic representations of multiculturalism. However, this is difficult to achieve and hence, the general tendency to avoid multicultural representation altogether, perpetuating the racial hegemony and continued marginalisation of minorities. Related to these issues, language is highly problematic in Singapore cinema with challenges facing every one of Singapore's languages. The negotiation between Singapore's political and cultural identities is also tested by local and global forces affecting Singapore cinema. Filmmakers have to take local and international audiences into consideration in whether to address either a cultural or political identity. The former would draw in local audiences, but possibly alienate international audiences, and vice versa for the latter, given the dissonance between local consciousness and the international branding of Singapore. As Khoo (2006, p. 82) highlighted, the struggle for filmmakers here is between personal storytelling which bears the 'voice' of the filmmaker in revealing Singapore and projective storytelling which projects that of the Government in selling Singapore. Taking audience reception into consideration also impacts on the production process, for example in the film style or language used, because production in the Singapore context is highly dependent on reception.

The challenges above – of censorship, multiracialism and the negotiation of local and global forces – along with the fragmented history of Singapore cinema – impede filmmakers who try to construct Singapore's identity on film. Thus, addressing the second part of the research question, filmmakers construct Singapore's identity in their films by negotiating these challenges as best they can; examples of this have been discussed in earlier chapters. As these challenges also question the authenticity of Singapore films, what then constitutes the 'Singapore Film', one that speaks to and of Singapore?

For some of my interviewees, the definition of what constitutes the Singapore film is quite wide. IMDA's<sup>22</sup> Assistant CEO Kenneth Tan offers the following definition:

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<sup>22</sup> Info-communications Media Development Authority

Made in or by or with Singapore that wouldn't have turned out that way if Singapore were not in it, so by that definition, a Singaporean key person, Singapore as the setting, narratively or cinematographically, Singapore expertise being integral in the film, Singapore money alone, but usually this comes with Singaporean talent as well...in my book, that's Singapore cinema (interview, 29 December 2015).

By this definition, films with Singapore expertise or financing that are not otherwise Singapore stories are considered as expressing Singapore identity. Tan uses *Hitman: Agent 47* (2015) as an example. This is a Hollywood film which was shot in Singapore – its only connection to the country. For Tan, *Hitman: Agent 47* represents the transnational product that has Singapore identity but is “not Singapore-created IP<sup>23</sup>”, but this does not matter as long as there are other films where the IP is Singaporean-created (interview, 29 December 2015).

For other interviewees, however, the definition is more specific and needs to entail something recognisable to Singaporeans. As expressed by Director Sanif Olek:

When a Singaporean who lives overseas can identify what they see in that film as something from Singapore, regardless of the race and culture, I think that is Singapore cinema (interview, 29 October 2015).

Other interviewees feel that the term ‘Singapore Film’ cannot be defined. Film academic Edna Lim explains:

There is no one text that can possibly encompass all that Singapore could mean or be to everyone. What we have are multiple perspectives and I think they ought to be taken in their own merit (interview, 4 December 2015).

Sharing the same view, Producer Juan Foo states that there cannot be one film to represent the entire zeitgeist of Singapore, and furthermore, Singapore does not make enough films to even create a “Criterion Collection” of Singapore cinema (i.e.) ten to twenty films which are demonstrative of Singapore culture through the years. Thus, for Foo, the building of a

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<sup>23</sup> Intellectual property

national cinema is ongoing and there will never be a quintessential Singapore film, because a single work cannot express Singapore identity like a body of work can (interview, 14 December 2015).

Given the hyphenated cinemas we have representing the various ethnic communities, it is clear that no single film can represent Singapore identity. As Director Chai Yee Wei expresses, “we’re like “rojak”, where it’s a mish-mash of everything. We speak in English and we switch to Chinese and we have a little bit of Malay and so on, but that’s what we are” (interview, 21 October 2015). Rojak is an apt term to describe the eclecticism of Singapore cinema, but Actor/Director Alaric Tay is quick to point out that even if Singapore films are rojak, “our rojak is a certain type of rojak” (interview, 19 October 2015). Tay’s statement implies that even if Singapore films reflect the country’s cultural heterogeneity, they must still be able to communicate a Singapore connection or consciousness that cuts across racial boundaries. This is a tall order for Singapore films and perhaps explains why the quintessential Singapore film has yet to be made.

Film Academic Edna Lim concludes that the label ‘Singapore cinema’ is a broad one – it can encompass films made by Singaporeans about local issues, or films by Singaporeans that have nothing to do with Singapore, or films not made by Singaporeans but are about Singapore. Furthermore, she makes a distinction between ‘Singapore cinema’ and ‘Singaporean cinema’, the latter being something very culturally definitive. “Singaporean cinema denotes something that’s very specific – made by Singaporeans, for Singaporeans or about Singaporeans” (interview, 4 December 2015).

Lim’s distinction between Singapore cinema and Singaporean cinema is significant. Singapore cinema is something much broader. Perhaps such a distinction is necessary in explaining why filmmakers still need to target different markets (local or international), taking into consideration production and audience reception, particularly the different degrees of authenticity required by different audiences. Growing national cinema (Singaporean cinema) is important for cultural reasons and growing transnational cinema (Singapore cinema) is also important for economic reasons and to position Singapore cinema’s place in world cinema. While ideally, Singapore films should find ways to be both authentic and universal, appealing both locally and internationally, this has been challenging as seen with middle ground films or commercial indies. Thus, in answering the third part of the research

question, Singapore filmmakers currently negotiate the local/global divide by making their films specific to either a local or international audience, but not both, justifying the distinction between Singapore cinema and Singaporean cinema.

Even as a transnational cinema, Singapore cinema still remains a national cinema. Given the contestation over the term 'national cinema', it is more useful to ask how Singapore cinema works as a national cinema, rather than suggesting it has a fixed character. For Edna Lim, "Singapore cinema functions as a national cinema by showing us another Singapore, whether it's a Singapore of the past like the golden age films, or a Singapore that's different from the state's performance of Singapore as a successful nation" (interview, 4 December 2015). While both golden age and contemporary cinema serve their function as national cinema, by expressing the tensions between the nation's political and cultural identity and by counter performance, the difficulty is in seeing both cinemas as one unified national cinema because of the incongruity between the two. The fragmentation in Singapore cinematic history not only hindered the development of national cinema, it also made it hard to attribute a sense of identity (and authenticity) to the body of films.

Golden Age cinema was reflective of the nation but it was a different nation at a different time. Such films gave Singapore an identity when it was still an integral part of the Malay world, but its nationalist narrative became irrelevant when Singapore became independent (Teo, 2017a, p. 3). Hence, many do not see the golden age as part of Singapore's national cinema. For Film Academic Liew Kai Khiun, golden age cinema was transnational and more diffused, working within a broader regional market, so it is the revival cinema that marks the beginnings of a national cinema, evolving along with the nation-state and engaging in articulations of its postcolonial identity (interview, 10 December 2015). However, a small domestic market, the Government's internationalising strategy and the culture of Western media consumption have contributed to Singapore cinema becoming a transnational cinema before solidifying as a national cinema. As Khoo (2006) notes, Singapore is keen both to build and yet disperse the notion of a national cinema in order to become a regional hub and a site of global media exchange (p. 94). Yet Tan (2012b) states that thinking about Singapore's filmmaking efforts in terms of the transnational film may be premature and counterproductive since depth, complexity, and authenticity have yet to be established in the Singapore films that pose and problematise questions of national and cultural identity (p. 153). Aside from overcoming the challenges faced by filmmakers as discussed in the thesis, time is needed for

more films to be made, for more introspection and articulations to take place for national cinema to grow and an active film culture to be developed. Such film culture would invite more scholarship on how films problematise identity which encourages further inquiry by both scholars and filmmakers, thus sustaining and cultivating the film culture.

Singapore cinema's struggle to be both national and transnational recalls Higson's (1989) argument that national cinemas have an inward and outward focus; they are a product of a tension between 'home' and 'away'. As Berry (2006) reiterates, while the transnational continues to grow, the national persists, often stimulated by the very same transnational forces that were thought to be displace it (p. 149). He stresses that no transnational cinema exists without encountering and negotiating national spaces and cultures (2010, p. 112). As the national continues to exert its presence within transnational filmmaking (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p. 10), Singapore cinema needs to continue to develop and capitalise on a unique Singapore identity to do so. As Director Anthony Chen expresses:

My personal hope or wish for Singapore cinema moving forward – it's not about what is right or wrong, it's not about arthouse or mainstream – what I'm looking forward to is a cinema of possibilities. Why? Because my sense is that we are probably one of the few countries that could do that. We are multilingual, multiracial, we are a complex, colourful migrant society, we speak in a mish-mash of languages. If any country can create a cinema that's very diverse, that's of different shapes and sizes, that's of different genres and types, I think we are the one, which is why I'm looking forward to a Singapore cinema of possibilities (interview, 23 November 2015).

Singapore cinema, with its multiplicity of languages, does not fit into the current global framework of homogeneous film markets. However, if it can find some way to transcend this by leveraging on having multiple languages and turning this into a commercial product as suggested by Producer Lau Chee Nien (interview, 21 December 2015), multilingualism would become an asset. How this can be achieved in practical terms should be explored by further scholarship, but perhaps as a starting point, filmmakers should embrace Singapore's multilingualism and not worry about working with many languages. In Choi's (2011) comprehensive definition of 'national cinema', he states that national cinema is a discourse, a fusion of policies and political aspirations (p. 184). As a discourse, Singapore cinema can

seek to change policy and practice within and beyond its borders if it aspires to be a “cinema of possibilities”.

### **The Relationship between Singapore Identity and Singapore Cinema**

Given the challenges faced by Singapore filmmakers in addressing the nation in their works, what can be said about the relationship between Singapore’s identity and cinema? First, Producer Juan Foo raises an interesting question: What comes first, national identity or cinema? Or cinema growing that national identity? (Interview, 14 December 2015). Recalling Cheng’s (2004) idea about our role as active agents, shaping our cultures, have Singapore filmmakers used their works to shape Singapore’s culture or identity? Artist/Curator Khairuddin bin Hori believes it should be through art that we find our identity (interview, 22 January 2016). Yet, economic success takes precedence over art in Singapore, and its identity is associated more with capitalist rather than cultural pursuits. In such an environment, most filmmakers cannot help but think and work along economic terms, which affects their craft and output. As Director Daniel Hui expresses:

If we think too much about the industry and the economics, you kill creativity, you kill your love for cinema...[Yet] there is something that is very particular to Singapore: we cannot stop thinking about money (interview, 2 February 2016).

There are of course exceptions – filmmakers who believe in using their films to grow national culture – but they are few and far between, and they struggle to work in a system that often does not recognise or support their work.

A second point on the relationship between Singapore identity and cinema is that both are in flux and cinema, like the nation, has been struggling to define its own sense of identity and place in the world. As expressed by Director Glen Goei:

You could say the cinema of the past twenty years is representative of where we are in Singapore today, we’re still looking for that identity. You could say it’s very colourful and mixed, you can never really pin point it because it’s very layered and multifaceted, or you could just say that it doesn’t exist. It’s so disparate, all of us live

in our own communities and our own little worlds, but nothing actually really brings it together (interview, 11 December 2015).

This disparateness of Singapore cinema is mainly due to race and language issues that prevent it from being culturally homogenous. Yet, this is reflective of Singapore's heterogeneity, segregations existing according to CMIO.

Art of any culture, regardless of where it originates, is a creative allegory of the collective society, as a powerful signifier of a culture's collective consciousness (Gomes, 2015, p. 44). Singaporeans turn to their cinema to make sense of their collective circumstance, which has to do with the complexities associated with the drive to be globally relevant while remaining culturally rooted. As a young nation, Singapore faces five challenges with its identity: A strong ethnic Chinese demographic in a demographically Malay-centric geographic region; an increasingly diverse multi-ethnic and multicultural society; an ambitiously cosmopolitan society that enjoys wealth and materialism, but contrastingly, also cherishes conservatism and traditional cultural values; the rewriting of history through the officially sanctioned narrative known as *The Singapore Story*; and an authoritarian government that plays a vital part in the development of Singapore's society and culture which is both lauded and loathed by Singaporeans (Gomes, 2015, p. 46 – 52).

However, out of these five challenges, the first two have to do with race, religion and regional politics, and the last two have to do with the Government and its manipulation of history, so recalling the OB markers, they remain largely untouchable by Singapore filmmakers. The only challenge which allows film engagement is the third one – the tension between Singapore's progressiveness and its roots as a traditional Asian society. Indeed, this is the subject matter of many Singapore contemporary films, which explore the social issues stemming from Singapore's transnational position between Western economy and Eastern traditions (Marchetti, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 5, it is this negotiation between the local and the global that contributes to the elusiveness of authenticity in Singapore cinema. Aspects of Singapore's culture had to be sacrificed in the nation's pursuit of globalisation, for example physical infrastructure and language. As Director Kan Lumé reflects, "We are rootless. We are a culture that's been lobotomised, transplanted, haven't really had chance to take deep root." Since the very notion of Singapore identity and culture is problematic, to make a Singapore film or a film with Singapore identity is problematic (Kan Lumé, 9 January 2016).



For Director Sun Koh, Singapore's rootlessness is not necessarily a bad thing because "it frees us up to do a lot that people feel too imprisoned [by history] to express." The challenge then for Singapore filmmakers is to actually express it, given censorship constraints (Sun Koh, interview, 12 January 2016). By making films that function as counter performance to dominant ideology, local filmmakers are gradually pushing censorship boundaries.

As boundaries continue being pushed in the pursuit of authenticity, Singapore cinema will persist in offering a counter perspective to Singapore, fulfilling its function as a national cinema. As Willemsen (2006) asserts, the role of national cinema is to engage with the questions of national specificity from a critical, counter-hegemonic position, and in so doing, move the 'national' configuration (p. 35 – 36). How can Singapore filmmakers grow national cinema and how can they use their films to speak to Singapore's identity? Producer Juan Foo states that in contrast to the rapid growth of Singapore's economy, the development of national cinema and the film industry cannot be rushed. Time is needed to establish film as a national voice. He articulates:

Filmmaking is ideology. If you want to grow an ideology, it really takes a long time, it takes generations. Will the authorities want to take that leap of faith and commit to growing ideology for generations to come? Or do they want it to be quick stop-gap measure? (Interview, 14 December 2015).

Foo also places the responsibility on filmmakers – whether they want to spend their entire lives growing this ideology or growing cinema? Or whether they just want to get rich quick, make a commercially viable film, rest on its laurels, and not consider that filmmaking is really building blocks for national identity and culture (interview, 14 December 2015). Growing a national cinema also requires nurturing an appreciation for local arts amongst local audiences. First, there needs to be a mindset change that local works have merit in their own right and do not need foreign endorsement before being recognised locally. Second, this change in thinking could be effected through education, more state initiatives to promote local work, and more dialogue between filmmakers and audiences.

For Artist/Director Ho Tzu Nyen, while identity is important in cinema, Singapore cinema should not be a quest for identity. He argues that the quest for identity as a stable essence and from a single starting point is futile because of the nature of identity as always in flux. He

believes it is more productive to think about this search itself as an endless proliferation; identity is no longer a search for one singular truth and therefore, a thing of anxiety (interview, 13 January 2016). However, the search for identity is in-built as part of our humanity, from the personal to the national. Singapore and its cinema will continue to find its identity as it grows into its own, but as studied, identity will be partly constructed, partly naturally developed and always changing with time. Singapore International Film Festival Director Zhang Wenjie concludes:

Some of the best films to come out of Singapore are films that address the sense of searching for identity, that sense of uneasiness about who we are, the tension between what is official and what is personal, or what is the nation and what is the individual, the sense that we've been told we're like this but we feel differently (interview, 5 January 2016).

Hall (2004) articulates that “identity is constituted, not outside but within representation. Hence, cinema should not reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are.” This is the vocation of a modern Singapore cinema: to see and recognise the “different parts and histories of ourselves” and what we call the nation (p. 397). With my own film, I have endeavoured to construct my own understanding of Singapore’s identity and having reflected in Chapter 6 on my engagement with the subject matter through my creative practice, I have a better sense of myself as a Singaporean, as a filmmaker, and what it means to be both. I see that as the Singapore identity continues to evolve, Singapore cinema can play an important role in shaping that identity.

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