

## *The Construction of 'Singapore' in Singapore Cinema*

Jeanine Lim, University of Auckland, New Zealand

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### **Abstract**

Supported by interviews from my documentary on the same topic, this paper will explore how race and language are addressed in Singapore through the incorporation of 'Multiracialism', and how filmmakers negotiate these issues in their films in constructing the Singapore identity on screen. Singapore is a heterogeneous society with various ethnic groups. This cultural mix and the constant migration of people make the idea of a unified Singapore identity very challenging. Through promoting 'Multiracialism' and various language policies, the Government has tried to construct this unified identity, while maintaining the individual racial, linguistic and religious boundaries of each official racial group. This in itself is at odds with each other and is an ongoing challenge to the present day. The complexity of race and language issues in Singapore has created a cinema with fragmented cultural identity, one that is racially and linguistically divided. This is further complicated by censorship on both race and language. Filmmaking in Singapore is thus a constant negotiation of remaining culturally authentic to appeal to local audiences and censorship constraints that directly challenge this.

Keywords: Multiracialism, CMIO, Singapore Languages, Singapore Television and Cinema, Censorship

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## **Introduction**

With its diasporic migrant history and reputation as a place of convergence, Singapore has always been a hub of diversity. The various ethnic groups and constant movement of people through immigration makes the idea of a unified Singapore identity very challenging. Singapore has a total population of 5.61 million, of which 3.41 million or a little over 60% are Singapore citizens. Of these, 74.3% are Chinese, 13.4% are Malays, 9.1% are Indians, and 3.2% are made up of Eurasians and other minorities (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2016). In addition, 40% of the population consists of foreigners, which is reflective of Singapore's diasporic history.

Singapore has always been an immigrant society. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Singapore was a thriving centre of trade (Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals), 1970), which grew with its 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial founding, attracting traders from the Malay archipelago, India and China (Tan, 2010, p. 161). When Singapore gained independence in 1965, suddenly a new nation-state was formed and the Singapore Government faced the challenge of bringing together a multiracial, multilingual and multireligious population with nothing to tie them together apart from the fact that they were largely descendants either of people who came to Singapore to make a better life for themselves (Peterson, 2001, p. 11).

Given this history and the present situation, how did the Singapore Government construct and reconstruct its national identity over time to keep up with the country's ever-changing cultural landscape? The Singapore Government differs from many other countries and from common sociological understandings in considering the different cultural groups within society to be racial groups rather than ethnic groups (Goh, 2008). Whereas an ethnic group self-identifies and is recognised by others as being a group on the basis of sharing a language, religious practices, a homeland or culture, the concept of race argues for the biological distinctiveness of cultural groups (Fozdar, Wilding & Hawkins, 2009). Resulting from the officially endorsed Singaporean view that cultural groupings are fixed and biologically determined races, the terms 'race' and 'multiracialism' tend to be used in place of the internationally more common terms 'ethnicity' and 'multiculturalism' (Chua, 1998; Hill & Lian, 1995). Multiracialism is the Government's solution to manage the disparateness of its people. Race is the basis for Singapore's identity construction, and is also at the forefront of the government agenda, and the Singaporean psyche, in terms of official policies that govern housing, education, employment, national service, the electoral system etc (Gomes, 2015, p. 61; Clammer, 1998).

## **Constructing a unified Singapore identity based on Multiracialism**

In the 1970s, Berry, Kalin and Taylor (1977, 1) defined Multiculturalism through three closely related features. First, multiculturalism is demographic fact: most countries are now culturally diverse. Second, multiculturalism is an ideology: individuals and communities have views on the acceptance or rejection of such diversity. Third, some governments implement public policies and programmes to encourage the promotion of diversity. While the three features of multiculturalism above apply to Singapore, the country's version of multiculturalism is less 'melting pot' and emphasises ethnic diversity. The 'melting pot' model incorporates colour-blind ideologies and policies which ignore or minimise group differences. Singapore's

multiculturalism is not colour-blind, but rather colour-conscious and to an extent that it is also problematic. Poet and Playwright Alfian bin Sa'at explains this by distinguishing between Multiculturalism and Multiracialism. For him, multiculturalism is more inclusive, because multiracialism is defined in Singapore in quite narrow terms, which is to create these particular categories of communities through the “Chinese-Malays-Indians-Others” (CMIO) framework. Whereas multiculturalism is a respect for cultural diversity, multiracialism in Singapore is framed as a hierarchy based on the numerical strength of each racial group. So instead of the ‘melting pot’ model, Singapore has a ‘mosaic’ model or a ‘salad bowl’ model, in which all the ingredients in the salad are there, but they are still discreet and distinct, and they do form this dish which is called a salad (Alfian bin Sa'at, interview, 7 January 2016).

With Singapore’s model of multiculturalism, diversity is over-emphasised in race-based policies which contradict the objective of multiculturalism. Thus, Singapore has a complex multicultural identity (Ang and Stratton, 1995) that both unifies as well as divides ethnic communities (Gomes, 2010). According to Chua (2003), Singapore has ‘imagined multiculturalism’ – Singapore’s CMIO categories highlight difference rather than integration, diversity rather than hybridity.

## **Multiracialism and CMIO**

### *CMIO*

CMIO is a racial framework of Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others. This racial framework is used as the basis for many public policies and is a homogenising tool used to structure a heterogenous society. A legacy from colonial times, as an idealised “four races” model of society, CMIO assumes that racial identities are fixed, primordial and authentic – in essence, holding an essentialist position (Tan, 2008, p. 29).

### *Racial riots*

Singapore’s history is marked by the racial riots of the 1950s and 1960s which have also defined the Government’s approach to nation-building and shaped the average Singaporean’s view that a person’s ‘race’ is a fundamental marker of identity. The riots took place before and around the time when Singapore became independent, and are part of the reason why Singapore separated from Malaysia, due to political differences and tensions between the Chinese and Malay.

### *Racial harmony*

After the riots, the Government promoted a national identity based on multiracialism and racial harmony. These are officially celebrated annually through National Day and Racial Harmony Day. Maintaining racial harmony is then part of a top-down, hegemonic agenda rather than something that develops organically from the ground up. As Academic Kirpal Singh notes, “the idea of a multiracial, multi-religious, multi-lingual Singaporean society is seen to be a political dictum”, which is “not always transferred to the level of day-to-day engagements” (Kirpal Singh, interview, 27 October 2015).

Singaporeans tend to not question the legitimacy of the country's multiculturalism having been indoctrinated by government rhetoric on "Singapore's perfect racial harmony". They are also unlikely to question such issues because the Government discourages public discussion on race, continuously citing the racial riots as a reason why such matters should be avoided. A recent Channel NewsAsia-Institute of Policy Studies Survey on Race Relations found that many Singaporeans regard talking about racial issues as highly sensitive, disconcerting and having the potential for tension (Mathews, 2016a, p. 11; Mathews, 2016b, p. 4). Actor Brendon Fernandez explains why race is a taboo topic in Singapore:

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 (Brendon Fernandez, interview, 16 December 2015).

### *The Impact of CMIO*

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 class being conflated and held to be permanent and passed down through the generations, powerfully shaping national and cultural identity (Vasu, 2012, p. 738; Tan, 2008, p. 29). The first problem with CMIO is the 'Others' category, which includes any minor ethnic group outside the predominantly CMI framework, such as Eurasians (the significant community within this grouping), Arabs, Armenians, Japanese and Europeans.

Second, the other CMI categories disregard ethnic differences within each category, so the most dominant ethnicity is used as the recognition shell for communal classification. As such, the Malayalees, Punjabis, Bengalis, Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese are all grouped as Indian. All people from Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh are also classified 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. So 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 with the promotion of Mandarin to create a sense of homogeneity amongst the Chinese. This has the effect of cultural erosion as language is an obvious signifier and transporter of culture. Transforming hybrid and constantly evolving ethnic identity (encompassing language and religion) into neat categories makes it easier for the Government to manage diversity in terms of administration and governance (Tan, 2008, p. 29–30). While CMIO makes for easier management of race, it does not allow for the existence of hybridity. In fact, CMIO has led to heightened racial consciousness and the hardening of racial divisions.

The third problem with CMIO is how it challenges the idea of an overarching Singapore national identity that the Government has constructed and continues to promote. Academic Hoon Chang Yau explains:

On one hand, there's differences that Singapore is synonymous with like CMIO. On the other hand, Singapore also wants to build itself as one unified Singapore identity. So the tension between these two is something that's very real in Singapore. 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 fullstop (Hoon Chang Yau, interview, 20 October 2015).

In short, the Singapore identity is torn between its national and its cultural identity. Now, a hyphenated identity prevails as Singaporeans see themselves as Singaporean-Chinese, Malay, Indian rather than just Singaporean.

Following CMIO, multiracialism is kept in check through various means, including the implementation of racial quotas and race-based self-help groups, amongst others. Intended to promote racial harmony, all this, instead, promotes racial hegemony. For example, the elite schools are Chinese. In the military, until recently, certain sensitive areas were restricted to certain races. Politically, Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese Prime Minister. The plethora of multicultural policies has made us less multicultural. As suggested earlier by Alfian bin Sa'at – we are multiracial, but not multicultural. How can we be multicultural if melting pot practices and hybridity are discouraged?

## **Multiculturalism in the Media**

### *Television*

Singapore being a multiracial society which does not talk about race, it is unsurprising that the subject of race is silenced by the Out-of-Bounds (OB) marker on race and religion. An OB marker is used in Singapore to denote what topics are permissible for public discussion. The main OB areas are Race/Religion; Politics; and Alternative Lifestyles. Multiracialism is thus presented on screen as an accessory and not really in terms of content. Like multiracialism in the country, multiracialism in Singapore cinema is CMIO-based. Cinema takes its cue from television where there are dedicated channels allocated to the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities. Programmes on each of these channels are culturally and linguistically specific to a community and thus, are often limited to that community. On the surface, the vernacular channels seem necessary to promote the use of our official languages and protect linguistic rights in a multicultural society, but the consequence is the creation of monolingual environments, producing monoethnic and monocultural worlds (Alfian, 2016, n.p.).

## *Cinema*

Like television, Singapore cinema is divided along racial lines. The majority of Singapore films are Chinese-dominated, featuring predominantly Chinese actors speaking in Mandarin, peppered with dialects, English and Singlish. Due to the languages used, these films appeal mainly to Chinese Singaporeans. There is little minority representation in these Chinese films. Singapore films either sidestep the complexities of ethnicities outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus or portray them reductively or stereotypically. Through unproblematic and humorous portrayals of ethnic minorities, a mirage of racial harmony is created, providing an insight into how multiculturalism in Singapore can only cope within specific ethnic parameters (Gomes, 2015, p. 82). The ethnic minorities thus continue to struggle to find a place in Singapore cinema.

This is apparent in the fact that Malay and Tamil feature film production in Singapore is almost non-existent. Singapore cinema has been Chinese-dominated since independence, with only two Tamil films (Eric Khoo's *My Magic* and T.T Thavamani's *Gurushetram – 24 Hours of Anger*) and two Malay feature films produced in the last 50 years (Sanif Olek's *Sayang Disayang* and M. Raihan Halim's *Banting*). In fact, these films were all produced only in the last decade. However, these works, being targeted at their respective communities and not really featuring other races in prominent roles, generally do not appeal beyond their immediate ethnic communities.

Singapore's multiracialism is adapted in CMIO terms on screen and the 'authentic multiculturalism' that exists on the ground is not carried over to television and cinema. Instead of reflecting stories of true embedded multiculturalism, evident in hybrid or melting pot practices, television and state-supported films adopt a prescribed state-endorsed notion of multiculturalism which seems forced and therefore inauthentic. Other than this, the other approach is to avoid multicultural representation altogether, which many films have done. This is for both cultural and economic reasons – the basic idea that marketing films that feature a mix of ethnic groups or mixed languages is extremely challenging given the cultural homogeneity of film markets. Singapore cinema thus cannot simply be just that. Singapore cinema is really a hyphenated cinema – Singapore Chinese/Malay/Indian cinema.

### **Language in Singapore**

In the construction of Singapore identity, race and language are intrinsically intertwined. The language problems faced in Singapore carry over to its cinema.

#### *Language Policies*

Singapore's language policy assumes that there is a tight, almost unbreakable link between language and ethnic identity. Thus, the state feels comfortable in assigning official mother tongues to individuals on the basis of their ethnic identities (Wee, 2014, p. 652). Bilingualism was implemented in 1960 with English being taught to prepare Singaporeans for the global economy and the second language used to retain cultural roots. With the priority on nation-building and Singapore's global economic competitiveness, the Government promoted English-language education during the

1970s. After about a decade however, the Government feared that Singapore was “becoming deculturalised” and too Westernised. So in 1979, the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign was launched to reconnect Chinese Singaporeans to their Chinese roots.

Under Singapore’s bilingual policy, four languages are defined as its official languages, namely, English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil where English is the first language and the others (referred to as 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).

In terms of the language policies, the effect of enforcing English, then switching to Mandarin within a decade, has no doubt confused the generations and left most Singaporean Chinese far from being completely bilingual, struggling with both languages and excelling in neither (Peterson, 2001, p. 58). The ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign also heightened racial consciousness, promoting the language of the majority race and alienating the minorities.

I will now focus on English and Mandarin and their related languages as these are the languages in contention with censorship.

### *English*

English is the unifying language in Singapore, but it is a foreign tongue. It replaced Malay which was our unifying language prior to independence. The decision to make English the first language is economically motivated as discussed earlier. However, it is also politically motivated – English is a ‘neutral’ language that would be common to all races and being neutral, it is a fair linguistic choice across the different races. The simultaneous acceptance and rejection of English is one of the many problems with language in Singapore. On one hand, English is the country’s lingua franca facilitating inter-ethnic interaction, but on the other hand, it is not recognised as a mother tongue, which then lowers its standing against the other official languages of Singapore.

### *Singlish*

English in Singapore has also evolved as Singlish, which consists of a “largely English-based vocabulary peppered with Malay and dialect, but with syntax closer to Chinese or Malay than English” (Peterson, 2001, p. 58). Singlish has become the unofficial symbol of Singapore’s multicultural national identity, fostering an unofficial nationalist spirit and creating a sense of unity amongst disparate Singaporeans across ethnic cultures (Gomes, 2015, p. 41, 150). Singlish is disapproved of and discouraged by the state as the Government believes it will adversely affect the ability of Singaporeans to learn ‘good’ English and jeopardise their ability to compete effectively in the global economy (Rubdy, 2001; Chng, 2003). Singlish is thus banned in official communiqué and in classrooms, and discouraged in media. Singlish is undoubtedly one of the few authentic markers of Singaporean identity and culture, but it continues to struggle in being accepted as such by the state.

## *Mandarin and Dialects*

With the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign, the Government hoped to unify the Chinese in Singapore who were speaking different Chinese dialects, and to connect them to the Motherland of China for cultural and economic reasons. The campaign sought to eliminate the use of dialects as they were deemed a threat to Mandarin. Dialects were eradicated from TV and to a lesser degree, cinema. However in fact, English and Singlish pose much bigger threats, being more commonly spoken on the ground. Lee and André conclude that Singapore’s case with the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign presents contrary evidence to the hypothesis that language transmits culture (2015, p. 15). I would argue that language transmits culture if the language is perceived as indigenous. Mandarin was never native for Singapore. The same can be said for English. This explains why Singapore has neither fully accepted English nor Chinese culture and is in fact straddling both. Had dialects not been wiped out, authentic heritage and cultures of the individual Chinese ethnicities would still exist today, which would strengthen the sense of Chineseness the Government sought after when they implemented the ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign. Like Singlish, another important cultural marker of Singapore identity, particularly the Singapore Chinese identity, is denied.

## **Language in Singapore Cinema and Censorship**

### *Dialects*

Language in Singapore cinema is problematic because of the various ethnicities and the use of the CMIO approach restricting films to an ethnic group based on the language of the film. This is further complicated by language censorship, specifically on Singlish and Chinese dialects, both of which are considered authentically Singaporean. Both are discouraged on film and disallowed on television. Singlish and Chinese dialects lay dormant from the 1960s until the mid-1990s, so local audiences were exuberant with their resurgence in revival cinema (Chan, 2008, p. 100). Also, the very presence of disowned languages in Singapore films serves as a terse reminder about the state’s failure in language policing (Tan, Lee & Aw, 2003, p. 19).

Despite being Mandarin-dominated, Singapore cinema today often includes the state-permitted amount of dominant dialects (Gomes, 2015, p. 42). However, it is ambiguous what the state-permitted amount is. In the Board of Film Censors Classification Guidelines, it is stated:

Films with dialect content are allowed on a case-by-case basis. Chinese films meant for theatrical release should generally be in Mandarin, in line with the Speak Mandarin Campaign (Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2011).

As gathered by the many filmmakers I interviewed, the dialect quota is understood to be in the range of 30% to 50%. The quota is not stated explicitly anywhere.



How do filmmakers feel about such censorship? According to Singapore Film Society's Vice Chairman David Lee:

The marker on dialects affects [all] Chinese-language films [in Singapore]. This is a big issue even for a filmmaker like Jack Neo [Singapore's most popular and successful filmmaker] 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 (David Lee, interview, 5 January 2016).

A significant first for Singapore is *667*, a recent anthology of shorts entirely in dialects, produced by acclaimed Singapore director, Royston Tan. The anthology features five shorts about the search for one's cultural roots and how one makes Singapore home. Helmed by five up-and-coming directors, each individual segment is told in a different Chinese dialect – Cantonese, Teochew, Hokkien, Hainanese and Hakka (Yip, 2017). While this may seem like a relaxation of the rules, the film has a hegemonic agenda. It was commissioned by the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC), and produced for the centre's inaugural Singapore Chinese cultural festival (Yip, 2017). While an exception on dialect allowance was made for this film, there has been no announcement from the Media Authority on any change in rules pertaining to the use of dialects in films.

### *Singlish*

Despite the Government's promotion of English throughout Singapore's history, the preference of Singlish on the ground has led to most Singapore films using Singlish over English. The use of Singlish in films allows for the linguistic diversity that underlies a collective Singaporean cultural identity, rather than a Chinese, Malay, or Indian one (Chan, 2008, p. 100). As Siddique (2002) notes, "it is Singlish, rather than Standard English, that functions as a cultural broker language that mediates between the different races" (p. 165 – 166).

Against censorship, Singlish also serves as a form of resistance – a powerful yet non-confrontational device employed by the masses in an unconscious collective expression of civil disobedience against an autocratic government (Gomes, 2015, p. 151, 172). For Singapore filmmakers, using Singlish in their works is a constant tug-of-war between pushing censorship boundaries and not alienating local and international audiences with too little or too much Singlish. The case of *Talking Cock – The Movie* (2002) is a stark reminder of how a film can be 'punished' for overusing Singlish. The film was initially rated R(A) [Restricted (Artistic)]. Movies under this category are not considered suitable for those under age 21 as they depict sex and violence in an explicit or exploitative manner. Later upon appeal, the film was rated NC16 [No Children Under 16], which was still disproportionately high for a film with no sex scenes, violence or any other unsuitable content (Tan & Fernando, 2007, p. 137).

Filmmakers negotiate around censorship by either using less Singlish, less crude forms of Singlish or balancing it with proper English. Filmmakers are also deeply aware of how crucial and difficult it is to get the pitch of Singlish just right on film, failing which the films appear inauthentic and lose local audiences.

As a patois, Singlish can also be unintelligible to and alienate foreign audiences. So filmmakers, trying to be both authentic and economical, compromise by keeping some degree of Singlish, but neutralising it as much as possible for international appeal (Lui, 2014). Both a source of cultural pride and embarrassment, there appears to be no consistency in what the right amount of Singlish is – whether it works with the audience depends largely on treatment and reception (Chan, 2008, p. 102). As explained by Artist and Director Sherman Ong:

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 (Sherman Ong, interview, 20 December 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The issue of language censorship brings into question the issue of authenticity in Singapore films. How truthful can Singapore films be if they are constantly under the scrutiny of censorship? Director Chai Yee Wei explains:

Singlish not being allowed on screen is almost like telling us that if you want to portray real Singaporeans on screen, you're not allowed to. I feel that this is extremely dangerous because we lose the opportunity to portray what is the truth on screen and that is after all what art is all about...it's a pursuit of truth. If you can't tell the truth when it comes to developing art works, then art itself has lost its meaning (Chai Yee Wei, interview, 21 October 2015).

Similarly for dialects, Actor and Director Alaric Tay questions:

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? (Alaric Tay, interview, 19 October 2015).

Furthermore, while the use of multiple languages seems to reflect Singapore's multicultural character, in effect, the emphasis on Chinese languages shows Singapore's racial hegemony. More significantly, there is a desire to feature Chinese languages that have been outlawed instead of featuring minority languages that are

today's national languages, speaking to the continued marginalisation of the Malay and Indian communities.

For the filmmakers I interviewed, the language problem is compounded because neither English nor Mandarin is our true mother tongue. Both are inherited languages made official by language policies. According to 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...(Director Martyn See, interview, 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 (Artist/Director Sherman Ong, interview, 20 December 2015).

In terms of Singapore identity in Singapore cinema, how can Singapore films address the 'national', when most of the aspects of national identity (constituting of gender, ethnicity, religion, language, social class, sexuality, politics and economics) are OB areas? The OB marker on race prevents films from addressing multiracialism, race issues, racial hegemony and minority race problems, which takes away any real expression of national and cultural identity. The OB marker on language further widens films' detachment from a cultural identity.

Notwithstanding authenticity as a problematic term, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal, which is subject to change as culture changes (Vannini and Williams, 2009). For Singapore identity, what has been accepted as authentic is its multicultural society, the hybridisation of languages in the form of Singlish, and its functioning as a highly controlled nation, run by a soft authoritarian Government, which works very hard to showcase the positive aspects of the country and hide the negative ones. Films that work within the OB markers will not reflect any of this honestly or accurately, and films that go beyond the OB markers in providing a more truthful representation will most likely get banned and not be seen by Singaporeans. Either way, portraying an authentic Singapore is problematic. Despite being the most authentic and unifying languages in Singapore, Singlish and dialects struggle to find a place in Singapore cinema. Where OB boundaries are not clearly defined, the pursuit of authentic linguistic representation is not easily achieved. Such is the climate and environment in which Singapore filmmakers have to work, where for a country that appears black and white, there are many grey areas.

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**Contact email:** [jeanine.lim@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:jeanine.lim@auckland.ac.nz)