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The construction of national identity through the production of ritual and spectacle

An analysis of National Day parades in Singapore

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, we adopt the view that 'nation' and 'national identity' are social constructions, created to serve ideological ends. We discuss this in the specific empirical context of Singapore's National Day parades. By drawing on officially produced souvenir programmes and magazines, newspaper reports, and interviews with participants and spectators, we analyse the parades between 1965 and 1994, showing how, as an annual ritual and landscape spectacle, the parades succeed to a large extent in creating a sense of awe, wonderment and admiration. Discussion focuses on four aspects of the celebrations: the site of the parades, their display and theatricality, the composition and involvement of parade participants, and parade themes. We also discuss some examples of alternative readings of parade meanings, illustrating how ideological hegemony is not total. Copyright © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

Introduction

Increasingly, in recent years, scholars have recognized that 'nation' and 'national identity' are social constructions, that they do not exist as essences but as political, cultural inventions and local tactics (Clifford, 1988: 12). The case of Singapore exemplifies this well. On gaining independence through the severance of ties with Malaysia in 1965, Singapore found itself in a position of having to rally its people in the exercise of nation-building. In 1969, racial riots threatened the fabric of society and again highlighted the need for a 'national identity' to be developed that cut across racial and cultural lines. Economic problems in 1973 and 1974 (triggered off by the oil crisis) and in 1985 and 1986 (brought on by global recession) again required that Singaporeans pulled together and worked as a 'nation'. In recent times, the broader 'annihilation of space by time' (Marx, quoted in Massey, 1993: 232)—the process of globalization—has further contributed to the felt need to assert a sense of the local and to construct a shared national identity. Together, these examples illustrate how, at various points in its history, Singapore has been confronted with different crises in which it has been necessary to develop and sustain a sense of national identity and belonging.

Our focus in this paper is on one of the means by which the state hopes to develop a sense of 'nation' and 'national identity'. Our specific aim is to analyse National Day

parades in Singapore from 1965 to 1994 as evidence of the state's efforts at inventing ritual and creating landscape spectacle in order to build up national identity and develop an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). We will do so by analyzing the strands that make up this secular ritual and landscape spectacle, namely: the constitution of ceremonial space; the contribution to display and theatricality; the composition of parade participants; and the selection of parade motifs. In the course of discussion, we will examine how the specific strategies may have changed over time and why. These four themes have been chosen because they are strategies that the state has chosen to achieve its ends. Different levels of overtness in ideological intent are evident in the four. While the ideological messages are less overt in the first three themes, parade motifs most obviously convey ideological meanings. We will also discuss instances of alternative readings of these parades, illustrating how state hegemony is not complete. Our discussions are based on a combination of sources: official documents in the form of souvenir programmes and magazines,¹ newspaper reports² and interviews with spectators and participants.³

Concepts and contexts

As Jackson and Penrose (1993: 8) have argued, the term 'nation' is a social construct. It draws on notions of common interest between heterogeneous groups and by grounding it in physical space and delimiting a recognizable territory, belief in the existence, legitimacy and inviolability of the entity is reinforced. The 'nation' comprises an 'imagined community', 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 minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1983: 15). At the same time, nations are communities 'because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson, 1983: 16). Central to the construction of a 'nation' is also the articulation of a 'mystical bond between people and place', an immutable relationship between citizens and their country (Penrose, 1993: 29). In circumstances where heterogeneous groups are involved, where a shared history is lacking, and where any nascent sense of nation and national identity is threatened by global (sometimes interpreted as western) forces, the bonds between members of the community, and between people and place, is at best tenuous, and requires nurturing. Indeed, given that identities are conjunctural and socially constructed rather than of the essence and natural (Clifford, 1988: 12; Jackson and Penrose, 1993; Cohen, 1993), it follows that at particular times and under particular conditions, the sense of national identity is especially threatened. In other words, the need to foster and assert the sense of identity may be stronger at some times than others.

For example, it has been shown that the rise of the modern nation-state exemplifies one particular condition under which there is a need to develop and assert the sense of identity. This is well-discussed in a series of benchmark essays in Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) *The Invention of Tradition* in the context of Europe, in which it is suggested that traditions, such as the national anthem and the national flag, were invented in order to 'inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour' (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1) as part of nation-building. It has also been argued that in recent times, with improved telecommunications and the growth in travel and tourism, time-space compression has led to the loss of a 'sense of local place and its particularity'. This has led some to reactionary responses: 'certain forms of nationalism, sentimentalized recovering of sanitized "heritages"' (Massey, 1993: 232). Featherstone (1993: 177) suggests that with

greater globalization, there is the 'generation of such nationalistic, ethnic and fundamentalist reactions to globalization . . . [that there is] a strong assertion of local cultures. These might take the form of reviving or simulating local traditions and ceremonies, or inventing new ones'. Attempts may be made to produce 'homogeneous, integrated common cultures and standardized citizens loyal to the national ideal', for example, through the 'establishment of national symbols and ceremonies and the reinvention of traditions' (Featherstone, 1993: 178). Under these circumstances, the rites and ceremonies need not be invented *ex nibilo* because they can draw on traditions and ethnic cultures that possessed plausibility (Featherstone, 1993: 178).

In our analysis of Singapore's National Day parades, we take as our starting point this idea that nations and national identities are socially constructed. We will discuss the attempts at such construction, given the chequered historical conditions characterizing the birth of the Republic, and the perceived and real threats to its survival since 1965. In attempting this analysis, we will adopt the notions of ritual and spectacle.

Ritual entails oft-repeated actions, routinely followed according to some due form and order. Rituals may be associated with religious or secular origins. Our concern here is only with the latter, which can take a variety of forms, such as the annual New Year celebrations, or the rituals of everyday life such as who buys the drinks in which order (Featherstone, 1993: 178). In the context of this paper, we are less concerned with the ordinary and everyday than with the spectacular and episodic. Specifically, we analyze National Day parades as secular or civic rituals that are stage-managed once a year.

Ritual is distinguished by certain characteristics and functions. First, Goheen (1993b: 131) has suggested that celebration in the form of civic ritual is place and time apart. This is because all normal business is interrupted for the parade: streets are decorated in exceptional ways, costumes of parade participants are specially designed and music is publicly played. Together with the mammoth crowds that gather in the parade grounds, along the streets or at vantage points, the atmosphere is transformed into an emotive one and place and time are set apart (Goheen, 1993b: 131–132). Second, ritual is 'potentially a period of scrutinisation of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs' (Turner, 1974a: 156). As Wilson (1954: 241) argues in the context of religious ritual, they reveal values at their deepest level because 'men [sic] express in ritual what moves them most'. Indeed, she expresses the view that 'the study of rituals [is] the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies'. Often, it is argued that the values that rituals reveal and emphasize are shared values (Goheen, 1993b: 131) since collective participation in ritual suggests affirmation of those values being celebrated.

Apart from the links with a society's values, a third and closely related characteristic of ritual is its inextricable links to social relationships. In particular, Marston (1989: 255) has suggested that parades, as a specific form of ritual, are 'complex commentaries' on social relations. They 'are both shaped by the field of power relations in which they take place, and are attempts to act on and influence those relations' (Davis, 1986: 6). This is possible because

. . . in them performers define who can be a social actor and what subjects and ideas are available for communication and consideration. These defining images in turn shape the actions and alternatives people can imagine and propose. (Davis, 1986: 6)

A specific example of the link between ritual and social relations is the way in which rituals reinforce group cohesion: by emphasizing the common attribute of citizenship (Goheen, 1993b: 131) or belonging, by highlighting the shared values of society (Bocock,

1974: 174), by demonstrating community power and solidarity (Marston, 1989: 255), and by allowing for a suspension of the structures that govern day-to-day social relationships, often a suppression of the normally dominant relations. This condition has been termed 'liminality', defined by Turner (1974a: 156; 1974b) as 'a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action'. In these ways, rituals contribute to social and political life by creating a 'sense of community', often cutting across class lines (Kaplan, 1984: 173).

A fourth characteristic of ritual is its role in sustaining a sense of place, which can be interpreted at a variety of levels. Connerton (1989) argues that ritual performances and commemorative ceremonies are important in building up collective memory, which is in turn crucial for the development of a sense of home. Certainly this argument, writ large, suggests that rituals can help to sustain a sense of nation.

Spectacle is characterized by a high degree of display and theatricality (Daniels and Cosgrove, 1993: 58). As a landscape metaphor, it impresses not so much by its actual substance but through pageantry, fanfare and show. Spectacle may be designed to create an impact through the use of fear (thus, a punitive strategy) or the use of awe and wonder (a celebratory strategy). The former may be effected through public torture, execution and other punishment meted out in excess, often using the body as the site of spectacle: it is marked, trained, tortured, forced to carry out tasks; it performs ceremonies and emits signs (Foucault, 1979; Tuan, 1979: 182). Our concern, however, is with the latter, in which spectacle is used to inspire positive feelings of admiration and wonder rather than fear and terror. In this instance, spectacle connotes triumph and proclaims achievement. This may be attained through the deliberate use of ceremony; the conscious construction of pomp; the creation of occasion and circumstances for celebration; and visual effects (Ley and Olds, 1988; Kearns, 1993; Yeoh and Lau, 1995). Indeed, for Debord (1973), spectacle pervades the whole of social life, invading the realms of production and consumption, and in fact, of consciousness.

Whether it is fear or admiration that is intended, spectacle can be an effective means of social control. Foucault (1979: 9), for example, argues that the threat of punishment, emphasized through spectacle, leaves the domain of everyday perceptions and enters that of the abstract consciousness. In the same way, the impression of triumph and achievement, celebration and carnival can enter the realm of abstract consciousness beyond the immediate experience of witnessing the spectacle. The effect is therefore that ideological intent can invade the private realm of everyday life through the use of hegemonic means rather than force. As Ley and Olds (1988) recognize, the elite, through their control of spectacle, can effect strong influence in the realm of social life and popular consciousness. Applied in the context of this paper, the concepts of spectacle and ritual become useful in attempting to understand the state's attempt to develop national pride, construct national identity and inculcate loyalty.

Hegemony, while generally a more effective weapon than outright force, is, however, never fully achieved (Gramsci, 1973). In other words, those seeking to gain and/or maintain power, or more generally, to propagate or perpetuate a particular ideology, will always be challenged in some way by other groups in society. Resistance may be overt and material, as in riots and demonstrations, but it could as well be latent and symbolic. Our focus will mainly be on the latter, in which resistance, representing political action, can be conveyed in social and cultural terms, for example, through the appropriation and transformation of the resources of the dominating group (see for example, Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hall *et al.*, 1978; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982). Such resistance represents what de Certeau (1984: xix) calls the means by which the 'weak' create their own sphere of autonomous action and self-determination within the

constraints placed on them by the 'strong', or what Scott (1985) calls the 'weapons of the weak'. As de Certeau (1984: 36–7) goes on to argue, the actions of the weak represent 'tactics' rather than 'strategies' in that tactics involve seizing 'propitious moments' and 'space[s] of the other' and turning them to one's own ends, thus making them opportunities. On the other hand, 'strategies' imply that people have at their disposal spaces of their own from which they can launch their 'attack'/resistance'.

In the present context, we will argue that the state attempts to persuade Singaporeans of the naturalness of its ideologies by using the spectacle and ritual of National Day parades. Such hegemony is usually successful, as we will illustrate below, although there are instances of resistance. Such resistance usually represents tactics, revealing 'the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers' (de Certeau, 1984: 37).

A new state, a new social order: nation and nation-building in Singapore

Before attempting our analysis of the role of National Day parades in nation-building, we will first sketch the prevailing context in post-war Singapore to provide the local backcloth to understanding the creation of a 'nation'.

On reoccupying Singapore in 1945 after the end of the Second World War, the British encountered fundamentally new political attitudes and aspirations among the people of the colony. Not only had the Japanese occupation socially and economically ravaged the island, it had also shattered the myth of white superiority and British invincibility. In April 1946, the British made Singapore a distinct colony separate from the Malayan Union, a move that eventually led to internal self-government and the installation of the People's Action Party (PAP) government in 1959. After a failed attempt at merger with Malaysia (1963–5), Singapore became an independent sovereign state on 9 August 1965.

The age of independence thus dawned at the end of a slow and uneven road. Prior to merger, the PAP had consistently and fervently campaigned for 'independence through merger', as it was never believed at the time that Singapore could survive economically or politically without its hinterland, the Federation of Malaysia (Yeo and Lau, 1991: 148). 'National identity' as conceived then was thus directed towards Malaya. However, with the merger, the anti-communalist leadership of the city-state 'was increasingly at odds with the more conservative, Malay-dominated leadership of the Central Government' (Chew, 1991: 363). Within the new polity, the PAP's vision of a non-communal multiracial 'Malaysian Malaysia' rekindled fears within the Federation that Malay privileges would be withdrawn and that the 'racial arithmetic' might be turned against the Malays if the PAP should gain ascendancy (Yeo and Lau, 1991: 147). This propelled Singapore's exit from Malaysia, and with the union peremptorily severed in August 1965, the PAP ironically found itself having to disprove its original contention that an independent Singapore was not viable (Yeo and Lau, 1991: 149). The parameters that engendered the mood of uncertainty at the time were stark: the island had no natural resource base to depend on, external relations with immediate neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia were strained, the communist challenge was 'crippled but not crushed' (Chew, 1991: 363), and Singapore's vulnerability was further underscored by the withdrawal of British military forces from 1967. Singapore was 'a complex, multiracial community with little sense of common history, with a group purpose which is yet to be properly articulated, . . . in the process of rapid transition towards a destiny which we do not know yet' (Goh Keng Swee, then Minister of the Interior and Defence, quoted in Chew, 1991: 363). National survival became the

dominant preoccupation of Singapore's political leaders, who urged the people to 'buckle down to the job of "nation-building"' (Benjamin, 1988: 20).

The formation of a new nation-state represents a radical discontinuity from the past and is the product of 'conscious goal-directed planning' (Benjamin, 1988: 3). In the case of Singapore, strategies were mounted to tackle major socioeconomic problems which threatened the fragile fabric of the newly created 'nation', including racial tensions, economic backwardness and unemployment, housing shortages and health concerns. These policies and plans were not only intended to improve living conditions for the people but were also intimately linked to the government's bid to secure political legitimacy, build ideological consensus and transform the population into a disciplined industrial workforce (Chua, 1991). Beyond meeting the immediate and more long-term material needs of the people, it was equally crucial to forge common consciousness of a sense of identity with the nation-state. Singapore's leaders had to fundamentally reshape the 'primacy of places' in people's consciousness and in turn replace it by 'an abstractly conceptualized and much less immediate linkage with a generalized area', in this case, a 'nation' defined by political and territorial boundaries (Benjamin, 1988: 3). This was particularly crucial in the case of Singapore where, for nearly 150 years of colonial rule, the island's population had consisted primarily of immigrants hailing from different 'homelands' (such as China, India and the Malay world), and where even the locally born 'had to anchor their political [and cultural] orientation through myths of the ancestor homes' (Chua and Kuo, 1990: 2).

A corollary of place-bonding in the construction of nationhood is the welding of individuals within the legitimized borders of the independent 'nation' into 'one people'. The state's vision was to integrate the 'nation' on the basis of principles to create a 'multiracial, non-communist, non-aligned, and democratic socialist state' (Chan, 1991: 158). In 1966, a Constitution Commission was appointed to enshrine the multiracial ideal in the constitution in order to safeguard the rights of racial, linguistic and religious minorities (Chan, 1991: 159). Multiracialism (along with multilingualism, multireligiosity and multiculturalism) has since then been promulgated as a social formula to forge a single identity out of the heterogeneous population riven by racial, religious, language and cultural lines (Betts, 1975; Benjamin, 1976; Siddique, 1989: 365). This state-vaunted formulation designates four 'official' races—Chinese, Malays, Indians and 'Others'—viewed as separate but equal, and encourages acceptance of the coexistence of different religious practices, customs and traditions of the various communities 'without discrimination for any particular community' (Chan and Evers, 1978: 123). The PAP government had consistently regarded racial chauvinism as one of the two main threats to nation-building (the other being communism) and strove to ensure a balance between the interests of the different racial groups through its policies relating to education, housing, language and, most recently, the formation of self-help groups (Chiew, 1985; Shee, 1985). While each race is urged to maintain and draw sustenance from a carefully contained sense of ethnic and cultural identity, they are also encouraged to develop a larger identity based on secular, non-cultural national values. Communalist sentiments based on race, dialect, surname or regional affinity must be broken down and replaced with social relationships that derive their meaning from the overarching 'nation-state framework' (Benjamin, 1988: 36). By appeasing and containing ethnic demands, the multiracial ideology 'contributes to the nation building process' (Hill and Lian, 1995: 5).

The process of nation-building thus requires that the state interferes with the consciousness of its new citizens, turning people's attention away from more parochial concerns towards the nation-state. This process of constructing a 'nation' and a 'people'

from their 'almost non-existent past' has a short history of no more than 30 years and is thus 'relatively shallow and extremely fluid and formative' (Chua and Kuo, 1990: 5). In the immediate post-independence era, the reality and rhetoric of national survival in the face of threats (such as communism) and heavy odds (such as the lack of natural resources) became the major rallying point for mobilizing the population and inculcating national consciousness. At least before the 1980s, the national values selected to form the bedrock of national identity were deliberately pragmatic rather than associated with any one cultural tradition; they were 'universalistic' values relating to modernity, development and economic success (Chan and Evers, 1978: 122, 125). In more recent times, economic success has brought with it 'substantial injection of self-definition and national pride', contributing significantly to the development of national culture and identity (Chua and Kuo, 1990: 6). In the climate of success, the rhetoric of 'survival' and 'necessity', while not totally abandoned, is no longer compelling in mobilizing people to unite in their strivings. Instead, with affluence opening up the avenues of choice and individual preferences, new imperatives had to be found that could justify the moulding of a singular national identity (Chua, 1985: 42; Hill and Lian, 1995: 11). The focus of national identity construction from the mid-1980s has in turn broadened to include an emphasis on the collective history, heritage and struggles of 'one people', a revival of 'Asian values', and the development of a national ideology, 'shared values' (*Straits Times*, 6 January 1991) culled from a selective distillation of 'eastern' and 'western' mores, and of traditional and progressive elements. 'Janus-faced', the state in the process of nation building 'select[s] from the past and reconstitute[s] those elements which are identified as possible sources of cultural ballast and therefore of stability while simultaneously orienting citizens towards the achievement of future goals' (Hill and Lian, 1995: 36). This new consciousness of being 'one people', cutting across divisive lines belonging to 'one place', is symbolized and solidified by the institutionalization of routinized and ceremonial ritual practices, including saluting the national flag, singing the national anthem, taking the pledge of loyalty to serve the country 'regardless of race, language or religion' and, as will be discussed here, staging and participating in National Day parades.

National Day parades: the invention of ritual and the creation of landscape spectacle

Imp-faced Chou Shixian, 11 . . . His spirits soared as he screamed, sang, and then screamed some more. He needed no prompting as spontaneity was in the air. Shixian was not alone. There were 60,000 others like him at the stadium that night, some older, some younger. All of them were determined to have a party. They cheered as they waved their small red and white plastic flags at a man who stood in for President Ong Teng Cheong. Standing still, they sang the national anthem and took the pledge. Finally, they sang the Happy Birthday song to Singapore when a giant two-tiered pink cake was wheeled into the stadium. I was amazed at what I saw because all of this happened at a parade review. Then yesterday, I saw a repeat performance by 60,000 other spectators. What a spectacle it was, seeing, hearing and feeling Singaporeans cheering for Singapore. I had seen the parade three times before and yet I felt the goose-bumps. The Singapore spirit had hit me. Yesterday, this cynic became a convert. (Nirmala, 1994: 6)

After this, one feels like one would fight and die for Singapore. (Parade spectator, quoted in *Straits Times*, 10 August 1986)

The above quotations illustrate well the effect that spectacular National Day parades have on ordinary Singaporeans: the sense of belonging and identity, and the feeling of

pride, are abundantly evident. How have these effects been achieved? In this section, we will analyse National Day parades in Singapore from 1965 to 1994. These parades, organized by the Singapore Armed Forces, serve as evidence of the state's efforts at inventing ritual and creating landscape spectacle. We will explore four strands of this secular ritual and landscape spectacle: the constitution of ceremonial space, the contribution to display and theatricality, the composition of parade participants and the selection of parade motifs.

Drawing on symbolic capital: the making of ceremonial space

If spectacle means 'something to wonder at, thus touching mystery' (Daniels and Cosgrove, 1993: 58), part of its enchantment derives from the terrain on which it is staged. The materiality of the landscape does not simply provide a passive backcloth for the enactment of spectacle but its architecture and aesthetics are designed to invade the private realm and invite visual consumption of inscribed meanings. Indeed, the choice of the landscape in which to stage a spectacle is not a matter of indifference, for 'some sites have more significance than others' (Kuper, quoted in Goheen, 1993a: 331).

In 1966, Singapore's first National Day parade was staged at the Padang, the expanse of green characteristically situated at the heart of the colonial city. Fronting a premier recreation club and surrounded by municipal offices, the court house, and other religious and educational institutions, the Padang had served both as cricket and ceremonial ground (a quintessentially British combination) in the colonial days. Its location marked it out as the locus of colonial power and civic pride but, significantly, it was from the steps of City Hall (once the municipal offices) that Singapore's first president, Yusof Ishak, took the salute from participants of the first National Day march-past on the morning of 9 August 1966 (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1966). Framed by august edifices of imperial origin, the sea of green vanished beneath the feet of several thousand parade participants arranged in serried ranks and wielding military and musical instruments, flags and other paraphernalia. The appropriation of this 'green cricket ground that once symbolised white colonial rule' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1990) for the staging of a national event, a celebration of the emergence of the 'nation' from a colonial past, serves to illustrate the fact that landscape meanings are not static but are constantly reinscribed (*Plate 1*). While societies emerging from colonialism may attempt to divest the landscape of colonial associations by removing its stock of colonial structures such as statuary and street-names (Lewandowski, 1984), in practice, post-colonial societies often 'do not have the capability to rewrite forthwith a new image in their cities' as 'other priorities clamor' and colonial structures are often appropriated for new purposes and re-invested with new meanings (Western, 1985: 344). The National Day spectacle thus depends for its effects on combining the architectural spectacularity of the past and the animated spectacularity of the moment. By the 1990s, the captivating effects of the latter are stronger compared to the former, as evident in the fact that for the majority of the people, the site is not so much associated with 'British rule' as with 'a distinctive architectural style' (Kong and Yeoh, 1994: 257). As national ritual, National Day parades draw selectively from historically sedimented symbolic capital in the landscape; at the same time, since landscape is a constantly growing repository of collective memory, new uses as national parade ground inscribe new meanings which go some way in obscuring older significances.

Parades do not simply occupy central space but also move through space as a means of diffusing the effects of spectacle. From the Padang, the National Day parade wound its way through thickly populated Chinatown, cheered by the people, 'normally indifferent

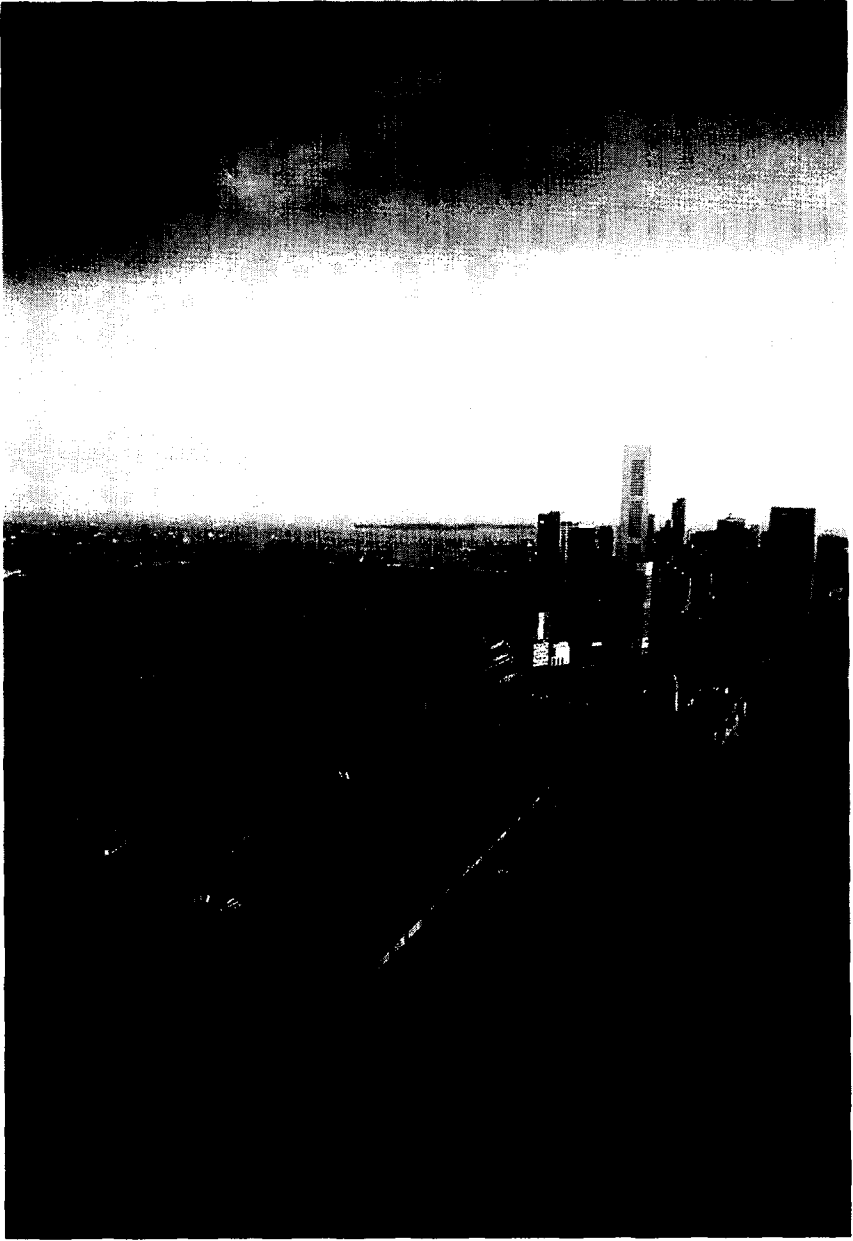


PLATE 1. The Padang is transformed from green cricket ground to a kaleidoscopic parade ground, framed by architectural imprints of the colonial past and over-reaching skyscrapers and office towers, symbols of modernity and progress.

to police and soldiers' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1966), crowding along roadsides and five-foot-ways,⁴ waving from windows, and clambering over bridges and balconies. In other years during the 1960s and early 1970s, the marching columns not only traversed the older parts of the central city but also headed towards the satellite towns and housing estates such as Alexandra and Queenstown (*Straits Times*, 9 August 1968; *Sunday Times*,

10 August 1969). In the days before 'live' telecast of the parades brought the spectacle into the homes of every Singaporean, these long marches comprising different excerpts of the main pageantry multiplied the effects of spectacle by invading the spaces of everyday life and transforming ordinary streets into theatres of pomp. Parading, by traversing and transforming ordinary spaces, allows the 'symbolic capture' (Berger, quoted in Goheen, 1993a: 348) of spectacles to move beyond the locus of the ceremonial landscape to the habitations of the people.

Following a similar logic of bringing the parades closer to the people, the National Day parade was decentralized every alternate year between 1975 and 1984 and held throughout the island at 13 selected centres at the heart of residential areas such as Farrer Park, Jalan Besar, Jurong, Paya Lebar, Redhill, Toa Payoh and Queenstown. Staggered between 8.30 a.m. and 5.30 p.m., each segment lasted about an hour, followed by route marches through the neighbouring areas. In form and composition, the decentralized mini-parades of at least 3000 participants each were scaled-down replicas of the typical unified parade, featuring contingents comprising military units, school uniformed groups, trade unions and cultural and civic organizations. Each 'pocket pageant' or 'travelling parade' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1975; *Souvenir Magazine*, 1990: 14), however, was distinguished by some special highlights to showcase local talent, usually dance numbers, pugilistic displays or band items, performed by school, athletic or cultural troupes drawn from the surrounding catchment of five constituencies. The prime minister and cabinet members also spread themselves among the different centres on a time sequence basis to act as reviewing ministers for the march-pasts. The underlying idea was to celebrate in a more informal way and to provide more citizens across the island 'the opportunity of witnessing the pomp and pageantry' of the parade (*Straits Times*, 14 July 1975). According to S. Rajaratnam, then foreign minister, the aim was also to involve more people at the grassroots level, so that people '[would] get the satisfaction of knowing that they [could] organise such a function [successfully]' in the spirit of 'democracy [which] after all meant "running things for the people by the people"' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1975). These decentralized parades were thus meant to combine local resources with national prestige in the production of spectacle.

In the economy of parades intended 'to demonstrate consensus and civic solidarity', 'size meant success' and 'the largest were among the most memorable' (Goheen, 1993a: 342). Large crowds of spectators were crucial to the triumph of spectacle. In 1976, the parade was held for the first time at the newly completed National Stadium, which was able to admit 60 000 spectators. This was the first time that such a large crowd could be accommodated, as compared to the smaller crowds of less than 20 000 at the Padang. For the first time too, tickets were issued free of charge to 'people from all walks of life' in place of admission by invitation only in previous years (*Straits Times*, 18 July 1976). The choice of venue reflected both the pride in a new national structure (opened in 1973) and the desire to include more people in a collective celebration of the nation. Not only was the Stadium able to accommodate a larger crowd both in terms of marchers and spectators, it was also custom-built to allow large crowds to converge in one spot to watch the whole parade and to provide observers with a good view of the parade (*Plate 2*), unlike the setting at the Padang where 'many people had to stand up and crane their necks while those who remained seated missed seeing the contingents when they marched round the sea front' (*Straits Times*, 11 August 1976). The 'national spirit of gaiety and togetherness' would thus be more fully captured, and with the parade timed for the softer evening light as opposed to brilliant sunshine, technological wizardry in the form of special lighting and sound systems could be tapped to enhance the atmosphere, giving

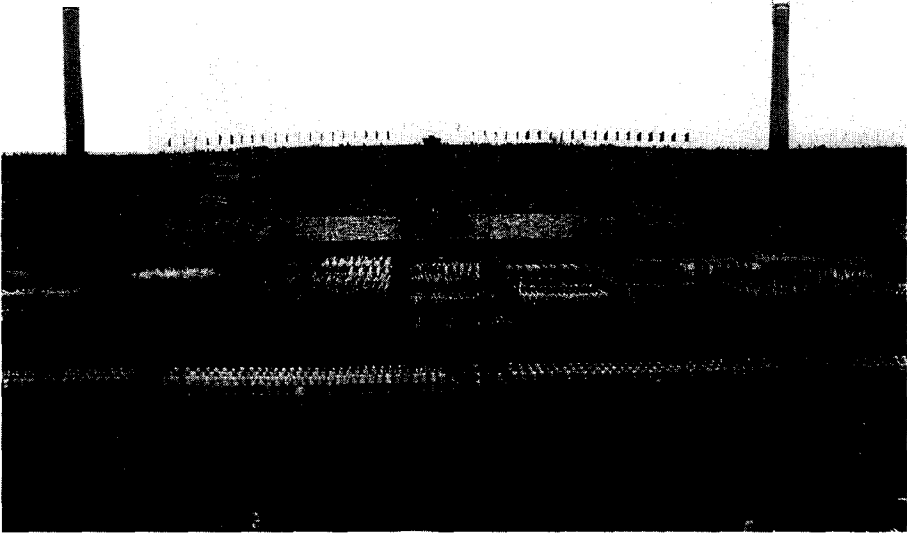


PLATE 2. The National Stadium allowed for large crowds, which could converge in one spot to view the parade. Every point was a vantage point.

it 'a touch of magic' (*Straits Times*, 11 August 1976). As with other cases of 'grand show[s] of strength and patriotism' which require meticulous orchestration and planning and involve large numbers, crowd control is crucial to success; in this regard, the Stadium was tailored for such events: 'there was less confusion among the spectators as there were policemen stationed everywhere in the parking lots and entrances to the stadium to guide the public', observed one spectator (*Straits Times*, 11 August 1976). While lacking the historic grandeur and associations with a momentous past, the Stadium as a setting for the parade conjures up its own sense of occasion and ceremony by its sheer immensity of space, convergence of people and technological sophistication. As a site of spectacle, it allows for the combination of order and control with large numbers.

In 1985, it was announced that National Day parades would be centralized henceforth, with venues alternating between the National Stadium and the Padang. The logic was that the dispersed events had not provided a focus for the annual celebrations in the same way that one big parade could (*Straits Times*, 11 July 1985). In 1986, route marches through the streets were also dispensed with 'to enable parade celebrations to be focused entirely on-site at the stadium' (*Straits Times*, 12 July 1986). The choice of the National Stadium was predicated on the advantages that it offered. Its greater capacity meant that more spectators could be admitted, while its enclosed nature and custom-built structure facilitated spectatorship. While the Padang did not share these advantages, it nevertheless continues to be used for various reasons. Apart from its historical importance, outlined above, today the surrounding skyline, comprising gleaming office towers, five-star hotels of international repute and modernist shopping centres, speaks of Singapore's achievements and progress. The colonial heart of the city, of which the Padang is a part, has thus remained the main hub of the city economically and administratively, and hosting the parade there draws on its symbolic capital both historically and in present times. This is reflected in a press report in 1990, in which it was said that the sight of the then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew on the

steps of City Hall 'evoked memories of that historic first parade in 1966 on the very same turf of the Padang' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1990). This symbolic significance clearly remains favourably evaluated as seen from the fact that for Singapore's 25th birthday parade in 1990, 'a parade in the style of earlier parades at the Padang but much bigger [and] grander' was chosen to mark the celebrations (*Souvenir Programme*, 1990: 24). The National Day parade spectacle thus requires the constant change and elaboration of ceremonial space: by alternating between sites, it draws on the symbolic capital of not one but two landscapes of 'nationhood'.

Display and theatricality, or 'How I was converted from cynic to proud Singaporean'⁵

Apart from the significance of site in contributing to the meaningfulness of National Day parades, these parades also seek to impress through their pageantry, fanfare and show. This has been achieved in a variety of ways: through the demonstration of military might, through the deliberate use of colour, through the manipulation of lights and fireworks, and through the orchestration of sound and music. Through the combined effect of these orchestrated strategies, National Day parades provide abundant vivid images to form the substance of collective memory, in turn contributing to the development of a sense of place.

Military might. In the late 1960s, through the 1970s and early 1980s, spectacle and awe were created by columns of tanks, armoured carriers and big guns. The martial appearance of these parades were obvious attempts to flex military muscles. National Day was an occasion to show Singaporeans and the world that although the island was small and the population inconsiderable, it had every intention to defend itself against external threats. As the military developed and armoury became increasingly advanced, land and air defence equipment were drawn into the parades to inspire a sense of awe. In 1969, for example, AMX13 light tanks made their debut and represented the first announcement of the acquisition of mobile armour by the Singapore Armed Forces (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1969). In 1970, the first appearance of BAC Strikemaster jet-trainers, turbine-drive Alouette III and amphibious V-200 armoured personnel carriers signalled another significant step in the Republic's defence build-up (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1970). In 1976, there was the biggest ever flypast by 60 military aircraft, including three Alouette helicopters, three Strikemasters, 27 Skyhawks and 27 Hunters from the Republic of Singapore Air Force (*Straits Times*, 18 July 1976). In 1984, the mobile column constituting the drive-past included a range of new defence capabilities, such as jeeps used mainly for reconnaissance, M113 armoured personnel carriers, anti-aircraft missiles and AMX13 tanks. In many ways, this defence build-up was made necessary because Singapore's exit from Malaysia in 1965 and the withdrawal of the British military forces from 1967 left it a tiny island with strained relations with Malaysia and Indonesia, and open to possible attack by other larger powers. National Day parades were thus excellent platforms to impress others and to assure the local people of their army's capabilities.

As a sign of Singapore's 'coming of age', the 21st birthday celebrations in 1986 marked a turning point in the display of military might on National Day. While military equipment has been put on display to different degrees since then, parades since that 21st anniversary have generally been shorn of their explicit martial appearance. Instead, where the military is engaged in the creation of spectacle, it is done with more sophistication, involving skill and dexterity rather than the sheer power of equipment. This was perhaps a response to popular sentiment that earlier displays of military

equipment were becoming 'boring', a view that several interviewees expressed, no doubt because as immediate threats of confrontation diminished, the message about Singapore's military might became seemingly 'irrelevant' to Singaporeans' everyday lives. The sophistication and skill displayed by members of the armed forces in later years became more welcome 'entertainment'. Hence, in 1986, for example, instead of tanks rumbling across the tartan track, the crowds were thrilled by members of the Singapore Armed Forces Provost Unit twirling their rifles, tossing their bayonet-tipped rifles, 'flirting and charming the crowd with their practised nonchalance' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1986). Their perfectly synchronized steps bore testimony to skills honed from rigorous and precise training. This was matched in 1987 by men from the Republic of Singapore Police and the armed forces Provost Unit demonstrating their agility as they skilfully manoeuvred their way through intricate patterns on their motorcycles. In 1993, four air force Super Skyhawk jets impressed in the first ever aerobic display. The jets 'perform[ed] a loop over the Padang in a tight diamond formation with wing tips barely metres away from each other before breaking into a bomb burst manoeuvre, flying off in four directions' (*Straits Times*, 9 August 1993). In the same year, 20 skydivers jumped from a Super Puma helicopter at about 1800 m. Two freefallers carrying the state flag and the commando flag went for precision landings on a 6 × 6 m panel in the centre of the Padang (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1993). Meanwhile, out at sea, the display and theatricality continued with more high-speed drama and daredevil stunts. The highlight was a four-minute display by four Police Coast Guard boats performing tight 90-degree turns and head-on passes, bringing the boats to within a metre of each other at speeds of up to 30 knots (*Straits Times*, 9 August 1993). Men from the Republic of Singapore Navy also rescued divers from the waters effortlessly; canoeists did their 'storm rolls', flipping the canoes belly-side up and themselves under and resurfacing on the other side in one swift manoeuvre. Daredevils on jet skis and jet scooters did stunning criss-crosses at high speeds (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1993). All provided further evidence of the coordination and competence that would be required of the armed forces should a crisis occur. The message seemed to be that, combined with the 'brawn' of earlier years was 'brain' that could be relied on: the military had become increasingly sophisticated not only in terms of machinery and equipment, but in terms of strategy and manoeuvre.

Apart from the general shift in emphasis from the display of equipment to the display of skills, any continuing thread in the demonstration of machinery has been done in recent years to emphasize not only the sophistication of machinery, but to underline the contributions of multiple groups as indication of their role in 'total defence'. Hence, where drive-pasts of vehicles and equipment have taken place in the last ten years, the emphasis has shifted from the earlier focus on the Singapore Armed Forces to include the Singapore Police Force, Singapore Joint Civil Defence Forces and civil resource owners, as in 1990, for example. This reflects the way in which defence is now treated with more sophistication as a total concept, involving both the military and civilians.

The deliberate use of colour. Throughout all the National Day parades, the striking display of colour has constantly been an important component in the making of spectacle. The multiple hues that colour the various venues contribute to the sense of celebration, carnival and cheer. In one year, for example, the headlines—'Colour wins the day' and 'A moving panorama of colour' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1973)—captured its integral role in contributing to the day's celebrations. The only difference through the years has been the increasingly varied ways in which colour is injected in the parades. In the 1960s and 1970s, colour was deliberately used in the costumes and props used by participants of

mass displays. Whether it was the T-shirts, skirts, flags, flowers or ribbons worn or used by the performers, care was often taken to include bright and cheerful colours such as striking yellow, eye-catching red, glittering gold and brilliant blue. This effect of colour was achieved through a marking of the body. To borrow Foucault's (1979) argument in relation to public torture, the body becomes the site of spectacle. Bodies are marked (clothed), made up and trained to perform, and in this way contribute to the spectacle. In the 1980s and 1990s, this became true not only of the performers on the field, but of the spectators as well. Whereas spectators go to parades in expectation of witnessing rather than contributing to the pageantry and display, they become part of the performance through a marking of their bodies. The 'spectator contingents' from grassroots organizations and private and public bodies become involved through the patterns they form, simply by the colour of T-shirts they are asked to wear; the banners, pom-poms and flags they wave; and the flashcards they flash to form spectacular displays. Thus, on cue, the galleries would explode with beautiful colours, forming an impressive series of pictures. Such is the impact of the effective use of colour that in 1990, the parade finale was described as 'culminat[ing] in a joyous burst of kaleidoscopic colours' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1990).

The manipulation of lights and fireworks. Paralleling the use of colour, National Day parade organizing committees have increasingly discovered the impact that lights and fireworks can have in exciting a sense of awe. In the 1960s and 1970s, the spectacle of fireworks was not harnessed successfully as parades were held during the day and the night fireworks were divorced from the celebrations. The impact was thus diffused. What is more, in the first year of independence, the firework display fizzled out when, after the initial bursts, the rest failed to ignite (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1966). Instead, earlier parades relied on the effect of 'the stadium cauldron burst[ing] into full flame' and 'the lighted torch . . . and the flashing electronic lights' to give 'the whole atmosphere . . . "a touch of magic"' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1976; 11 August 1976).

In tandem with Singapore's increasing sophistication and development, the scale and spectacle of fireworks has become more effectively harnessed in recent years. Once again, the 21st birthday celebrations in 1986 led the way in this, with a blazing laser light display, searchlights lighting the night sky, a dazzling firework spectacular with up to 40 bursts at one time, complemented by spectators' torchlights. The parade was planned to start later than usual to harness the power of night, to capitalize on the lights, lasers and fireworks that would come on in the dark. Descriptions in the local newspapers capture the success of the grand finale in 1986:

Green lasers shot across the stadium, swayed, and finally burst into the air like machine-gun fire. It resembled a scene from the movie *Star Wars* and the crowd went wild. . . . Next, giant white rays from searchlights pierced the sky . . . Then out of the dark sky came the first shock of fireworks. Golden, the first cluster clung high in the sky and was followed immediately by more. (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1986)

When the spectators' torchlights came on, the Stadium was transformed:

In a flash, a sea of brilliant jewels—rubies, sapphires, opals, diamonds, emeralds—set the velvet darkness ablaze. . . . The torches went wild, storm-tossed stars in a blank sky. (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1986)

Such fire in the sky succeeded in impressing audiences. As one spectator put it:

This is what we came for. It was spectacular, especially how the showers of gold changed colours as they fell to the sea. (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1993)

Others expressed enchantment in their choice of words: 'sheer magic', 'awe-struck', 'fantastic', 'majestic blooms of fireworks' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1993). We would argue that such spectacle leaves indelible impressions in the minds of spectators. The sense of celebration and of the triumph of the evening becomes abstracted and writ large, entering the popular consciousness as evidence of Singapore's triumph.

The orchestration of sound and music. National Day parades would be unimaginable without the song, music and cheers that have come to be associated with the annual ritual. Part of the revelry of the celebrations stems from the cacophony of sounds, both spontaneous and orchestrated. The booming of guns in the 21-gun salute, the clash of cymbals, the beat of drums, the sound of gongs, the music of pipes and tambourines, the resounding voices of the Combined Schools choir, and the spontaneous cheers all contribute to the crescendo of sound and the air of celebration, all spurred by the energy of cheerleaders.

Such a soundscape is integral to the production of a carnival atmosphere. The festive laughter becomes a proclamation of a nation in celebration; the hearty cheers of the people symbolize shared values. Together, they demonstrate community power, solidarity and group cohesion.

Parade participants: 'We are Singapore'

When 60,000 pairs of different coloured hands went up to help unfurl a Singapore flag the size of the entire stadium, one could not but feel it was a perfect metaphor for the spirit of co-operation that has held this island of diverse peoples together for the last 25 years. (*Straits Times*, 26 August 1990)

As a public ritual intended to reinforce group cohesion and weld diverse individuals into one 'nation', by both demonstrating community solidarity as well as augmenting the reservoir of collective memory, National Day parades present a view of society emphasizing consensus, harmony, the compatibility of constituent parts, an accepted hierarchical ordering and shared values. Indeed, parades are often designed 'to avoid creating dissension [sic]' and to 'encourage the participants of organized social groups whose presence would incorporate the great variety of interests present in the city and encourage widespread interest' (Goheen, 1993b: 133). This is evident in the composition of and relations among parade participants.

From the first parade of 1966, military and police units, youth and uniformed organizations, trade unions, sports and cultural troupes, and schools and institutions of higher learning have featured prominently. Not only is their inclusion emblematic of characteristic themes such as military prowess, the rich cultural heritage of a multiracial population, the youthfulness of the 'nation', social discipline and a strong work ethic, their simultaneous presence, often in splendid marching order and coordinated in clockwork fashion, on one single stage and at a culminated high point, speaks of how different organically related constituent parts of society have been forged into one 'nation'. The National Day parade is 'a shared event', 'a time to stand alongside fellow Singaporeans', 'a show of the nation's progress, achievements and aspirations [in] which every Singaporean anticipates and partakes', 'an auspicious occasion that is truly by and for the people', a high point that reflects 'the spirit of many people coming together for

a common cause, with a common purpose, in a common celebration' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1984: 2, 19).

With the years, the parade grew not only in numbers but also in representation, drawing from the commercial, industrial, financial, service and public sectors; uniformed groups; institutions of higher learning; schools and various cultural and social organizations in order to 'epitomise the very elements that constitute [Singapore's] effort at nation-building' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1984: 2). This shared 'time apart', a tapestry woven from the different strands of society, is intended as a mirror of the social 'reality' of being 'One People, One Nation, One Singapore' (*Souvenir Magazine*, 1990). For example, in 1990, the year Lee Kuan Yew stepped down as prime minister, Singapore's 'Silver Jubilee Spectacular' was described as 'a fitting conclusion' to the successful translation of Lee's 'ideal of meaningful ethnic, cultural and religious diversity in a common national unity' into reality (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1990).

In this mass display of 'nationhood', dissenting elements have no part. For example, 'people from all walks of life participated in the national joy'; the ruling party was out in force and even members of the Ex-Political Detainees Association (sufficiently reformed to be described as being 'one with Singapore's aspirations') participated in the march-past (*Sunday Times*, 10 August 1969). Opposition political parties, on the other hand, were nowhere in sight. By the 1990s, the spirit of nation-building may have grown more expansive: the National Day cultural pageantry appears more 'diverse' and 'inclusive', featuring once overlooked minority groups such as the Eurasians, who have traditionally been subsumed in the category 'Others' and consequently unrepresented (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1990). However, the line remains tightly drawn: openly dissenting groups are nowhere evident.

As a mass event with a high degree of orchestration, the National Day parade embodies in microcosm the hierarchical structure of Singapore society: ordinary citizens either in the galleries or on the parade-ground wait upon and/or are reviewed by the ruling elite represented by the president who officiates at the parade as well as the cabinet ministers and MPs who sit on the reviewing dais behind the president. All matters of protocol and procedure are orientated around the office of the president (Rajah and Sinha, 1994). However, at the same time as reflecting the hierarchy of power within the 'nation', there are also other elements of the parade that signify the integration of the rulers and the ruled. As part of parades in the early years of independence, members of the ruling elite—the ministers for labour, education, culture and social affairs, and defence; parliamentary secretaries; and members of parliament—donned uniforms and marched in the ranks of the officer cadets of the People's Defence Force (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1966). The PAP contingent, comprising second-line leadership in parliament, is also a staple item in the parade. In a bid to innovate in 1993, eight national leaders left their usual seats on the steps of City Hall and sat in the spectator stands among the crowd of 20 000 at the Padang (*Straits Times*, 4 August 1993). These manoeuvres are intended to demonstrate that while not all are equal in standing, each citizen, whether numbering among the ruling elite or rank and file, plays an equally significant role in the 'arduous task' of nation-building. In the words of the then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, 'we can achieve excellence by demonstrating that we, the people and the leaders, are united in facing up to our problems and are prepared to make sacrifices to surmount them' (*Souvenir Magazine*, 1986). This 'feeling of "oneness", of belonging to the same team . . . whatever the differences in origins' (Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in *Souvenir Magazine*, 1987) was unexpectedly demonstrated in certain years when the weather denied its cooperation; for example, in 1968, thousands of Singaporeans—from the acting vice-president who reviewed the

parade bareheaded, the prime minister and his cabinet members who stood solemnly in the rain, down to the men, women and school children on the Padang, mud-splattered and bedraggled—all braved the rain in an hour-long downpour to salute National Day (*Straits Times*, 9 August 1968). The binding ethos of nation-building allowed no room for flinching (at least outwardly); each is expected to stand his/her ground and play his/her part in a show of defiance against the natural elements, a symbolic gesture of individual sacrifice and togetherness in facing the rigours of national development 'whatever the odds' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1975). Thus, at the same time as playing out in ritualistic form the hierarchies governing social relations in society, the parades also present an illusion of solidarity between the ruling elite and the people.

Theoretically, while one may distinguish between 'ritual ceremony' as 'a serious and formalised pageantry designed to be observed rather than practised' and 'the carnivalesque' as 'a public spectacle created by and for its participants' (Smith, 1995: 143), the National Day parade has from its inception combined both strategies in its attempt to remind people of their common experience as citizens and as a statement of collective identity and Singapore's 'nationhood'. From the mid-1980s, however, there was a conscious move towards opening up more space for the people's participation: 'In a dramatic change of format, the 1985 to 1989 Parades became People's Parades. The spectators not only watched the parade but became active participants themselves in song and movement' (*Souvenir Magazine*, 1990: 20).

Before the 1985 parade, the crowds had been involved in the parades mainly as spectators, cheering the marchers, occasionally reciprocating overtures on the part of the performers with applause, screams and other means of expressing shared sentiment and appreciation. As observers, they had often been caught up and had joined in the spirit of the parade, but generally their active participation was only required at selected moments such as the singing of the National Anthem and not in the direct execution of the parade and accompanying mass displays. From the mid-1980s, it was promised that there would be 'less parading, more entertainment and more audience participation' at the celebrations (*Straits Times*, 12 July 1986). More definite roles were carved out for those who were not directly centre stage, whether as participants in marching contingents or in field displays. The orchestration of the spectacle included the 'enthusiastic participation' of cheerleaders rousing the crowds, the choir lending support from the sidelines, and the synchronized manoeuvres of flashcard display contingents (*Souvenir Magazine*, 1992). 'Spectator contingents' were also cued to flick on torchlights in unison as part of the 'visual treat' (1986), dressed in coordinated colours and signalled to wave colourful umbrellas (1988), or Big Hands specially made for spectators to put on and wave in the air (1989). These choreographed spectator displays, often timed to harmonize with the grand finale, were intended to 'signify an expression of [the people's] support for the aim to build a nation of excellence' (*Straits Times*, 12 July 1986) (*Plate 3*).

As 'people's parades', the National Day celebrations from the mid-1980s took on a more distinct air of informality: the 'ceremonial' portion—the recitation of the pledge, the inspection of the guard-of-honour by the president, the 21-gun salute and the march-past—was condensed while the 'celebration' segment—aerial displays, mass displays on the parade ground, laser and fireworks displays, and spectator participation—was augmented. A whole hour prior to the start of the parade was set aside for 'audience-loosening' exercises 'to set the atmosphere for the parade' (*Straits Times*, 9 August 1986). To encourage a more informal ambience, rock groups and local pop stars were included to provide entertainment, locally composed tunes replaced foreign marching strains which used to be the standard fare for the march-past, and even the military, for long the

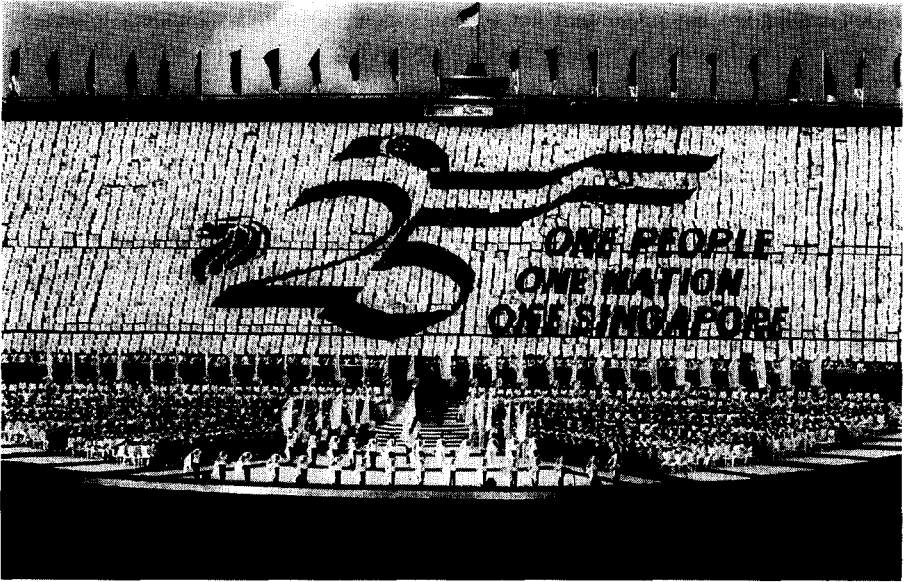


PLATE 3. Choreographed spectator participation included the massive synchronization of flashcard displays, which included the declaration of unity, as in this 25th anniversary proclamation of 'One people, one nation, one Singapore'.

mainstay of the parade, were 'nudged out of the limelight' to focus on civilian mass displays (*Straits Times*, 9 and 10 August 1986; 19 August 1990). Even the ceremonial part of the parade itself was also modified to reflect the stronger involvement of the people: from 1986, a select group of 'ordinary Singaporeans' of all ages and from all walks of life, ranging from bus driver to businessman, led a mass dedication ceremony involving everyone present to affirm their allegiance to the 'nation' (*Straits Times*, 6 August 1986; *Souvenir Magazine*, 1990: 44). By encouraging the widest possible participation, ceremony and celebration both signify the binding together of the entire community, the 'body politic' (cf. Daniels and Cosgrove, 1993: 59).

Two particular parades stand out in denoting the parade as people's participation in the spectacle of nation-building. Twenty-one years after Singapore's rude thrust into independence in 1965, the 1986 National Day parade marked the 'nation's coming-out party' when 'by unspoken consensus, Singaporeans left that episode of their history behind for the last time' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1986). To signal this turning point, the organizers wanted a parade with a difference, and to do so they 'put on centrestage' the 70 000-strong crowd, in the hope of transforming 'passive spectators' into active participants, not 'indifferent performers' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1986). The result was 'a spontaneous outpouring in unabashed nationalistic flag-waving' as the people celebrated (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1986). As a hawkler who viewed the spectacle on television said, 'the whole act would not have succeeded if everyone did not do his [*sic*] part' (*Straits Times*, 11 September 1986). In short, in National Day celebrations over the last decade, 'the spectators became the parade' (*New Paper*, 10 August 1993).

In approximating 'a public spectacle created by and for its participants', the 1993 parade, billed as the 'Nation on Parade' march-past, attempted to dispense with traditional pomp and pageantry and close the gap between the leaders and the people. This parade featured spectators themselves filing past the president and leaders on the

grandstand, 'waving paper fans' and 'singing lustily' (*Straits Times*, 10 September 1993). The 'people on parade' represented an attempt to seal the bond between leaders and people in a (deceptively) spontaneous fashion: it created carefully managed opportunities for ordinary citizens to catch a glimpse of, and, for a few moments, interact in an unceremonious fashion with the president himself. In this limited sense, the National Day parade creates a time and place that allow for a temporary suspension of dominant-subordinate relationships, a withdrawal from the protocol governing social action, thereby inspiring a sense of community and togetherness among Singaporeans. Yet in this most carnivalesque of National Day parades, seemingly 'spontaneous', unrehearsed social incorporation was not divorced from social control. In actual fact, the people's march-past required 'precision military operation timed right down to the second', arduous mock rehearsals with 2500 spectators before the day itself and intricate coordination 'to get the crowd from the stands to the field in eight minutes' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1993).

National Day parades thus reflect the Bakhtinian notion of a certain carnivalesque *mésalliance* between the 'lofty' and the 'low', functioning at points as 'a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators' (Folch-Serra, 1990: 265). In distorting the relationship between performers and spectators, carnival (the parade) is no longer a spectacle seen by people; indeed, everyone participates in it, and there is no life outside it (Jackson, 1988: 225). In the words of one young spectator-participant at the National Day parade:

We all had a part to play. We were not here just to watch the Prime Minister or the contingents. (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1986)

The constitution of spectacle: parade motifs

In a much more direct way, the state's ideological messages pertaining to nation-building have also been transmitted in the themes that have characterized parades through the years, including overall parade themes as well as motifs characterizing specific mass and placard display items and float decorations. There are themes that have emerged again and again consistently through the years, underlining the continued importance of the messages. At the same time, others have emerged at particular times in the short history of independent Singapore, indicating the specific concerns confronting the nation at particular points in time.

Four messages have unfailingly emerged again and again through the years, evidence of their importance in the bedrock of state ideology. The first is that of multiracialism, and relatedly, multiculturalism, multilingualism and multireligiosity. The concern, as we have already discussed, is that all groups will be fairly treated; that there will be no discrimination; that racial chauvinism of any sort should be avoided; that all groups should live in harmony; and that racial and cultural sentiments and identities should exist only alongside a larger identity based on secular, non-cultural national values. This is evident in the many multiracial and multicultural items and floats presented year after year. The titles of these items and floats scream out the ideological positions unequivocally: 'Joy of harmony' (1976); 'Living harmoniously in a multicultural blend' (1985); 'Unity in rhythm' (1986); 'Many races, one nation' and 'Many cultures, one people' (1988). In one display item, for example, multiracial participants formed the word 'Unity', while the programme notes read: 'Racial harmony and strength in unity. Regardless of race, language or religion. For a cohesive society' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1986: 48).

A second consistent message through the last three decades is concerned with youthfulness. This may be interpreted at two levels: the importance of youth in nation-building and the relative youthfulness of Singapore as a nation. The exuberance and vibrance of youth—of nation and people—are celebrated in song and dance. At the same time, the role of youth as ‘citizens of tomorrow’ is time and again underscored, as reflected in titles of items such as ‘Our children . . . our tomorrow’ (1985) and programme notes such as:

Our children are our hope for tomorrow. With youthful energy, our little boys and girls show they have the zest and vitality to build bridges to the future.
(*Souvenir Programme*, 1991: 24)

The third and fourth themes that have invariably emerged in related guises are built on an ideology of pragmatism. As we have already illustrated, values relating to development and economic success, such as social discipline, efficiency and technological rationalism, were actively promoted as necessary values for the nation to progress. Amongst other avenues, National Day parades became the platform for such an ideological exercise. Evident in parade motifs are two values: teamwork and the importance of education and training. The former iterates the view that only with determination and social discipline can the nation succeed. Thus, the entire parade theme for 1970, a time when Singapore was still struggling to achieve economic and political stability, was: ‘Work together for security and prosperity’. Working together was critical, so mass displays and floats highlighted the importance of unity (‘Unity and progress’ in 1973; ‘Teamwork and loyalty’ in 1984 and ‘United as one, together we progress’ in 1984). When Singapore faced economic crisis brought on by worldwide recession in 1985 and 1986, Singaporeans were again exhorted to work together to weather the storm. The grand finale in the 1986 parade was hailed ‘Together Singapore’, in which Singaporeans were exhorted to ‘play their part’ so that the nation could ‘count on them’ in the ‘pursuit of excellence for Singapore’ (*Souvenir Programme*, 1986: 53).

Related to this pragmatic inculcation of a work attitude is a fourth consistent theme, that of the importance of education and training in order that economic development can be achieved and maintained. Seldom are education and training seen as ends in themselves. Instead, they are hailed as holding the key to a more promising future. The emphasis in such education and training is also on technology rather than the humanities. For example, a 1984 float had as its theme ‘Education and training for higher technology’, whilst a 1987 float was entitled ‘Technology for growth’.

Apart from these four themes, which have repeatedly reappeared on the agenda since 1966, we also wish to highlight other motifs which have emerged at particular times in Singapore’s and the parade’s history. These are indicative of the specific concerns that have confronted the nation. Several themes have made no more than a single appearance as motifs of mass displays or floats. Examples include the need to industrialize to achieve success (1970), the need to conserve water (1973), the fight against profiteering (1973), and the need for self-reliance (1976). These are certainly historically contingent, reflecting the challenges facing the nation at those particular historical moments.

Apart from these, other themes have also emerged over several years at a time, indicative of growing and continued emphasis on underlying ideologies and strategies. The first of these is the focus on ‘one people’, the attempt to create a new consciousness and pride for the nation. This was very starkly expressed in 1991 when the grand finale entitled ‘Joy and jubilation’ was designed to encourage Singaporeans to express pride for their country. This was explicitly articulated in the *Souvenir Programme* (1991: 26):

We are proud to be Singaporeans. The celebration expresses all that we feel about ourselves, our country and the world in which we live. My Singapore, the place that I call home.

This was reiterated in the 1992 declaration, 'We are Singapore', and again in 1993 when the official theme of the celebrations was 'My Singapore, My Home'. As a spokesman from the Ministry of Information and the Arts suggested, the theme is 'an expression of the pride Singaporeans feel for their homeland' (*Straits Times*, 18 May 1993). The parade was thus intended as a platform for Singaporeans to 'demonstrate a personal statement of faith, a declaration of feelings and pride that Singapore is, above all else, a place we can call home' (Colonel Lee Boon Loi, chairman of the executive committee for the parade, quoted in *Straits Times*, 4 August 1993). This explicit attempt at rallying Singaporeans and getting them to articulate their sense of attachment and belonging has become particularly apparent in recent years and reflects the state's reactions to the perceived threats posed by global forces, sometimes thought of as westernization. It reveals the concern that Singaporeans must be rooted in their Asian heritage while importing the more progressive elements of western development, all the time maintaining their ties, loyalty and indeed 'mystical bond' (Penrose, 1993: 29) with place (Singapore).

Alongside this exhortation to exult in pride for the nation is another exhortation: to strive for excellence for Singapore in order that this pride can be sustained. Given that Singapore had, by the mid-1980s, achieved a degree of economic success that most Third World countries would be happy to emulate, the earlier ideology of survival in its original form was no longer convincing as a means of mobilizing Singaporeans. Instead, the notion of 'excellence' was drawn in: to continue surviving, Singapore must excel. Thus, in 1986, the parade theme, 'Together . . . Excellence for Singapore', found expression in a number of mass display items. For example, 'Towards excellence' entailed formations depicting the productivity theme such as the Quality Control circle logo, emphasizing teamwork and cooperation, thought to be 'essential attributes for productivity' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1986: 47). 'Spot on' emphasized 'skill, precision and alertness', 'qualities for a nation of excellence' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1986: 49). 'Towards a brighter tomorrow' delivered the message for Singaporeans to 'strive for excellence towards a brighter tomorrow for all' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1987) and 'Excellence together . . . Singapore forever' underlined the message that

. . . We, the people of Singapore, regardless of race, language or religion, together, celebrate our National Day with singing of national songs and spectacular display of placards and lights. Singapore, a nation of excellence for all. (*Souvenir Programme*, 1988)

In order to achieve excellence for Singapore, a variety of values and orientations are encouraged. National Day parades have again provided the platform for articulating some of these, reinforcing other strategies such as the use of national songs (see Kong, 1995). One of the values advocated is that of healthy living. In 1986, Singaporeans were exhorted through a mass display to 'keep fit' and 'stay alert for economic progress' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1986: 51). In 1989, these found expression as 'the qualities of physical and mental toughness which make for a rugged society' (*Souvenir Programme*, 1989: 26). Time and again, it is emphasized that the quest for good health can be fun (1989) for young and old alike (1992).

Similarly, excellence for Singapore is only possible if the nation acknowledges its role in the international community. In 1991, the mass display item entitled 'Singapore International' recognized the 'new challenges' and 'new opportunities' facing Singapore.

and emphasized the part that Singaporeans can and should play in the international community (*Souvenir Programme*, 1991: 16). In 1992, the focus turned on Singapore's immediate neighbours in an item entitled 'Asean togetherness'.

While this discussion is not exhaustive, our intention is to illustrate how the exercise of nation-building has been facilitated by the explicit articulation of values and ideologies through parades' themes, including themes of mass displays and floats. Of the four strategies that the state uses in planning National Day celebrations, this is in fact the most explicit in ideological intent of all.

Alternative readings and resistances

Having illustrated the different strategies that the state employs to develop national consciousness and build consensus using National Day parades as a platform, and some evidence of the positive responses from Singaporeans, it is as important to note that there exist alternative readings and resistances against such hegemonic intentions. In the early years of independence, these were more overt and confrontational. For example, in 1966, opposition parties (Barisan Socialis and Party Rakyat) condemned the festivities as 'phoney independence' and 'an utter waste of public money' (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1966) and boycotted the parade. In 1970, anti-government banners were found in several areas, some with harmless parcels attached (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1970). In more recent years, resistance has become more symbolic and marginal, constituting alternative readings rather than outright confrontations. This may well be because in the 1960s, and until the early 1970s, the political situation had bred more open conflict and confrontation. However, soon after the PAP came into power, it engaged actively in depoliticizing the citizenry, a situation that Chan (1989: 78) characterizes as the development of an administrative state. In such a state, 'time spent by groups and counter-groups to lobby, influence and change policy outcomes are [seen to be] a waste of time that detract from the swift implementation of the plan and programme'. Should there be counter-opinions, these are managed and directed through approved channels, rather than allowed expression in confrontational style (Kong, 1993). The political culture in Singapore has thus become one of negligible organized opposition and of general non-resistance.

Given such a context, if Singaporeans' interpretations of National Day parades, particularly in recent years, have been distinct from those intended by the state, they are at most different, rather than outwardly confrontational. While the precise nature of these alternative readings varied, each was equally unlikely to lead to open conflict.

In our interviews with participants and spectators, it became evident that there were at least three categories of alternative meanings. First, there were the feelings of resentment amongst those who participated in the parades. Second, there were those who were unhappy about the nature and extent of the parades. Third, there were those who enjoyed and appreciated the parades but for entirely different reasons from those intended by the state.

For those who participated in the parades, there were some who felt compelled to be there, but resented the sense of compulsion and even entrapment. There were national servicemen who were expected to ensure order. ('I was on duty. I had to do crowd control. I was outside the stadium. I was reluctant and I resented it.'). There were students who performed in various items. ('I was sent by my school. We didn't like it. None of us liked it. Rehearsals were tough. I didn't enjoy it. We were there because my principal wanted us to be there.'). Many expressed the view that rehearsals were 'frustrating' and 'tough' because 'you've got to be disciplined' and 'wait and wait and wait and go through

the sequence again and again'. The language used by many interviewees was telling. Instead of 'we danced to the music' or 'we waved our flags', many of those interviewed invariably used phrases such as 'we had to' or 'we were supposed to', indicating the sense of coercion they felt.

Even though a number of interviewees indicated that the hard work did culminate at the actual parade in a feeling of patriotism and fervour, it was generally very short-lived. As one interviewee put it:

I was grateful to break the routine of having my Sunday 'burnt'.⁶ I was grateful to break it. Life was back to normal after that. We went back to our routines and I was glad.

Apart from participants' resentment, there were also those for whom the nature of the annual parades aroused more 'offensive' feelings than patriotism. Some were put off by the huge sums of money usually spent in putting together the parades. For others, it was the perceived routine and lack of creativity from year to year. For yet others, it was the blatant nature of the ideological messages ('It's so deliberate you feel really skeptical'). Some even detect an attempt to deflect Singaporeans' attention away from the real issues and difficult problems confronting Singapore:

It makes us think that everything is good; that we are having a good life in Singapore . . . everybody has a job and all that. But it doesn't draw our attention to the more realistic aspects of life . . . I think it makes us apathetic because we think everything is fine. We are diverting our attention from some of the real problems that do exist. Everything is made to look very positive.

While there is a certain degree of resentment and objection in the views expressed above, thus reflecting a degree of opposition, albeit latent, there were also many for whom the parades were viewed positively, although for very different reasons from those the state intends. These alternative readings are not confrontational, but nevertheless reveal the 'tactical' ways (de Certeau, 1984) in which people appropriate National Day parades for personal gain/fulfilment.

There were vendors, for example, for whom the parades represented opportunities for quick monetary gains. These entrepreneurs turn up at parade grounds not to share in the spirit of nationhood but because of its promise as grounds for business (*Straits Times*, 10 August 1986). Prices of drinks, portable fans, caps and the like are marked up as demand soars. There are also student participants for whom participation in the parades gives them a good record in their extra-curricular activities (ECA). Participation thus becomes important at a personal level rather than at the national level in the sense that 'it will be good for my ECA records', 'it's going to up my ECA points' and 'it's going to look good on my testimonial'. At yet another level, several student participants felt that their principals wanted them to participate in the parades because they wanted their schools to be in the limelight and for them to look capable and supportive of the country. As one interviewee put it: 'We thought that she was just making use of us to get a good reputation for the school'. In this sense, such principals are seen to be less concerned with national agendas than with personal agendas. Thus, instead of being of national import, the parades are appropriated in these various instances into a personal everyday context in which some personal gain or fulfilment is to be derived.

For a large number of participants and spectators, such parades are in fact enjoyable because of their entertainment value. Shorn of the ideological intent, the parades are 'fun' to entertain children with ('My little cousins enjoy the song and dance'; 'It's one way of keeping my children entertained'). Some even go to the extent of comparing a parade to

a football match, a big party, and an event like the opening of a shopping centre, which in Singapore's context always attracts huge crowds. For student participants, mainly teenagers, it was an opportunity to 'hang around' with friends all day 'for a legitimate reason'. As one teenage girl put it: 'It wasn't a chore because I could be there with my friends at weekly rehearsals and scream my lungs out. It was a thoroughly good experience.' In the words of another teenage boy: 'I found it quite fun because there were other schools there and you can get to know people from other schools'.

Conclusion

National Day parades serve as a barometer of Singapore's broader socio-political conditions. In particular, the felt need to assert a sense of the local/national to different degrees at different times has been captured in the particular manner of National Day parades. In the past, the rude thrust into independence and the acute awareness of the need to survive in a neighbourhood of regional hostility provided the backdrop against which the state sought to construct a sense of nationhood and national identity. This it did by using, *inter alia*, the military flavour of parades, asserting the capabilities of a small island in defence. In Singapore's more recent history, the perceived threat to national sovereignty has emanated from global forces, sometimes equated with western forces. In line with the changing historical circumstances, the military tenor has receded and the parade has become more of a people's affair. There has also been a movement from military defence to total defence, reflecting a movement from the view that defence is the province of a few trained specialists to defence involving an entire nation, a people united in one voice. Nevertheless, while the parades have undergone considerable elaboration and reworking, their basic purpose has remained essentially unchanged. They form part of the larger strategy of developing and maintaining a sense of belonging and national identity, drawing on pomp and ceremony, visual and aural effect. Indeed, evidence points to a degree of success. As one participant put it:

There was a great spectacle. The feeling was one of a great festival; it was very 'carnivalish'. There was a sense of euphoria, heightened emotions, patriotism and everything. It was wonderful.

However, the 'web of signification' (Ley and Olds, 1988: 195) spun by the state is not entirely compelling and segments of the population have found the possibility of expressing their resistance and investing their alternative meanings.

In essence, National Day parades illustrate how as annual ritual and spectacle they serve as means to assert a sense of the local/national and underline the point that identification does not happen once and for all (Hall, 1989: 73). By analyzing a form of ritual organized and orchestrated by the state, we have tried to illustrate how state power is legitimated by appealing to nationalism. We have attempted to examine a powerful and dominant group's use of ritual and spectacle in the form of parades to perpetuate its ideologies (see also Smith, 1993). We have therefore added an empirical case that serves as a counterpoint to most existing research, which explores parades as expressions of subordinate groups' struggles in their establishment and negotiation of identity.

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Notes

1. Official sources (Souvenir Programmes) clearly present a bias since, like actual parades, they serve overall state purposes. For this reason, it is impossible to glean any sense of how the parades are received by Singaporeans, except when these are obviously supportive.
2. We have drawn heavily from the *Straits Times*, which has been described by some as a pro-establishment newspaper. For this reason, it has also been difficult to glean from this source details of alternative and oppositional readings of the parades, although there are hints every now and again. Despite this 'handicap', we have had to rely on this newspaper because there are no other sources of public accounts of the parades.
3. Focus group interviews were conducted with three groups of Singaporeans: students in their early teens who had recently participated in the parades; young adults (20–30); and older adults (30–50). The latter two groups comprise those who had either participated or been 'live' spectators at a parade. These interviews constituted the main source of information regarding alternative readings, thus compensating for the lack of such information in the official sources and newspaper reports.
4. Five-foot-ways are verandahs fronting shophouses, which are usually two- to three-storey structures with residential quarters above the ground-floor shops.
5. This is the headline to an article reporting one Singaporean's testimony (Nirmala, 1994).
6. A colloquialism for 'wasted'.

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