

**GRAPHIC PROPAGANDA AND  
NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MALAYA (1948-1960):  
A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC APPROACH**

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NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MALAYA (1948-1960):  
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**by**

**KUAH LI FENG**

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# **PROPAGANDA GRAFIK DAN IDENTITI NASIONAL DI MALAYA (1948-1960): SATU PENDEKATAN SEMIOTIK SOSIAL**

## **ABSTRAK**

Apakah *rupa* sebuah negara? Bagaimana ia boleh *dilihat*? Dan adakah ia relevan untuk mengkaji identiti awal sedangkan Malaysia telah menyambut kemerdekaan yang ke-50? Identiti kontemporari Malaysia masih dianggap mentah dan sangat bergantung kepada aspek visual. Bagi menjawab soalan-soalan tersebut, penyelidik mencadangkan keperluan memahami sejarah dan teori untuk proses pembinaan visual yang berkaitan dengan menggunakan propaganda grafik di Malaya (1948 – 1960) sebagai rujukan.

Sebagai permulaan, satu pengisahan sejarah dihasilkan dengan menggabungkan kutipan data dan fakta sejarah Malaya untuk justifikasi peranan propaganda grafik bagi menggambarkan identiti mengikut definisi pihak berkuasa dalam tempoh tersebut. Sejumlah enam kajian kes dipilih untuk analisis Semiotik Sosial yang menunjukkan kekurangan satu *rupa* negara yang kukuh. Namun demikian, analisis juga menunjukkan bahawa perantaraan visual yang terancang antara pihak yang terlibat dan perkongsian matlamat telah menghasilkan cetusan gambaran yang boleh diterima oleh semua kaum berbilang bangsa di Malaya dengan menengahkan nilai dan sikap yang sesuai pada ketika itu. Oleh itu, kajian ini telah memberikan satu pengalaman yang bernilai sebagai rujukan kepada pembinaan identiti visual yang kontemporari.

Selain itu, kajian ini pada dasarnya merupakan satu kajian sejarah seni grafik di Malaysia dengan matlamat untuk melahirkan minat dan kajian baru dalam bidang yang belum diceburi ini. Oleh itu, penyelidik komited untuk menjelaskan setiap langkah yang terlibat dalam proses perolehan konsep dan teori untuk memberi satu contoh replika yang boleh diikuti oleh kajian-kajian sama pada masa akan datang.

# **GRAPHIC PROPAGANDA AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MALAYA (1948-1960): A SOCIAL SEMIOTICS APPROACH**

## **ABSTRACT**

What is the “look” of a nation? How can it be *seen*? And what is the relevance to look at the nascent “look” when Malaysia is already celebrating its 50 years of independence? Contemporary Malaysian identity remains contested and is increasingly visual driven. To answer the above questions, the researcher proposes the need of histories and theories to understand visual making in this matter by using graphic propaganda in Malaya (1948-1960) as reference.

First, a historical narrative is constructed by synthesizing the collected data and Malayan history to justify graphic propaganda’s role in portraying authority-defined identity during the selected period. A total of 6 case studies are then chosen for Social Semiotics analysis, revealing the absence of a solid “look”. Nonetheless, the analyses also showed that careful visual mediation between group interests and shared destinies has projected fragmented visuals that were agreeable to the Malayan people from diverse background by capturing the right values and attitudes of the given time. In this regard, the research presents a valuable experience for the reference of contemporary visual identity making.

Furthermore this research is essentially a study of graphic design history in Malaysia with the aim to generate more interest and future scholarship in this relatively unexplored area. Thus the researcher is committed to explain every step involved in conceptual and theoretical acquisitions in order to provide a replicable path for any potential undertaking of this kind.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“To produce image is to produce identity.”* (Octavio Getino)

What is the relevance to *look* at the nascent Malayan<sup>1</sup> identity when the nation is already celebrating its 50 years of independence? By means of *look*, the research is explicitly concerned with the visual<sup>2</sup> dimension of national identity. This introductory chapter hopes to situate this research in its broader context: national identity in the visual realm. This is done by first discussing the *look* of contemporary Malaysia, which leads to the call for histories and theories to better understand the making and meaning of the *look*.

### 1.1 Statement of Topic

First of all, why is the *look* significant in this context? In Anderson’s (1991) notion, a nation is in some sense imagined, thus possessing a look in the mind. Shils (1995) supports this notion by defining national identity as people possessing a shared look of the nation. While Ankersmit (1996) further stresses that each society needs a look of itself to function properly because without such a mirror image of itself, it will stumble around erratically and aimlessly like a blind man. All the above statements help to derive at the conclusion that the *look* is an essential aspect of national identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The researcher uses the terms Malaya, Malayan, Malaysia, and Malaysian throughout this thesis according to a simple criterion: Malaya is used for the political entity formed under the Federation of Malaya Agreement 1948 which lasted until 1963, and Malayan its people. Malaysia, technically is the political entity formed since September 16, 1963 (originally comprised of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore but the latter separated in 1965), and Malaysian its people. However the terms Malaysia and Malaysian are used here to refer to the country and its people throughout the process of nation building until today, which also include the part on Malaya and Malayan. Hence in this study Malaysia and Malaysian are contemporary in nature, while Malaya and Malayan particularly refer to their historical context, hence the title Malayan identity.

<sup>2</sup> The term visual is used to refer to any element that involves the visual sensory. Other terms such as image and text are used respectively to specifically refer to pictorial and linguistic attributes, they will be used more regularly in following chapters.

Hence, what is the look of a nation? How can one see it? Anderson (1991) points out that invention and development in reproductive and communicative technologies have made the imagined community visible through printed language. In today's society of advanced information technology, the imagined becomes even more visible through wide range of visual representations (Hall, 1992). Indeed, Chaplin (1994) argues that the visual (thus the *look*) has become more than ever, the central to the creation of identity.

Contemporary Malaysia is well aware of the importance to possess an identifiable look to bind its multiracial people. This is reflected in the introduction of Vision 2020 by the then Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad in late 1991. Besides representing the perfect vision (20-20 vision), it symbolises an imagined community of *Masyarakat Madani* whereby:

By the year 2020, Malaysia can be a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society “Bangsa Malaysia”, infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient. (Malaysia, Prime Minister Office, n.d.)

Vision 2020 is considered as one of the most important steps to recapture the imagination of Malaysian nationhood because since its conception, the mission to construct a look for *Bangsa Malaysia* has legitimised the nation-building agenda in many ways (Goh, 2004; Williamson, 2002). For examples, the construction of national symbols (such as the Petronas Twin Towers, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Kuala Lumpur Tower, Cyberjaya and Multimedia Super Corridor) and the Malaysia Boleh campaign are directed to instill in the people the sense of new Malaysian identity that transcends racial<sup>3</sup> differences (Zawawi, 2004, p. 133). The quest for the look of Bangsa Malaysia is continued in the recent 9th Malaysia Plan that sees the government paying more attention to arts and culture (mainly

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<sup>3</sup> The terms ‘race’ and ‘racial’ are used as opposed to ‘ethnic’ and ‘ethnicity’ because the former tend to be based on physical characteristics while the latter connote a cultural dimension that may or may not include physical characteristics (Lee, 2004, p. 120). Thus, “race” and “racial” are more applicable in this context for the convenience of visual depiction.

visual in nature) because “it is an important part of forging a unique Malaysian identity” (Malaysia, Economic Planning Unit, 2006, p. 467).

The matter of national identity has become urgent because according to Hng (2004), Malaysia has a large young population (three-fifths of whom are thirty years old and below) that is disconnected from the memories of the struggle of nation building, hence losing what being a Malaysian means. As such, the task to materialise national identity into visual form has also become a top priority because this younger group relies on meanings conveyed by the visuals to make sense of the world around them. As speculated by Postman (1985), the triumph of the visuals has made them “tools for conversation” (p. 8) in a society, and by attending to the dominant tools one can see through its identity clearly. Postman’s speculation is justified in the Malaysian context by many studies showing visual mediums, such as TV advertisements (Holden & Husin, 2002; Khattab, 2006; Lee, 2004) and the Internet (Mee, 1998; Uimonen, 2003) as active sources to construct and reconstruct the look of national identity. As such, in Sections 1.2 and 1.3 below the research attempts to illustrate how the look of Malaysia is actively engaged in both political and commercial spheres in Malaysia.

### **1.1.1 The Look in Contemporary Political Propaganda**

Malaysia held its 12<sup>th</sup> general election in March 2008. The researcher took the opportunity to observe political propaganda during the months leading to the election. Some examples are briefly discussed below in relation to the look of national identity.

In September 2007, Malaysians were shaken by a picture published in all the newspapers, showing a youngish man setting fire to the national flag on the street. The incident happened

in Terengganu when a PAS<sup>4</sup> political gathering turned into a riot with the police. Immediately after this incident, the ruling government accused PAS and its supporters for the radical acts (Tan, 2007, September 16). For further damage control, an advertisement on the state-run TV was released featuring people from distanced countries, such as Pakistan, suffering from and traumatised by Islamist violent acts. In this way, the government indirectly suggested that PAS is an Islam extremist organisation that would bring sufferings to the Malaysian people. The advertisement ended by saying, “this is not our culture” to express the government’s distaste for violent acts, thus positioning itself as one that is associated with moderate Islam.

Another example of the kind was seen during the Hindraf<sup>5</sup> (The Hindu Rights Action Force) episode. The Hindraf actively sowed racial sentiments among the Indians by allegedly accusing the government of sidelining and denying the rights of the Indian community in the economic, education and public sectors. They described the situation as “ethnic cleansing” of the Indians in Malaysia by an Islamist government (Lee, 2007, December 17). Since July 2007, Hindraf leaders and supporters have held several rallies around the country to lobby their cause. The largest one was a gathering on November 25, 2007 in Batu Caves, KL that resulted in bodily clashes and destructions of the public properties. A TV advertisement was also soon released, showing footages of bloody injuries and damages done during the rallies. Under the tagline “Mereka Berkonspirasi” (they are with conspiracy), the government accused the Hindraf of spreading false and baseless allegations with the aim to incite hatred against the government and racial unrest in the country which would ultimately lead to blood shed and sabotage. The advertisement also stressed the line “this is not our culture” to condemn the act of street protests rooted in racial division, “because of the multiracial element in this country...it can grow into something which cannot be controlled” says Dr S.

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<sup>4</sup> PAS (Parti Islam se-Malaysia), a fundamental Islamist, opposition political party lobbying to turn Malaysia into an ‘Islamic state’.

<sup>5</sup> Hindraf is a predominantly Indian non-political organisation claiming to fight for the rights of the Indian community in the country.

Subramanian, MIC Secretary General (Brant, 2008, March 4). Racial tension is of a key concern for Malaysia's government because any attempt to replicate the 1969 racial riot is seen as a threat to the country.

It is not the researcher's intention to debate about the cause and consequences of the above upheavals in this short circumstance. Rather she would only like to highlight the government's decision of using graphic propaganda to control public emotion against the rising tide of racial unrest, and to maintain the look of a peaceful multiracial country. This is accorded to Postman's (1985) speculation that never before has the manipulation of people through visuals been so important to authority.

The opening of 2008 soon after the Hindraf episode saw the released of many TV advertisements aiming to recapture public imagination amidst escalating tension brought by the wind of the election; one of them was an RTM advertisement aiming to foster patriotic spirit to the existing government. By juxtaposing the visuals of today's society with those from the past during the formative years, the advertisement aimed at tying the glory of modern development with one of independence. It ended with the lines: "untuk maju ke hadapan, kita mesti menoleh ke belakang" (we must look back in order to move forward). This relates the discussion back to the initial question, what exactly is one supposed to look back at? Besides showing Tunku Abdul Rahman's proclamation of independence, there were a lot of visuals depicting peaceful coexistence of people from distinct racial backgrounds, thus reflecting an ideal look of the golden years when "Ahmad, Ah Seng and Muthu lived as one big happy family".

Similar strategy of evoking collective memory was seen in one of the Barisan National election advertisements that portrayed speeches from the first Prime Minister and all his successors. The editing of the speeches showed consistency and commitment of Barisan National throughout the past 50 years to bring "Security, Peace, Prosperity" (the official BN

slogan for the general 12<sup>th</sup> election) to the country and its people. The look of a “happy family” was also frequently showed in this advertisement to reinforce the feeling of a common destiny under a strong BN leadership, thus the ending lines were “Kita sudah berada di landasan yang betul. Sama-samalah kita terus maju” (we are already on the right track. Let’s move forward together).

At the same time a 24-page Barisan Nasional manifesto was launched outlining the party’s achievement during its last term and their promises for the country should it be re-elected. The publication was lavishly illustrated by a lot of feel-good visuals to reiterate the main focus such as economy, education, law and order, public services, corruption, religion and unity, and foreign policy. Again, the portrait of a multiracial family appeared ubiquitously but was especially concentrated on the “Religion and Unity” pages because it is relatively sensitive and intangible compared to the other result-driven areas. As such, as an expression of the party’s commitment to freedom of religion, visuals of various religious/cultural practices from the different races were shown. Furthermore, since the manifesto was published in different languages (Bahasa Malaysia, English, Mandarin and Tamil), the choice of visuals on the “Religion and Unity” pages was also slightly altered. While the majority of the images remained unchanged (such as the dominating National Mosque, Christ Church Melaka, Indian Thaipusam parade, Chinese practice of filial piety, Buddhist ceremony, lion dance, and the national service), some were added in or taken out to serve the interest of its target audience. For example, the Bahasa Malaysia version featured image of Muslim prayers while the others substituted it with an image of the patriotic flag waving. Whereas the Tamil version showed Deepavali celebration, replacing the Chinese Dragon Boat race as seen in other versions. In this way, by improvising the look of the family portrait, Barisan Nasional has strategically positioned itself in the eyes of different audience as the party for all in Malaysia.

As the election was approaching, not only was Barisan Nasional firing its visual propaganda machine at full force, the Opposition also invested considerably in this department. For example the Democratic Action Party (DAP)<sup>6</sup> released an online publicity videoclip featuring its party anthem. Being a predominantly Chinese party, it too realised the importance of putting up a multiracial family portrait in its lobby for public support. Thus not surprisingly, both the Barisan Nasional and the Opposition parties in their visual propaganda stroke hard to maintain an ideal look of harmony and equality, one that was defined by distinct racial elements to celebrate the multiracial and multicultural factors. This point will be expanded in the following section.

### **1.1.2 The Look in Contemporary Commercial Advertisements**

TV advertisement as a form of popular culture also plays a crucial role in shaping the national identity in Malaysia. As claimed by Holden and Husin (2002), Malaysian TV advertisements are not only a form of entertainment or marketing tool, but also serve as moral guides that are carefully crafted by strict advertising code to ensure that the message of an advertisement is in line with the social and political norms of the nation. Thus, by stressing the practice of “moral advertising” (p. 142), the government and the advertisers have succeeded to marshal a safe parameter for the look of the nation, one that is injected with plenty of pro-social, pro-cultural and pro-political values. Indeed, some of the favorite and well-watched TV advertisements are patriotic in nature, for example those sponsored by the national corporate giants such as Petronas, Proton and Telekom Malaysia during festival seasons or Merdeka celebrations. These advertisements aim to foster a sense of belonging and spirit of *muhibbah* (multiculturalism), and are seen as constructive to capture the imagination of the younger generation (“Meaningful ads”, 2007). Lee (2004) further supports the view by claiming that although contemporary Malaysian society is still attached

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<sup>6</sup> DAP aims to establish a secular and democratic state in Malaysia.

to racial identity, the repetitive appearance of positive visuals in the media that celebrates multiculturalism has become a new source to define the look of Bangsa Malaysia.

To visualise multiculturalism in a plural society like Malaysia, racial markers are inevitable. This point is manifested obviously in the political advertisement mentioned before. Holden and Husin (2002) point out that in general, racial markers are used in positive ways (such as in the form of setting, dress, music, history, traditional events, language, or artifacts) to bestow pride, distinction, or ethnic “rootedness” (p. 148). Nonetheless, their study also reveals instances featuring less positive markers that tend to invoke stereotypical images associated with different races. Holden and Husin state that while the old stereotypes of Malay backwardness have generally disappeared and being replaced by ones that are sophisticated and successful; the common Chinese stereotypes persists as being energetic, aggressive, educated, confident, and entrepreneurial. The Indians, on the other hand, are virtually invisible. Khattab (2006) also comments on the minimum appearance of Indians and other indigenous minorities on TV, and further claims that these groups are often tagged with negative racial markers such as being “sick” or “destructive” (p. 358). Holden and Husin (2002) thus raise their concern over the perpetuation of negative racial stereotypes because it becomes a visual reminder especially to the non-Malay audience that Malaysia remains a stratified nation in which “they” are different from “us” (p. 149). This, in turn, is a threat to undermine the look of a harmonious multiracial society.

From the researcher’s observation of contemporary Malaysian TV advertisements, the situation of racial stereotyping has improved compared to Khattab’s (2006) study. For example a Maybank advertisement features the story of an Iban family from their humble beginnings in a longhouse to the daughter’s leaving to London to further her study. To enhance their cultural roots, the advertisement is entirely shot in Iban language and the symbol of tiger is frequently shown (significant as both the client’s trademark as well as a motif of protector in Iban culture). In addition, they are portrayed as sophisticated and

financially secured, reversing the common notion of indigenous people as backward and poor. According to the creative director of this advertisement Yasmin Ahmad, “It’s the first commercial, that I can remember, which features this minority group without showing them half-dressed and with feathers on their heads” (“Bank that Cares”, 2007).

Besides showing the minority group in favorable light, another common strategy to avoid offensive stereotyping in advertisements is to feature a large number of relatively indistinguishable brown-skinned and black hair people. Holden and Husin (2002) claim that in this way a multiracial society is reduced to a single, averaged-out national race: “We Malaysians” (p. 150). In the advertising scene, these neutral Malaysians are commonly represented by the Pan-Asian models who are from mixed parentage backgrounds, thus able to blur the boundaries of race. These Pan-Asian models are highly popular in the advertisement industry because they give an international outlook to their client’s product, not to mention it is more economical to produce an advertisement with the mixed look to appeal to the multiracial audience (A. Letchumanan, Azhariah, Sheela, Zack & Tan, 2007, February 7).

Nonetheless, the growing popularity of pan-Asian models in Malaysian advertisements has created some disputes over years. The news article “Advertisers ordered to drop models with non-Malay faces” (Kippusamy, 2007, February 7) reveals that as early as 1997, the government issued a ban on Pan-Asian models, but it was later shelved amid an outcry. In 2007, the government again proposed to revive the ban based on the ground that Pan-Asian features were not representative of Malaysian demographics, and using Pan-Asian faces means downgrading local faces (“Govt wants fewer Pan-Asian faces on TV ads”, 2007). The supporters of the ban often criticise the “Pan-Asian look” as an embodiment of foreign elements, thus giving false impression of what being a Malaysian truly means (“Move seen as giving others a chance”, 2007). The advertising and modeling agencies, on the other hand, fought back by claiming that the ban is confusing because the definition of a truly

“Malaysian-look” is ambiguous and the face of a Pan-Asian rightly represents the diversity of Malaysian society (Kippusamy, 2007, February 7).

### 1.1.3 Significance of the Look

Be it the intentional play up (as in political propaganda) or play down (as in commercial advertisement) of racial elements, the discussions above revealed that the look of the country is still very much contested. Nonetheless, the discussions also supported the undeniable role of the visuals in shaping national identity. Thus, in political propaganda one sees great efforts to *maintain the right look* of multiracial harmony and equality to garner public support. On the other hand, in commercial advertisements, besides maintaining the look, there is also a dire need to *strike the right look* of neutrality in order to sell a product to audience across the race spectrum.

However, the researcher would like to raise the question: what is the significance of the existing look in the contemporary Malaysian society? To be more precise, because the research is only concerned with the political look<sup>7</sup>, what is the validity of a harmonious family portrait in the midst of “stable tension” (“Malaysia in a state of stable tension, says don”, 2008, p. N37)? According to Prof. Datuk Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, an expert of ethnic relations in Malaysia, the term “stable tension” refers to the existing norm in Malaysia that features constant pull between overt racial sentiment and national interest. He further explains that such tension is the result of racial polarisation caused by the existing government system that is not likely to change in the near future. As such the government is opting for effective antidotes, such as education module to smooth the differences by encouraging inter-racial understanding. Since the visuals have become an indispensable part of contemporary living in Malaysia, how then can they play a role in this matter?

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<sup>7</sup> For its relevance to the subject matter of this study, i.e., graphic propaganda from 1948 to 1960, which was essentially a state affair aiming to mobilise the people politically.

#### **1.1.4 The Need of Histories**

According to Dilnot (1984b), the role of visuals cannot be discussed in a historical vacuum. In the case of Malaysia, one has to realise that Ahmad, Ah Seng, and Muthu did not just come together by chance and the look of a big happy family also did not just happen. Rather the family portrait was carefully designed under the British aspiration of a united nation during the formative years (cf. Dilnot, 1984a, pp. 5-6). As such, related histories have to be attended to in order to discuss the significance of the current look of multiracial harmony.

In this context, the researcher is referring to two histories in particular: the history of identity making and the history of graphic design in Malaysia. The first is useful because it helps to define identity. This is illustrated in the quote of the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir,

In order to go forward, you must know where you are coming from, otherwise, you may be going backwards thinking that you are going forward because you don't know where you came from. You have to learn the lessons of history. That means, the young people must know the history of this country. (Perdana Leadership Foundation, n.d.)

It is useful to examine the historical origin and socio-political roots of identity formation because it helps to ask questions such as how identity is being approached, shaped, and challenged through time; and how this process continues to guide and frame the search for a national identity today. Currently there is already a great deal of literature on different aspects of Malaysian identity; therefore the researcher will not elaborate further the debate, nor has she the knowledge to do so at the moment. This history is briefly compiled in Appendix A and will be used as a reference and backbone for the making of the second history.

While the first history shows how identity is made conceptually, the second history illustrates the process of giving the identity a look. According to Vignelli (1985),

documentation of design history is important as a valuable source of reference for the identity maker although he also expresses his concern of irresponsible use of such history whereby its function is reduced to a mere convenient source for stealing looks. Other visual experts, such as Margolin (1998, 2000) and McCoy (2003) also share the same concern for the lack of historical sensitivities in the contemporary visual fields. They collectively point out the trends of taking things at its face level to produce universal, value-free visuals that do not carry any significance in its social context. Dilnot (1984b) dramatises the situation by saying “too many utopias have died in this century by ignoring or repudiating history” (p. 20). As such, to maintain the look of a multiracial utopia in Malaysia, one has to know how it was shaped and used before.

In this sense, Holland (1978) claims that design history should be taken as essentially a problem solving process that has deep roots in the evolution of society. To put his point into context, one can say that by examining how the problem of national identity was solved visually in the past within certain considerations and factors, it will inspire successful design solution of the kind in the future.

Unfortunately, the history of graphic design in Malaysia is yet to be constructed because the study on this area is unprecedented in the local context. The research hence is a response to this need by operating itself within the parameter of graphic design history. To narrow down the scope, the researcher will only focus on graphic propaganda to search for the look of national identity during the selected period.

#### **1.1.5 The Need of Theories**

Furthermore, with all signs showing Malaysia as becoming a visual-driven society, the researcher sees an increasing need of suitable theories to understand both the making and reading of the visuals. For visual makers, “it is certain that until we have theory we will not

have a profession. We cannot continue to talk about how nice a picture is, or how nice the work of one or another designer is” (Vignelli, 1985, p. 9). What Vignelli called for is that there is a higher stake in visual making besides aesthetics. Thus theories are important to guide in visual making process in order to get the message across effectively to the audience (Heller, 2003; Kennedy, in press; Margolin, 1998, 2000; McCoy, 2003). For the readers, it is important to make sense of themselves in the visual-rich society, so much so that visual literacy has become “a matter of survival” in many cases (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 3). For the purpose of this research, theories are needed to fill in the gap between graphic propaganda and national identity, i.e. to understand how graphic propaganda projects the imagination of a nation.

In short, the research is a response to the need of histories and theories in the quest for the look of national identity. Thus, besides searching for the historical look of Malaya, the research also attempts to *read* the look in terms of its making and the meaning it carries. In this way, the researcher is able to present a case of visual solution in the past, thus contributing to the discourse of national identity in contemporary Malaysia.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

The research is guided by three questions revolving around the needs of graphic design history and theory:

- i. What are the ways to conduct a research of graphic design history?
- ii. What is the history of graphic propaganda from 1948 to 1960?
- iii. What is the identity reflected in graphic propaganda during the selected period?

### 1.3 Research Objectives

Responding to the respective questions above, the researcher draws out three research objectives accordingly.

- i. To develop a model of graphic design history applicable for the use of this research.

This first objective and the most important of all is to do things the right way. It aims to justify every step involved in the research, ranging from theory adaptation and application to the collection and sorting out of data. As such, a lot of efforts go to explaining the various research methods and methodology. In this way, the researcher aims to provide a research model for future undertaking of the like.

- ii. To describe a detailed account of graphic propaganda in Malaya (1948-1960)

Since there is no documentation of graphic propaganda in Malaya, the research starts with the assumption of its existence during the selected period. The aim here is to support this assumption by systematically building a detailed account from the collected data backed by reliable historical backdrop. In doing so, the researcher also aims to testify graphic propaganda as “tools of conversation” (Postman, 1985, p. 8) during the selected period, thus valid in the discussion on national identity.

- iii. To understand the national identity as reflected in graphic propaganda

This objective is concerned with the making of the *look* in graphic propaganda, and in return what does the *look* say about the national identity of Malaya during the selected period (1948-1960). These concerns are solved systematically by using Social Semiotics as an analytical tool. In doing so, the researcher hopes to introduce Social Semiotics as a valuable resource to aid in both the making and reading of the visuals. By presenting a case of visual solution in the past, the researcher aims to stimulate discussion and reflection on the contemporary look of the nation.

## **1.4 Organisation of Thesis**

This thesis consists of nine chapters that are organised into five main parts: Part I–Introduction, Part II–In Search for Method and Methodology, Part III–Structuring a Narration, Part IV–Building a Case, and Part V–Conclusion. They are organised according to the research aims and objectives and each will be discussed in detail in the following section.

### **Part I – Situating the Research**

Chapter 1: Introduction

### **Part II – In Search for Method and Methodology**

Chapter 2: Literature Review I: Graphic Propaganda and National Identity

*Complementary:* Appendix A–Historical Background to Identity Making In Malaysia

*Complementary:* Appendix B–History of World Graphic Propaganda

Chapter 3: Literature Review II: Graphic Design History and Methodology

*Complementary:* Appendix E–Comprehending Social Semiotics

Chapter 4: Methods

### **Part III – Structuring a Narrative**

Chapter 5: Building Historical Narration

Chapter 6: A History of Graphic Propaganda in Malaya

### **Part IV – Building a Case**

Chapter 7: Case Studies

Chapter 8: Malayan National Identity as Reflected in Graphic Propaganda (1948-1960)

### **Part V – Conclusion**

Chapter 9: Conclusion

**Part I** which is formed by Chapter 1 introduces the main concern of this research, national identity in the visual field. Several scenarios are discussed to show the active involvement of the visuals in contemporary nation building of Malaysia. This leads to the claim that the *look* is still very much at stake, thus rising needs of histories and theories to contribute to the discourse of national identity. Three research questions are listed down together with three responding research objectives. Each objective will be achieved by a separate part, i.e., Part II till IV. These three parts deal with the three research questions respectively.

**Part II** consists of three chapters (from Chapter 2 to 4), the biggest bloc in this thesis to show the researcher's commitment in tackling methods and methodology. To further extent, Chapter 5 and 7 also belong to this part, but are placed separately for smoother flow of reading. Collectively, these chapters tackle the first objective: to develop a model of graphic design history applicable for the use of this research. A distinct characteristic of Part II is to have a number of long appendices as complementary texts. This is because the appendices contain useful information for better understanding of the main chapters. Nonetheless, the information only serves supporting roles to provide additional insights, its inclusion into the main text will dilute the focus of discussion and interrupt the flow of reading. Chapter 2 is the first part of literature review that deals with the conceptual framework of this research. It first introduces key terminologies, such as graphic propaganda and national identity. The relation between the two is then contextualised in the Malayan context. This is aided by Appendices A and B that provide background and additional readings. Few concepts are then identified to examine how national identity is visualised in graphic propaganda. These concepts are significant as analytical categories in Part IV.

Chapter 3 is the second part of literature review that deals with the theoretical framework of this research. It systematically maps out the domain of graphic design history, which is the operating field in this context. It involves discussions on the various issues and methodologies related to the field before settling with Sociological Approach as basis, and

introducing Social Semiotics as an analytical tool. Since Social Semiotics is basically adopted to form the theoretical framework here, a comprehensive explanation of this complex enterprise is given in Appendix E. While Chapter 2 and 3 lay down the paperwork, Chapter 4 is concerned with the fieldwork. It explains in detail the methods used in every stage involved starting from data collection, sampling to data categorisation. Relevant issues in each stage are also discussed; and every decision made is justified to ensure reliability and validity of the following chapters.

**Part III** comprises Chapter 5 and 6 that are concerned with the second research objective: to describe a detailed account of graphic propaganda in Malaya (1948-1960). Chapter 5 continues the discussion on data categorisation already done in the previous chapter by analysing the data categories to generate trends. These trends are then consolidated to provide an overall idea of the graphic propaganda during the selected period. This is followed by Chapter 6 whereby a historical narration is constructed by supporting the generated overview with reliable historical accounts. The historical narration is also illustrated by visual evidence sampled from the collected data.

**Part IV** which consists of Chapter 7 and 8, on the other hand, is a response to the third research objective: to understand national identity as reflected in graphic propaganda. This is done by using systematic case studies in Chapter 7 with Social Semiotics as an analytical tool. These case studies are examined in relation to the concepts of national identity as established in Chapter 2. The results of the analyses are then summarised in Chapter 8 to show how Malayan national identity is constructed, and subsequently how the conceptions have been conveyed by the constructed identity.

Finally **Part V** which is made up of Chapter 9, provides a summary of the findings as well as discusses the various research limitations and recommendations. This is followed by suggestions for future studies before deriving a general conclusion that relates the research back to the contemporary context.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW I: GRAPHIC PROPAGANDA AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

*“Thought is impossible without an image.”* (Aristotle)

The research locates itself within the framework of graphic design history as discussed in the previous chapter. Following Dilnot (1984a), graphic design history arises in the service of design as a response to particular practical problems. Instead of focusing solely on an object or a product, graphic design history should be considered as a problem solving process within a nexus of particular social relations (political, cultural, economic, symbolic). Thus this chapter serves to outline the conceptual framework of the research by exploring its key ingredients namely graphic propaganda and national identity.

The chapter starts by first defining graphic propaganda as the subject matter of this study. This is followed by exploration of the various conceptions of national identity and the role of graphic propaganda in this matter. The relation of graphic propaganda and national identity is then contextualised in the Malayan setting from 1948 to 1960. Finally, the chapter discusses ways to visualise the Malayan national identity in four predetermined categories: the people, the Others, the land, and the hero.

#### **2.1 What is Graphic Propaganda?**

Graphic propaganda is a common genre in major textbooks of graphic design history, such as Hollis (1994) and Meggs (1998). The role of these two textbooks in this study remains at the introductory level because there is no mention of graphic propaganda in Asia. According to Jobling and Crowley (1996), a discriminate definition of the word propaganda is almost impossible due to its ambiguous and fluid nature. In nineteenth century Europe, propaganda

was largely used like the contemporary practice of publicity, hence, suggesting that advertising and public information campaign can also be treated as propaganda.

The most constructive explanation in the context of this research is provided by Nelson (1996) who suggests that propaganda should be:

neutrally defined as a systematic form of persuasion which attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audience for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels. (p. 232)

Pratkanis and Turner (1996) further define the function and form of propaganda as “attempts to move a recipient to a predetermined point of view by using simple images and slogans that truncate thought by playing on prejudices and emotions” (p. 190). In short, propaganda is a combination of text and images to convey a certain message. It takes form as propaganda posters and other mediums, such as booklets, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, postcards, banners, stamps, movies, the Internet and many more. In this research, the term graphic propaganda is used to explicitly suggest that the researcher’s main focus is on visual-oriented propaganda.

## **2.2 Concepts of National Identity**

Georgescu and Botescu (2004) while discussing the approach to branding national identity, claim that to discuss national identity in a visual context is a difficult task because the abstract content is still a disputed notion in the sociological milieu (p. 6). In order to visualise the content, the research will explore some of the primary features of this notion to derive a better understanding.

Anderson (1991) uses the term “imagined community” when proposing a definition of the nation. He says

It is an imagined political community.... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion. (p. 6)

Hall (1992) explains Anderson's notion of imagined is important because national identity is not something inherent, but is constructed out of a "system of representation" (p. 355). This study thus examines national identity as represented in the graphic propaganda.

In addition, the concept of "imagined community" is also applicable here during the selected period (1948-1960) when Malaya first emerged from colonial ruling. According to Lee (1983), most newly independent states owe their existence to the former colonial powers. Their present territorial boundaries are determined by the economic, strategic, and administrative convenience of these powers. The multi-racial people share no common culture or historical background other than the colonial history. They have only united in the common fight against the colonial rulers. When independence was achieved, the uniting factor ceased. Hence, there is a need for a new bonding factor to keep the different ethnic, linguistic, religious and other groups together. This gives rise to the concept of nation- "the centripetal cement to bind the disparate groups together" (Lee, 1983, p. 220). In contemporary context, Khattab (2006) also agrees with Anderson by claiming that Malaysian identity in the age of globalisation is "a fiction, an imaginative construct, seeking to unite its dispersed and diverse multicultural citizenry" (p. 351).

It is interesting to compare Anderson's (1991) "imagined community" with Shamsul's (1998) "nation-of-intent", which is more or less a precise idea of the form of a nation, but does not necessarily imply an aspiration for political self-rule. He claims that "nation-of-intent" could be called "a second generation nationalism" (p. 26) because it depicts an idea of a nation that still needs to be constructed or reconstructed. It invites the people to participate in a "grand project" which is used as a political platform to challenge the existing

notion of nation. In the case of this study, the researcher favours the concept of “imagined community” because the identity of the then newly born Malaya was essentially a new creation. The concept of “nation-of-intent”, on the other hand, is more applicable in contemporary context as expression of different political intentions aiming to fortified or challenge the existing identity, such as *Bangsa Malaysia* advocated by the then Prime Minister Tun Mahathir.

Shamsul (1998) also proposes the concept of “two social reality” approach in the study of identity: “authority-defined” versus “everyday-defined” (p. 18). The former is authoritatively defined by the people of the dominant power structure, while the latter is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life. He claims that the “two social reality” approach will provide a more complete discourse on identity and “nation-of-intent” is the bridge to link these two together. However, due to the nature of graphic propaganda as fundamentally a state creation, this study will only focus on the “authority-defined” identity.

Chan and Evers (1973) add to the discussion by proposing two alternatives to develop a national identity: progressive identity and regressive identity. The former emphasises the progress achieved in the setting up of a new political entity and follows the idea of creating a new society or new man. In this case, it means celebrating and creating a vision for the then newly independent Malaya. On the other hand, regressive identity tries to link the present state with the pre-colonial past, i.e., to resume the tradition of its golden age. In this case although it is prior to the selected period (1948-1960), the mentioning of Melaka Sultanate is inevitable because it is generally identified as the starting point for Malaysian history thus important in the discussion of national identity (Andaya & Andaya, 1982; Daniels, 2005; Hng, 2004; Khoo, 1991; Worden, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. Chan and Evers conclude their arguments by pointing out that most governments try to combine elements of the two to form their own

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Appendix A for a concise Malaysian history relating to national identity during the selected period (1948-1960).

formula of national identity. This point will be taken into consideration when analysing an image by taking the *new* and the *traditional* aspects into consideration. The sum of the above discussions helps to limit the scope of national identity as imagined, authority-defined and a mixture of progressive and regressive identities.

### **2.3 Graphic Propaganda and National Identity**

According to Crowley (1998), modern propaganda poster was “the product of changing political conditions” (p. 103). The last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed many nations transforming into civic states including England, USA and France, hence producing new relations between rulers and the ruled. Rulers of these new civic states had to take more into account the views of the people. When necessary, steps were taken to shape the public’s thoughts to secure loyalty and obedience, which included the use of mass propaganda. This shows that close relations between mass politics and graphic propaganda had already been established in early days to maintain social orders.

Crowley (1998) particularly stresses that propaganda posters have to be seen in a series or in a whole campaign as part of an intense strain of nationalism. This is because the repetitive use of certain images/symbols in a series of posters will instill strong impression of a subject or an ideology. This has been a “notable feature of graphic propaganda” (p. 106).

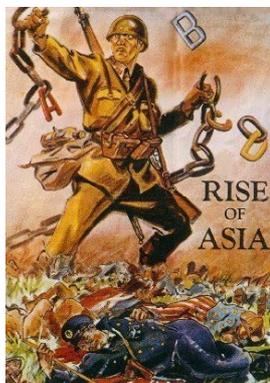
In the local context, Chan (2003) refers to the case of post-war Singapore graphic propaganda and claims that it contributed to “the production and consumption of knowledge about “Chineseness” and national identity within the socio-cultural and political contexts of the era” (Conclusion section). Unlike Crowley (1998) who sees graphic propaganda as a form of social control, Chan takes it as a reflection of Chinese immigrants’ experience in post-war Singapore to distinguish themselves from the mainland Chinese. As such, images

with local scenery, architecture, people and their daily activities were repeatedly used to promote local culture and identity.

Both Crowley (1998) and Chan (2003) demonstrate that graphic propaganda has been universal (the West and the East, past and present) tools to construct national identity. Regardless of whether it is “authority-defined” (as in Crowley) or “everyday-defined” (as in Chan), graphic propaganda effectively captures and reflects the identity of a society at particular time. This ability makes it a valuable medium for visual analysis from different perspectives.

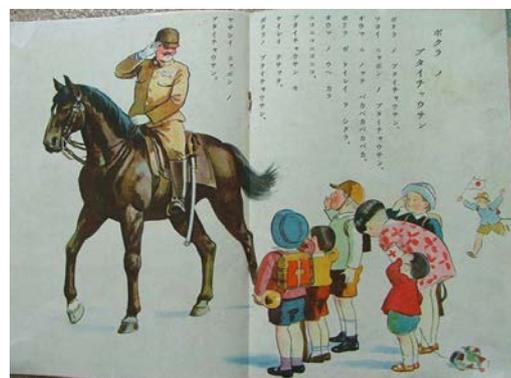
## 2.4 Background of Graphic Propaganda in Malaya

According to Raja Zahabuddin (1997), graphic propaganda first appeared during the Japanese occupation to call for support (see Plates 2.1 and 2.2 below).



**Plate 2.1: Poster, “Rise of Asia”, 1940s**

Picture from <http://www.wwii-collectibles.com/>



**Plate 2.2: Japanese propaganda booklet, 1940's** Picture from

<http://www.2bangkok.com/wwii/propaganda.shtml>

The use of graphic propaganda further flourished during the Emergency period when the authority called to fight against the communists. Graphic propaganda machine was armed by the Department of Information and Film Negara, with the assistance from Radio Malaysia