Portraying Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore through Murals

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Abstract

Malaysia and Singapore are neighbouring countries, which were one country in 1963-1965 but they have vastly different legal frameworks that governs murals. This study compares the image of multiculturalism constructed in murals located in Malaysia and Singapore using a social semiotic analysis to find out whether they portray government-sanctioned messages. The study involved the analysis of six murals, three from Malaysia and three from Singapore. The murals were photographed from October to December 2022. Kress and van Leuween's (2021) social semiotic visual analysis was adopted to interpret the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings in the murals. The three murals from Malaysian draw attention to diversity of occupations and ethnic groups. There is a contemporary focus featuring young people in "Faces of Future Generation" and "Kini Lebih Gempak", and a historical focus on past trading activities in "The Mercers". In Singapore, "National Day Celebration 2022" focusses on the present while "Cantonese Opera" and "Singapore Hawker Heritage" focus on the past heritage. The Malaysian murals reflect ethnic diversity whereas the Singaporean murals have an obvious Chinese presence despite the inclusion of various ethnic groups. The findings indicate that the murals helped to propagate government endorsed messages on national integration and unity.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, nation-building, murals, Malaysia, Singapore

Introduction

Murals is art found in public spaces that are accessible to the society. During ancient times, murals were used as a means of communication before the advent of writing. They were also regarded as a propaganda tool and a source of information on the community's voice (Łabądź, 2019). At that time, the artists had to hide their identities to avoid being caught for defacing the wall. Today, contemporary murals are often commissioned by the government or an organisation (Philipps et al., 2017). This is partly why certain murals have lost their contesting character because they are designed to reflect the identity of a place or an organisation. In many cities, these large, colourful, labour-intensive paintings drawn on buildings/walls function as a symbol of modernity and trendiness (Mokras-Grabowska, 2021), attracting tourists for photography purposes. For example, Liang (2017) reported that in just one day (16 April 2017), 478 Asians and 12 Caucasians took photos with the mural "Children on Bicycle" by Ernest Zacharevic in Georgetown, the capital city of Penang, Malaysia while 346 Asians and 82 Caucasians passed by without taking a photo. Murals also enrich the material dimension of a landscape and becoming an iconic symbol of a place (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2017).

The history of contemporary mural painting began in 1910 during the Mexican Revolution to overthrow a long-time president. In public spaces, artists painted the life and struggles of Mexican farmers and workers to express their thoughts (Greeley, 2012). When the revolution ended, these artists were invited by the new government to re-paint their works to convey the

new government's ideas on political and social issues. During the post-revolutionary period, the works of three Mexican painters mediated between the state and the nation (Greeley, 2012). In Northern Ireland, murals also conveyed political views. The first mural painted in the 20th century declared loyalty to the British crown. Subsequently, in the early 1970s, the murals began to cover other issues, including media censorship, police brutality, the Irish language, and women's rights (Lyell, 2001). These murals served aesthetic purposes and an avenue for the expression of societal and political issues (Wiśniewska, 2020). By the end of the 20th century, the functions of murals expanded into economic, political, commemorative, commercial, and artistic purposes (Skinner & Jollifee, 2017).

Murals can inspire society to think and enter into dialogues with one another. In most cases, the image poses more important messages than the text (Gralińska-Toborek, 2019). Murals usually reflect the sociocultural and historical context in which they have been constructed and painted. In Malaysia, Ong's (2021) analysis of 84 murals in Georgetown, Penang, showed that the images sent messages of multiculturalism (Ong, 2021). However, Ong and Ting's (2023) analysis of 10 murals showcased in the 2020 Penang International Container Art Festival showed segregation according to ethnic and occupational groups. The notion of multiculturalism presented is one where different cultures "combine like a salad, as opposed to the more traditional notion of a cultural melting pot" (Baofu, 2012, p. 22). In Malaysia, much of the academic publications on murals concentrated on the heritage value of murals in Penang (e.g., Ong, 2021; Ong & Ting, 2023; Razali et al., 2023; Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2015; Stephen, 2016). Murals in other places have largely been not studied. Sakip et al.'s (2016) study in Ipoh, Perak was about association of murals with crime sites. However, mural artists have not yet been fined for vandalism in Malaysia. The laws governing murals, Copyright Act 1987 and the National Heritage Act 2005, do not clearly indicate whether artists will face legal consequences (Salim, 2024). In fact, the December 2010 initiative by the Kuala Lumpur town hall to host the KUL Sign Festival paved the way for graffiti artists to show their work legally for the first time and it is now an annual event (InsideAsia Tours, n.d.). Little is known about how the permissive legal framework for urban art in Malaysia translates to messages in the murals.

However, Singapore has strict laws on graffiti, and murals are considered as art by some or vandalism of public spaces by others (Affandi, 2022). Singapore has recently acknowledged graffiti and street art as a subculture in the "Renaissance City", a place where arts and culture from all over the world can be displayed and consumed (Koh, 2018). However, strict legal intervention persists. Chang (2020) stated that some graffiti and street art artists have made use of opportunities given by the government to display their work but others have resisted the requirement to apply for licence to paint on designated walls. Some daring artists may add their satirical and/or symbolical visual messages into a commissioned mural after the draft has been inspected (Valjakka, 2021). In fact, commissioned art works also appear on void decks in public residential environments in Singapore, and arts organisations are coming forward to coordinate activities (Chang, 2022). Academic publications on murals in Singapore such as these lean towards assessment of the situation but there is a paucity of findings on messages in murals.

Considering the different legal frameworks that govern murals in Malaysia and Singapore, which share a common political history in 1963-1965, this study compares the image of multiculturalism constructed in murals located in Malaysia and Singapore using a social semiotic analysis. The first part provides a brief history of Malaysia and Singapore, followed by the site of data collection and framework of analysis. Subsequently, we present the analysis of the murals and discuss whether they portray government-sanctioned messages.

Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore

From the colonial days to the present, Malaysia and Singapore have taken multiculturalism into consideration in their policies (Goh, 2008). Their multiethnic communities—comprising locals, indigenous people, and migrants—have persisted in practising their cultures and traditions, which resulted in cultural pluralism. The multiethnic diversity has also extended to religious beliefs where various religions coexist, and the act of ostracising other religions is prohibited (Black, 2012). Additionally, multilingualism continues with the maintenance of mother tongue languages while English remains an important language of international trade and the global economy. In brief, multiculturalism is crucial for both countries, serving as an "effective public policy" that enhances national competitiveness (Ng & Metz, 2015, p. 253).

Malaysia

Malaysia has a population of 32.7 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023), comprising the Bumiputera (Malays and indigenous people) (69.6%), Chinese (22.6%), Indians (6.8%), and others (1.0%). Eberhard et al. (2023) estimate there are 111 living indigenous languages and 20 living non-indigenous languages, while two indigenous languages have become extinct.

Malaysia was colonised by the British in 1771. As the Malays were "unwilling to work for wages" (Andaya & Andaya, 2016, p. 182), Chinese and Indian migrants were imported to work primarily in tin mines and rubber estates to build the economy. The Malays were mostly fishermen and farmers in rural areas. Such a system led to ethnic segregation, which hinders national integration (Chai, 1977). Later, the Chinese gradually moved to bigger towns and set up grocery shops. Some brought their wives from China, while others married local women, which gave rise to the Peranakan culture. Some Indians joined the civil service, particularly as police officers and teachers. From agriculture, the Malays also moved into other occupations.

The maintenance of ethnic languages by ethnic groups date back to the colonial period when there were schools using four languages of instruction: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. After independence in 1957, English became the language of economic opportunity and academic achievement in urban areas. This led to frustrations among the Malays, who felt that political and economic power lay with those who spoke English. To solve the issue, Malay was adopted as the national language, resulting in a change from English to Malay-medium of education. English continued to function as the official language, which caused uneasiness among the Malay advocates. The National Language Act 1967 was passed, and consequently, Malay became the sole national and official language of Malaysia. Malay was the language of administration, education, and law courts. Additionally, the Bumiputera (indigenous and Malay people) was given more privileges in education and work opportunities in the government sector (David & Govindasamy, 2005) that extended to customary land rights. Islam is the official religion but other religions can be practised.

After the 1969 racial clash, the Malaysian government took measures to address racial tensions (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). The government guaranteed the teaching and learning of languages besides Malay to accommodate the use of other languages. English played the role of an unofficial language and was taught in school as a subject. The Chinese and Indian communities continued speaking their dialects, as did the indigenous and other small ethnic communities. On 31 August 1970, a new ideology, Rukunegara (Articles of Faith of the State), was introduced to foster unity among all ethnic communities. Affirmative action in the form of the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented to reduce poverty and create more jobs for the Malays. The NEP translated to more allocation for the Bumiputera in government services,

student enrolment in public universities, and additional discounts when purchasing properties. Noor and Leong (2013) argue that NEP was introduced because the Malays were afraid of losing their political power when the Chinese became strong economically. The income per capita for the Malays and Chinese reflected a huge difference and have continued to double as time passed (Saari et al., 2015). Jomo (2004, p. 1) sees the NEP as "positive discrimination" to help the economically disadvantaged. Indeed Sukemi et al.'s (2023) analysis of equity data for 42 years for ethnicity holdings shows the wealth distribution through growing economy rather than through the acquisition of other ethnic ownership, especially Chinese ethnic ownership, which was later transferred to Bumiputera.

However, critics of the NEP focussed on the undermining of social cohesion. NEP was "based on the notion that Malaya was a Malay country and that it belonged only to the Malays" (Vasil, 1980, pp. 37-38). Malay privileges encapsulated in NEP engender ethnic polarisation (Lee, 2023; Lee, 2024). Lim and Hunter (2023) argue that a new social justice paradigm that is not group-based is needed to drive dynamism. The government is aware of the ethnic cleavages, as seen in the slogans by various prime ministers, such as the 1Malaysia policy by Najib Razak in 2009 and Madani Malaysia by the current prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. To appease the non-Malays, the government has allowed private tertiary institutions to be established, opening up higher education opportunities to non-Malays (Loh, 2002). An allowance was made on the regulation to use Malay as the medium of instruction. These tertiary institutions could use to promote Malaysia as a regional centre of higher education.

However, where murals are concerned, the regulation on the use of Malay remains. The Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (Federal Territory) by-law 1982 states that:

An advertisement has to be in the Malay language on its own or together with other language(s). The wordings in the Malay language have to be given priority in terms of colour and have to be placed in a clearer position than wordings of other language(s).

Because of this, Malay is in larger font size than other languages in shop signs in Georgetown, Penang (Ben Said & Ong, 2019) and official signs in Chinese-medium schools (Kretzer & Ong, 2022).

Singapore

Singapore has a population of 5.64 million (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2023), comprising Chinese (74.1%), Malays (13.5%), Indians (9.0%), and other ethnicities (3.3%). According to Eberhard et al. (2023), there are two living indigenous languages and 20 living non-indigenous languages.

In 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore, which had only 120 Malays and 30 Chinese (Kwan-Terry, 2000). Strategic location along the spice route enabled Singapore to develop into a commercial and military centre. Malay, Chinese, and Indian migrants were imported to meet manpower needs. The Malays lived in the villages, the Chinese in Chinatown, and the Indians in Serangoon Road, and these developed into ethnic enclaves.

After World War II, Singapore was returned to the British and later became self-governing in 1959. In 1963, the Malaysian Federation was formed with Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore. A key factor that led to the separation in 1965 was Singapore's disagreement over any policy of preferential treatment to a particular ethnic community. Singapore became an independent state and was committed to envisioning a Singapore national culture and ideology rather than basing it on its dominant Chinese population.

In 1989, the Ethnic Integration Policy was introduced to prevent any ethnic community from

concentrating in a public residential estate. Despite controversies over the requirement on ethnic proportions of owners and tenants, the Singapore government continued with this intervention for nation-building and to prevent racial riots (Sim et al., 2003). Cultural festivals are celebrated in community centres. Lim et al. (2019) claimed that the Ethnic Integration Policy helps to achieve interethnic integration. The 2018 Household Survey (Housing & Development Board (HDB), 2023) shows that 96.9% of residents were satisfied with neighbourly relations, exchanging greetings, and engaging in casual conversations. Their sense of belonging to their estates has also increased from 98.6% in 2008 to 99.0% in 2018 (HDB, 2023). However, for mural artist Yip Yew Chong, the HDB flats may be cleaner, but Chinatown shophouses represent his childhood and those of other Singaporeans of his age group (Woon, 2023). Urban planning now encompasses commissioned murals to inculcate ethnic integration messages (Menkhoff et al., 2024), including those in HDB flats.

The Singapore government also introduced Racial Harmony Week to remind Singaporeans of the vulnerabilities associated with racial diversity. Students from preschools to secondary schools participate in cultural activities. Each main religion—Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity—is given public holidays to recognise the diversity in religion.

During the British rule, English-medium education was used to train people for government administration while Malay-medium education remained because Malays are considered indigenous people. Mandarin- and Tamil-medium education was left to the respective ethnic communities. After independence, the medium of instruction was changed to English and it was identified as the interracial language of communication, education, and economy (Moore, 2000).

To retain Singaporeans' roots and cultural identity and avoid the potential negative effect of being Westernised, the mother tongue policy was established. At the national level, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil are official mother tongue languages but the usage has declined. To encourage ethnic communities to retain its culture, language, and heritage linked to its roots (Lee, 2005), students are required to take the mother tongue subject based on their parents' ethnicity. Kwan-Terry (2000) found that the Speak Mandarin Campaign resulted in an increased usage of Mandarin and the decreased use of Chinese dialects.

But in reality, it is English (the most important of the four designated official languages in Singapore, not just internally for inter-ethnic communication but also externally for global trade and international communication) and Mandarin (with the ascension of China on the world stage) that are dominant (Tang, 2020). Language planning and policy in Singapore has been termed as driven by a narrative of linguistic instrumentalism (Wee, 2003), leading to processes of linguistic hierarchisation, stemming from the instrumental value and linguistic capital (Silver, 2005) attached to each of these languages in Singapore.

Since the 1980s, Singapore saw an influx of foreign labour. The country adopted liberal immigration policies that focus on skilled and semi-skilled labour. Some of the foreign workers married locals, and their children were born in Singapore and given Singapore citizenship. These children attend local schools and learn about the meaning of Singaporean identity.

Methodology

Three areas in Malaysia and three areas in Singapore were selected for data collection due to their popularity for hosting local and international artists to paint murals.

In Malaysia, the cities of Georgetown, Kuala Lumpur, and Kuching were selected. Georgetown and Kuching are the capital cities of Penang and Sarawak respectively, and Kuala Lumpur is

the capital of Malaysia. Georgetown is a pioneer location in Malaysia that has hosted murals events since 2012. As Ong (2021) had studied the murals in Georgetown, murals away from the city centre (Air Itam, Balik Pulau, and Pulau Tikus) were analysed. Among them is "Faces of Future Generation" (Mural 1). As for Kuching, some well-known murals pay tribute to ethnic communities that are indigenous to Sarawak (Mural 2, "The Mercers"). The murals in Kuala Lumpur were those drawn by local artists (Mural 3, "Kini Lebih Gempak").

In Singapore, the murals analysed were those found in of Kampong Gelam, Chinatown, and Little India. Kampong Gelam is one of the oldest urban quarters allocated for the Malay, Arab, and Bugis communities by Sir Stamford Raffles. In Malay, kampong means compound, while gelam refers to a long-leaved paperbank tree used for making boats and medicine. A prominent landmark there is the Sultan Mosque built in 1824 by Sultan Hussein Shah. The alleys hosted Singapore's first outdoor art gallery with the work of international and local artists. Recent years have seen the growth of mural painting around Chinatown. Meanwhile, Little India in Serangoon Road has alleys full of artwork painted by local and international artists dating back to the 19th century. The three Singapore murals analysed were "National Day 2022" (Mural 4), "Cantonese Opera" (Mural 5), and "Singapore Hawker Heritage" (Mural 6).

The murals were selected to include those, which portray the historical aspect (Mural 2, "The Mercers", Malaysia; Mural 5, Cantonese Opera, "Singapore"; Mural 6, "Singapore Hawker Heritage") and the contemporary situation (Mural 1, "Faces of Future Generation", Malaysia; Mural 3, "Kini Lebih Gempak", Malaysia; Mural 4, "National Day 2022", Singapore).

Data collection took place from October to December 2022. Murals were photographed with a digital camera and field notes related to the locations were made. Kress and van Leuween's (2021) social semiotic visual analysis was adopted to interpret the three dimensions of meanings in the murals.

The first dimension, representational, deals with the concrete and abstract depiction of participants – people, places, and things – in a diagram. This dimension focuses on analysing the visual semantic features (e.g., appearance and physical features) and visual syntactic patterns (e.g., their function and relation to each other). The representational dimension is further divided into narrative representation (presence of a vector or line to connect participants) and conceptual representation (absence of vector).

The second dimension, interactive, focuses on how images create interactions between viewers and the world that is represented in the picture. The analysis takes account of three factors – distance, contact, and point of view. The distance between the represented world and the viewer can be close up (head and shoulders), medium shot (up to waist or knee), and long shot (full figure). The contacts with viewers are further divided into "demand image" (people inside the picture look directly at the viewer and demand something) and "offer image" (people inside the picture offer information, goods, and services, but have no direct eye contact with the viewer). Analysis also takes account of point of view, people, places, and things (e.g., depicted from above, below or at eye-level, and from front, side, and back.

The third dimension, compositional, deals with information value, framing, salience, and modality. Information value refers to an analysis of the position of a particular element, whether it is placed on the left or right, centre or at the margin, upper or lower part in the picture. The framing requires an analysis of the connection of the elements, such as disconnected (separated identities) or connected through frame lines (representation of belonging). The analysis of salience deals with the positioning of the picture and the amount of space taken up. Features such as colour, use of lighting, and presence of gestures to attract viewer's attention are also analysed. The analysis of modality focuses on determining how real

the images in the picture are.

Findings

This section presents the results for the social semiotic analysis before the content of the murals are described.

Social Semiotic Analysis of Murals

This section presents results on the representational dimension of the murals (Table 1), interactiveness (Table 2), and composition of the images (Table 3).

Table 1 shows the results for representational dimension, which focuses on depiction of people, place, and things in the murals. The images of people usually highlight ethnicity and occupational groups.

Table 1: Representational dimension of social semiotic analysis of the murals

Murals	Representation Dimension	
	Conceptual	Narrative
1. Faces of Future Generation	The images of faces of women and men in different uniforms or performing different actions represent different occupations of the people in Malaysia.	A vector is formed by the front faces of three women. It is a non-transactive image because we can see the three women but what they are looking at is not clear to viewers. This is similar for the back women and men.
2. The Mercers	The image of two textile traders – one was seen holding onto his bicycle that contained folded textiles while another one was seen grabbing a roll of red textile – represents the textile industry in Malaysia.	Both traders' hands were holding onto the bicycle and rolled textile form diagonal vectors.
3. Kini Lebih Gempak	The image of a girl, dressed up in bright yellow sweater with her large headphones and cap, is running. The two can drinks are a new brand.	A horizontal vector is formed between the campaign tagline and the girl. It is a non-transactive image because we can see the girl running but we do not know what she is looking at.
4. National Day 2022	Images of several photo-framed pictures of a variety of citizens and two families watching fireworks at a riverbank.	Vectors are formed by the vertical strings of fireworks and the various photo-framed pictures. The photo-framed pictures are non-transactive because we do not know what the citizens are looking at.
5. Cantonese Opera	The image has people of different ethnic groups – five opera singers were performing on stage, audiences were watching the	A diagonal vector is formed between the opera singers and the audiences, connecting them together in the show. Two diagonal

	performance, an ice-cream seller was selling ice-cream to two children, a man was delivering food to an opera singer behind the stage, a rojak (local salad) seller waiting for customers.	vectors are also formed between the ice-cream seller and the girl, and the deliveryman and the opera singer.
6. Singapore Hawker Heritage	The images of a hawker frying koay teow (flat noodles), several other hawkers selling snacks, and children playing 'tossing the stones' game represent the liveliness in a market scene.	A diagonal vector is formed by the hawker's action of frying noodles as he gazes at the wok. Similarly, a diagonal vector is formed by the children as their gaze points to the stones. Diagonal vectors are also formed by the two female hawkers looking at the snacks they are selling.

Table 2 presents the results on the second dimension, interactive, which focuses on how images interact with viewers from a distance and point of view. In terms of distance, the three medium shot images draw attention to the people portrayed in the murals while the three long shot images draw attention to the background scenes that characterise either Malaysia or Singapore. In terms of contact, five of six murals are offer images where the people offer their products or services. As for point of view, most images are depicted at eye-level and presented from the front view to engage viewers.

Table 2: Interactive dimension of social semiotic analysis of the murals

Murals	Interactive Dimension		
	Distance	Contact	Point of View
1. Faces of Future Generation	Medium shot of the three women from waist up.	Offer image. The three women offer hope for future generations.	Image is depicted from above and at eye-level (based on the three main women). Two are from the side while one is from the front.
2. The Mercers	Medium shot of the two textile traders from thigh up.	Offer image. Both textile traders offer their textile for sale.	Image is depicted below eye-level and from the front.
3. Kini Lebih Gempak	Medium shot of the girl from waist up.	Offer image. The girl offers her energy to fit with the campaign tagline.	Image is depicted at eye-level and from the side.
4. National Day 2022	Long shot of both families.	Half of the image is an offer image because the framed-photos offer hope to viewers. The other half image is neither offer nor demand	Image is depicted at eye-level. Half the image is from the front while half is from the back.

		image because both families' backs face viewers.	
5. Cantonese Opera	Long shot features the opera singers, viewers, and other food sellers.	Offer image. The fiver opera singers offer their performance to audiences.	Image is depicted at eye-level. The opera singers are shown from the front while the audiences are shown from the back.
6. Singapore Hawker Heritage	Long shot of the hawkers and children.	Offer image. The hawkers offer their food to the viewers.	Image is depicted below eye-level and from the front.

Table 3 presents the analysis of the third dimension, composition, which shows the position of the human figures in the mural. In terms of framing, the lines in the murals draw attention to their actions that show their occupations. The people in the murals are given salience through the vivid colours and large size except for fifth mural (Kini Lebih Gempak), which incidentally is the only mural employing a graffiti style. The other five murals are photo-like, making the images look real.

Table 3: Compositional dimension of social semiotic analysis of the murals

Murals	Compositional Dimension			
	Information Value	Framing	Salience	Modality
1. Faces of Future Generation	Three women are placed at the centre while there are other athletes occupying the entire background.	The three women and others are separate identities but still connected. The mural shows different occupations.	The three women are the most salient, occupying two-thirds of the mural and they blend into the background with other athletes.	Photo-like painting makes the image real.
2. The Mercers	The Chinese textile trader occupies the left side while the Malay textile trader occupies the right side. They stand next to each other.	Both textile traders are connected as they work in the same industry.	The two textile traders are the most salient and their textile blend into the mural.	Photo-like painting makes the image real.
3. Kini Lebih Gempak	The campaign tagline and two can drinks	There are no frame lines but the hoop	The most salient in the mural is the tagline	Graffiti style makes the image unreal –

	occupy the left side while the girl is placed in the middle. On the right side are other can drinks and decorations.	separates the girl and the campaign tagline.	campaign and the two cans of drinks. The girl and other decorations are less salient although several can drinks are seen in the decorations.	classified as a diagram.
4. National Day 2022	Nine framed-photos occupied half of the mural (left) while a tree and two families occupy the other half (right).	The two families watching fireworks and the nine framed-photos are separate identities. However, they are still connected as the mural shows different ways of celebrating independence.	The two families watching fireworks are the most salient. Of secondary salience is the photo-framed images that are placed at the left side of the mural.	Photo-like painting makes the image real.
5. Cantonese Opera	The five opera singers and audiences occupy the centre space while food sellers are seen on both right and left sides.	Three main groups of people – opera singers, food sellers, audiences – are linked together because the mural shows the scene of an event.	The five opera singers are the most salient, occupying the centre position of the mural, while the audiences are the second most salience.	Photo-like painting makes the image real.
6. Singapore Hawker Heritage	The koay teow cart is placed on the left side while the two other hawkers are placed on the right side.	The hawkers are linked together because their goal is to sell food to customers.	The koay teow hawker is the most salient in the mural. The second most salient is the hawkers squatting to sell their food at floor level (right side of the mural).	Photo-like painting makes the image real.

Themed Descriptions of Murals

Mural 1: "Faces of Future Generation" by Andha.Ras, Malaysia

Drawn by Andha.Ras, "Faces of Future Generation" is located in Gurney Paragon, Pulau Tikus, Penang. The mural depicts the faces of several young women and men. A nurse, school girl guide, and girl scout are seen in the foreground. The background shows sports people (e.g., badminton player, cyclist, archer) indicating Malaysia's visibility in the international sports tournaments. Besides highlighting a diversity of occupations, this mural also shows different ethnic groups indicated by different skin colour tones.

Figure 1. "Faces of Future Generation" in Gurney Paragon, Pulau Tikus, Penang (Source: Andha.Ras)

Mural 2: "The Mercers" by Leonard Siaw, Malaysia

"The Mercers" is drawn by Leonard Siaw on the wall of a shophouse in India Street, Kuching. "The Mercers" features two pioneer textile traders, Wee Aik Oh and Sayed Ahmad. Wee, a Chinese textile shop owner, is holding onto his bicycle that carries a stack of folded cloth for making clothes, sheets, and curtains. Ahmad, likely an Indian Muslim wearing a songgok (traditional Malay headgear), and portrayed as the owner of a textile shop as there are many such textile shops in India Street. He is drawn flipping the red cloth, a typical action of textile shop assistants when they show the beauty of the cloth to customers. Both traders began their businesses in the 1930s before World War II, which resulted in the textile trade becoming one of the most significant businesses in Kuching. The mural portrays the contribution of the Chinese and Indian communities in building the economy of Sarawak. Today, the textile industry, which includes apparel designing and production, is one of Malaysia's fastest-growing sectors (Boon et al., 2013).

Figure 2. "The Mercers" in Kuching, Malaysia (Source: Leonard Siaw)

Mural 3: "Kini Lebih Gempak" by Kenji Chai, Malaysia

The F&N funky mural, "Kini Lebih Gempak", is drawn by Kenji Chai, and located on the wall of Bukit Bintang MRT, Kuala Lumpur. This is an advertisement carrying F&N's new campaign tagline, "Kini Lebih Gempak" (Now cooler/taller). The mural targets young customers by showing a girl in a bright yellow sweater with her large headphones and cap, electronic gadgets, some animals (bird, monkey, panda, dog, cat alluding to Kuching the cat city), and Rafflesia (the largest flower in Sarawak that blooms once a year). Besides the tagline which is in Malay, the F&N flavours are also in Malay (oren for orange, strawberi for strawberry, aiskrim soda for soda ice-cream). The use of Malay complies with the Malaysian regulation on the use of Malay in advertisements, the Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (Federal Territory) by-law 1982.

Figure 3. "Kini Lebih Gempak" in Bukit Bintang MRT, Kuala Lumpur (Source: Kenji Chai)

Taken together, the three murals draw attention to diversity of occupations and ethnic groups in Malaysia. There is also a contemporary focus featuring young people in Murals 1 and 3. Mural 2 highlights older people and is about the history of trading activities in Kuching.

Mural 4: “National Day 2022” by Belinda Low, Singapore

Drawn by Belinda Low, “National Day 2022” features Singapore’s National Day celebration, held on 9 August annually. The mural shows two families watching the national day fireworks from a riverbank. On the right is a couple with two children, somewhat reflective of the current family size in Singapore. In the middle is a father with a child on his shoulders. On the left are eight photos showing citizens of different ethnic groups and occupations—a young boy, two elderly women, a family, a hawker, a bespectacled man, a special needs child, and Singapore’s female president. The Singapore national flag is shown three times to symbolise the country’s national identity. The “National Day 2022” mural shows the diversified society of Singapore today in terms of ethnicity, status, occupation, age, and gender.

Figure 4. “National Day 2022” in Chinatown, Singapore (Source: Teresa Ong).

Mural 5: “Cantonese Opera” by Yip Yew Chong, Singapore

The mural titled the “Cantonese Opera” by Yip Yew Chong, is painted onto the wall of a building in Chinatown next to the Sri Mariamman Temple. It shows the opera stage and the spectators, some informally dressed in singlets and shorts Operas are usually performed in Cantonese. The opera is portrayed as Chinese culture, shown by a Chinese girl in pigtail in the foreground, and other women wearing the samfu (Cheongsam-like top) and trousers. The multi-ethnic society of Singapore is shown by the inclusion of Malay and Indian traders. In the foreground, on the right is a Malay man in songkok and sarong (large tube fabric wrapped around the waist) selling rojak (mixed salad) on his bicycle to the Chinese audience. On the left is a Punjabi man is seen delivering some food to one of the opera singers.

Figure 5. "Cantonese Opera" in Chinatown, Singapore (Source: Teresa Ong).

Mural 6: "Singapore Hawker Heritage" by Bibby Low, Singapore

Mural 6 "Singapore Hawker Heritage" is drawn by Bibby Low on the wall of a two-storey building. The background shows old-style shop houses with louvred windows. There is a banner stretching from the left row of shophouses to the right row. It reads "Singapore Hawker Heritage" in English, followed by Chinese at the bottom. This demonstrates the dominance of English in Singapore's public spaces. English is the most frequently spoken language (48.3%) in the home domain (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2021). The banner is red, the main colour of the Singapore flag. In the foreground is a hawker cart and traders selling a variety of Singaporean food. The Char Koay Teow (stir-fry flat rice noodles) cart catches attention. The English words are above the Chinese words. The positioning shows the importance of English as a commonly spoken language in Singapore, and the association of the hawker food with the Chinese culture. The mural is set in the past as shown by Chinese children playing a traditional game in Malaysia and Singapore, "tossing the stones" in the foreground. The heritage is also evident in the old-style shophouses, and hawkers selling wares in baskets on their shoulders. The old-style shophouses are retained as a site of cultural heritage and Char Koay Teow continues to be a favourite street food. Mural 6 portrays the past because Char Koay Teow is now mostly sold in food courts in shopping malls.

Figure 6. "Singapore Hawker Heritage" in Chinatown (Source: Teresa Ong).

Taken together, the three murals in Singapore show the present ("National day celebration 2022") and the cultural heritage ("Cantonese opera" and "Singapore Hawker Heritage"). These murals have a lot of more details compared to the Malaysian murals. The Chinese presence is obvious in the murals, which is expected because the Chinese population is 74.1% (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2023). However, other ethnic groups are included to portray ethnic diversity.

Discussion and Conclusion

The social semiotic analysis of the six murals in Malaysia and Singapore produced three key findings. Firstly, the messages of multiculturalism in the murals reflect different everyday realities in the past and present. The murals that portray the past record the ethnic cleavages like Mural 2 ("The Mercers"), which shows an association of the Indian with the textile trade in Kuching, Sarawak, and Mural 5 ("Cantonese Opera"), which shows the association of the Chinese with the performance art in Singapore in the earlier era. However, murals that portray the present index cultural diversity and ethnic integration, although this is merely based on the co-presence of different ethnic groups in the same space. Mural 1 ("Faces of Future Generation") in Penang, Malaysia and Mural 4 ("National Day 2022") in Chinatown, Singapore symbolise the ideal of racial unity.

Secondly, the analysis shows that murals that portray the past and the present provide a valuable record of how economic activities are becoming dissociated from ethnic group. In the past, economic activities show an association of ethnic group and occupation (Mural 2, "The Mercers", Sarawak, Malaysia; Mural 5, "Cantonese Opera", Singapore). Both murals document traces of past history and are suggestive of distinctive nostalgia (Malykhina, 2020). However, the murals which focus on the present do not associate economic activities with ethnicity. For example, Mural 1 ("Faces of Future Generation") illustrates several occupations of young women and men in sports, and Mural 3 ("Kini Lebih Gempak") shows an F&N

advertisement in Malaysia that shows young people venturing into previously-explored businesses and making a good income from it such as being social influencers. For example, influencers in Singapore can earn S$50 to S$10,000 per sponsored post, depending on number of followers (Tan, 2023).

Thirdly, murals have grown into a respectable culture and acted as an interchange of ideas and images in recent years (Malykhina, 2020). The murals are no longer drawn secretly by artists. Evidence of murals becoming a respectable culture is the commissioning of the murals by authorities such as Mural 2 ("The Mercers"), where Leonard Siaw was invited to draw the mural and he was paid for it. The municipal councils recognise the value of the murals in portraying the historical identity of the place, and the murals are seen and photographed by many locals and tourists alike. They also appear in many tourism materials used to show the uniqueness of a place. The past prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, was seen endorsing murals. He was photographed adding finishing touches on a mural painted by Temenggong Artists-In-Residence to brighten a neighbourhood (Facebook, 2022). This act gives recognition to the value of murals to capture and impart important meanings to the community.

In the field of social semiotics, the present study has shown that images in murals reflect realities and, at the same time, act as a tool to shape realities on ethnic identities and cultural perceptions. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) state, visuality acts as part of a language and speaks it through expressing meanings. Visual aspects such as typography, semiotic layout, colour, and symbols may convey meanings better than words. Nevertheless, a limitation of this study is the small sample size, which limits the generalisability of conclusions drawn. In further research, insights can be gained using interviews with mural artists to elicit their motivations and targeted messages in their artwork. Such studies will reveal whether artists consciously align their artwork with government ideals on national unity.

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