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### POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE CINEMA

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## POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE CINEMA

The Films of Jack Neo, or Politics by Cinematic Means

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**'dialects'**

**dissensus or  
disagreement**

**language poli-  
cies**

**politics**

**Rancièrè**

**Singapore  
cinema**

*While critics have argued that the films of Singapore director Jack Neo posit a critique of the state, this essay will argue the contrary. In deploying Chinese 'dialects' his films may appear to give voice to the Chinese-speaking masses in Singapore, especially those who have been marginalized by the state's political economy, which clearly favours the educated and English-speaking milieu. For the Chinese-speaking masses, his films may even appear to act as a medium or outlet for 'anti-state' criticisms which they feel but cannot articulate, since criticism of the government is essentially prohibited here. However, as this essay will demonstrate, Neo uses such linguistic idioms only as a foil to further perpetuate government propaganda: he uses Chinese 'dialects' to draw his intended audience to his side, and once they are taken in, he persuades them to reconcile with unpopular government policies. In other words, Neo's films constitute an extension of state politics via cinematic means, rather than an authentic political critique. As this essay also suggests, unveiling Neo's manipulation of language in his films as such will be critical to uncover not only Neo's underlying political intent, but also the unequal distribution that underlies the state's language policies.*

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1 Jack Neo co-wrote the screenplay of *Money No Enough* and played the lead role, but he did not direct it. We make reference to this film because Neo has received much credit and recognition for it.

2 See especially Chua and Yeo (2003) and Tan (2008). We will refer to their work in the course of this essay. More recently, Chong (2011: 893) has also argued that Neo's films present an 'acceptable critique' of the state.

3 The person who seeks to *speak for* another tends to assume a superior position in relation to the other, for he or she presumes to possess the know-how of speaking. We follow Deleuze (1987: 52) in making the distinction between *speaking for*, which is speaking 'in the place of' the other, and *speaking with*, which can be considered 'introduc[ing] a [critical] distance which allows [the subject in question, e.g. the victimized other] and us to observe, to criticize, to prolong' existing political injustices.

Scholars working on Singapore will have noted, in one way or another, that the recent evolution of Singapore cinema has been marked by two disparate filmmaking practices (e.g. Uhde and Uhde 2000; Siddique 2001; Chua and Yeo 2003; Millet 2006; Tan 2008). On the one hand, there are the apparently populist films of Jack Neo (*Money No Enough* 1998;<sup>1</sup> *I Not Stupid* 2002; *Homerun* 2003; *I Not Stupid Too* 2006), which enjoyed huge commercial success at local box offices. On the other hand, there are the radical, if not subterranean, art films of Kelvin Tong (*Eating Air* 1999; *Men in White* 2007), Royston Tan (*15* 2003; *4:30* 2006), and Eric Khoo (*Mee Pok Man* 1995; *12 Storeys* 1997; *Be With Me* 2005; *My Magic* 2008), most of which have gained recognition in both regional and international art film festivals or competitions. The same scholars may have also observed that despite the artistic differences between the two camps, there remains a commonality that runs through them, which is the deployment of Chinese languages in their films, particularly those that are referred to in the Singapore context as 'dialects'. The deployment of such languages is of interest to us, and we will focus our study here on the films of Jack Neo. This is not only because of space constraints, but also because we believe that a critical study of the use of language in Neo's films is of greater urgency, since scholars who have discussed his films appear to have missed the underlying political intent of his mobilization of 'dialects'. They tend to (mis)interpret the latter as part of Neo's political critique against the state.<sup>2</sup> That is understandable, given that Chinese 'dialects' are in fact officially prohibited on broadcast media in Singapore, and so the use of 'banned' languages may at first glance come across as an expression of radical, anti-state politics, or 'little acts of rebellion' (Tan and Fernando 2008: 136). However, as we will show here, instead of putting forth a political critique (e.g. critiquing the ban of those languages on broadcast media), Neo's deployment of language is political only in the sense of reinforcing state policies. We will explicate that Neo deploys Chinese 'dialects' *as if* to give voice to the Chinese-speaking masses in Singapore who have been largely marginalized by the state's political economy that undeniably favours the educated, English-speaking milieu. His films may even appear to function as a medium or outlet of 'anti-state' criticisms that the same group of people strongly feel but are unable to articulate, since criticism of the government is essentially prohibited in this city-state. Neo's films then seem to *speak for* – in the derogatory sense where the other is presumed incapable of speaking for him or herself and needs another to express his or her desires – those who suffer the injustice of the government's unforgiving language policies.<sup>3</sup> However, as we will demonstrate, the deployment of Chinese 'dialects' only belies an attempt to reconcile the audience with unpopular policies. In other words, Neo's use of 'dialects' can reveal itself to be a foil to further perpetuate government propaganda. We therefore argue for an urgent critique or critical examination of such (ab)use of language in

Neo's films, in place of endorsing Neo as a critic of the state as other scholars have done, which only risks being oblivious to, if not, worse, complicit with the transmission of state politics by cinematic means. Our intervention as such, we believe, can have implications for an authentic political critique, since unveiling Neo's politics of language would be tantamount to disagreeing with the state's unjust language policies that have the effect of keeping silent a certain group of people.

### Singapore's 'Art of Politics', or Who's Afraid of Chinese 'Dialects'?

In suggesting above that authentic political critique comprises an element of disagreement, we undoubtedly align ourselves with Jacques Rancière's political philosophy. It will not be fruitful to rehearse Rancière's argument here, since we are not seeking to provide a critical account or review of his philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we highlight two interlaced terms or concepts from Rancière's philosophy that could effectively articulate the political situation in Singapore that we seek to critique and which Neo appears to put into question in his films. The first is the notion of 'politics' as Rancière understands it. According to Rancière, politics, as practised and disseminated by the state, 'revolve around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak' (2004: 12/13). This in turn gives place in the public sphere to what Rancière calls the 'distribution of the sensible', the second term that we would like to invoke in this essay. In Rancière's words, the distribution of the sensible is 'the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it' (12/13). In relation to state politics, one could say that the distribution of the sensible is the technics and/or consequence of the state's systematic organization of what is visible and debatable in society, and the demarcation of who has and who has not the privilege or right to partake in debates in the public sphere. Rancière will also call this the state's 'art of politics' which, as he argues in *On the Shores of Politics* (1995), only suppresses and represses the political rights and voices of those set apart to (re)claim the part (that counts) that they are in fact equally entitled to. Such an art of politics, which also compels its subjects to accede to its system of distribution, is what an authentic political critique or intervention must resist, according to Rancière. In other words, authentic political critique must take on some form that insistently creates a 'dissensus' with the existing distribution of the sensible.<sup>5</sup> And while what is 'wrong' of the state's art of politics is to make disappear what the state does not want its subjects to see or talk about, true political critique, in contrast,

4 See Rancière (1995b), translated as Rancière (1998a), for his argument for 'disagreement' as a critical political intervention.

5 'Dissensus' is a term Rancière (1995a) uses. Rancière (2003) uses the word 'dissemblance' to argue for an aesthetics, in contradistinction to an aesthetics of representation, to disrupt or rupture what is made sensible or perceptible by the state in society. For references to 'dissensus' in Rancière's works, see Rancière (2010).

must concern itself with this ‘wrong’: it must give exposition to all that the state wants to render silent or invisible.

A form of distribution of the sensible can be said to be at work in the state’s treatment of the Chinese-speaking milieu in Singapore. While critics like Chua (1995) have exposed the distribution of the sensible in Singapore along racial lines, no critic has foregrounded and critiqued the distribution in terms of linguistic biases. We would therefore like to underscore here the linguistic prejudice that founds the distribution of the sensible in Singapore: in other words, who counts or who counts more, and who does not count, in society, depends on the language one speaks. And as it is clear for all to see, and Neo’s films will show this too, it is the Chinese-speaking milieu that does not count for much in the eyes of the state, particularly those who are fluent in the Chinese ‘dialects’.<sup>6</sup> At times, the state is even blatant in articulating this distribution, such as in the 1999 National Day address of Goh Chok Tong, Singapore’s prime minister from 1999 to 2004. He made a distinction between two types of Singaporeans: the ‘cosmopolitan’ Singaporean and his or her ‘heartlander’ counterpart. Cosmopolitan Singaporeans are those who ‘speak good English but are bilingual’ and ‘have skills that command good incomes’. For the state, this cosmopolitan Singaporean is the model Singaporean. Then there are the heartlander Singaporeans, who have ‘skills that are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish. They include taxi-drivers, stallholders, provision shop owners, production workers and contractors ... If they emigrate to America, they will probably settle in Chinatown, open a Chinese restaurant and call it “eating house”’ (Goh, 1999; also cited in Tan and Fernando 2008). The heartlander Singaporean, speaking bad English or no English at all, and therefore probably with only Mandarin or Chinese ‘dialects’ or other languages as his or her means of communication, is clearly denigrated by the state. There is therefore no doubt that language plays a role in institutionalizing the distribution of the sensible in Singapore.

The state of course will denounce this claim and say that if there is any distribution of the sensible in Singapore, it is fair and just, based on the overarching spirit of ‘meritocracy’. According to state rhetoric, meritocracy is a system of governance that rewards those who excel in school and work: the higher one’s educational qualifications, the better one’s job prospects, or the greater one’s opportunities; thereafter, one is promised a better living space and lifestyle. There is probably nothing wrong with the idea of working hard and gaining rewards for it. But what is problematic or wrong in Rancière’s sense is the underlying, fundamental predicate of this ‘meritocratic’ system of distribution: one must not just have the ‘talent to speak’ (to use Rancière’s phrase), but one must also have the talent to speak the languages that the state privileges. To be able to succeed, if not to count, in this ‘meritocratic’ system, one must speak the state’s chosen language,

6 Although the focus of this essay is on the Singaporean Chinese population, we are not suggesting that everything in Singapore concerns only this particular ethnic group. There are two other important ethnic groups: Malays (constituting 13.9 per cent of Singapore’s population) and Indians (7.9 per cent). However, as we will highlight very soon, there seems to be a deliberate systematic targeting of the Chinese-speaking milieu by the state’s politics of language.

which is English. Otherwise, working hard will be insufficient, and one might find oneself relegated by the state to those who hardly count in society, becoming one who gets passed over in terms of access to opportunities and benefits. Such a political economy, organized around linguistic distribution more than the meritocracy proclaimed by the state, is clearly sensed and projected on film by the local filmmakers mentioned above. But whether each film constitutes an authentic political critique depends on whether it disrupts or leaves intact that distribution. We will demonstrate that Neo's films ultimately reestablish a consensus with the state's socioeconomic distribution along linguistic lines. However, before going into that, and for the benefit of those unfamiliar with Singapore's history, we will rearticulate the genealogy of the linguistic distribution of the sensible that denigrates the Chinese-speaking milieu in Singapore.

Historically, language has always been a critical political–economic factor in Singapore. On the one hand, the state has always believed that a common language could lead to more efficient governance of a multiracial and multilingual people. On the other, the nation's access to the world economy has also always been seen to be a linguistic matter, i.e. a question of speaking the language that drives the world economy. That is why so much emphasis has been placed on English, clearly the language of globalization and of global markets. Singapore is certainly not exceptional with regard to such a practice, as non-English-speaking countries surely have similar language policies in order for their citizens to have a stake in the global economy. But the Singapore case is such that other languages are systematically denigrated to the point where even their manifestation in non-political or non-economic spheres, for example in cultural domains, are discouraged.

This can be said to have had its beginnings in the Language Policy Act of the Singapore government of the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1965, a policy driven precisely by the perspective that language is a resource and key to the achievement of economic and social development, and which decreed English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil as Singapore's official languages. In that policy one could already see a degree of targeting of the linguistically diverse Chinese population. According to 1957 census data, a total of 33 mother tongues were spoken in Singapore; within the Chinese community, which made up 75.4 per cent of the population, more than thirteen Chinese languages were spoken (Bokhorst-Heng 1998: 288). The majority of the Chinese population, who were migrants from Southern China, spoke Chinese languages such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese. As these Chinese grouped themselves into disparate communities differentiated along linguistic lines and backed by powerful clan associations, the PAP government began to regard them as socially divisive and unstable. To better manage this heterogeneous Chinese population, or to preempt a social crisis erupting from possible clan rivalries,

the state saw the need to create a 'oneness' within this diverse Chinese community. The state decided that the only way to do that was to unify them with a relatively neutral linguistic idiom. Mandarin Chinese was therefore chosen, which, according to the 1957 census data, was spoken only by 0.1 per cent of the population.

Institutionalizing Mandarin as an official language might indeed serve a neutralizing function among the linguistically heterogeneous Chinese population, encouraging them to build a cohesive community. But one could imagine as well how the elevation of an unrepresentative linguistic idiom could in fact be an alienating policy for many, for it surely divided each Chinese speaker internally, distancing them from their own linguistic idioms or mother tongues. The intent to alienate as such becomes undeniable when the Speak Mandarin Campaign swept the country in 1979. Chinese languages other than Mandarin were quickly and extensively relegated and labelled derogatorily as 'dialects'. By 1982, Chinese 'dialects' were officially banned on national television, and measures were also taken to prohibit their use in schools. Lee Kuan Yew, then prime minister, even went to the extent of warning against the use of these languages in the household. According to him, if the 'dialect'-speaking populations did not wish their children to be left behind in terms of access to economic and social opportunities, they should not retard or 'burden' their children's climb out of their 'dialect' trappings by continuing to speak to them in their native idioms or mother tongues (Lee 1979). The campaign and government rhetoric was conducted with such force that speakers of 'dialects' or even speakers with speech largely accented by 'dialects' quickly came to be looked upon poorly in terms of economic viability, social status and academic standing.

The distribution of those who count and those who do not, depending on the language one speaks, was also institutionalized by means of education policies. Education was offered in the official languages, but that did not mean that everyone had equal access to the schools of their preferred language medium. The English-medium schools, steeped in a long period of colonial history and elitism, were reserved for the rich and well connected. Privileged Singaporeans who went to these schools, which included the children of government officials and future ministers, aligned themselves with western ideas and ideals and became known as the English-educated. The majority of Chinese Singaporeans, however, because they were mostly children of poor Chinese immigrants who worked as coolies, rickshaw-pullers, or hawkers, had no access to these English-medium schools and so went through a Chinese-based education. Some of these schools were nonetheless influential, receiving much support from the Chinese community and famous Chinese businesses and philanthropists. There were also many good Chinese high schools,<sup>7</sup> which produced many outstanding Chinese

7 Just to name a few: Chung Cheng High School, Anglican High School, Chinese High School, Singapore Chinese Girls School and Nanyang Girls School.

8 Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan were such figures in the 1950s. The English-educated Lee Kuan Yew understood their immense influence over the Chinese majority and initially sought them out as political allies to gain majority votes for PAP. But Lee also sensed that with the support of the Chinese majority, Lim and Fong could undo both his and PAP's political power, and hence sought to purge them from politics. For historical accounts of Lee's political rivalry with Chinese-educated intellectuals, see Lau (1998) and Hong and Huang (2008).

9 Though never made explicit or officially declared, the closure may be said to be the culmination of PAP's political rivalry with the Chinese-educated. As early as 1963, Lee Kuan Yew, who had yet to become prime minister, already mistrusted the Chinese-educated at Nanyang University, associating them with violent communism. A 'political abuse of the Communists in Nanyang [University]' (*Straits Times*, 10 December 1963) was how he viewed their presence there.

students who did well enough to go to university, particularly Nanyang University as it was known then and which was the symbol of Chinese education and scholarship and home to much of the Chinese intelligentsia (Van der Kroef 1964). Leaning towards modern Chinese ideas as promoted in China at that time (Kwok 2001), contrary in other words to the ideological inclinations of the English-educated ministers, it is not surprising that the latter would regard this Chinese-educated milieu as harbouring potential political enemies and would want them to be set apart in society and deny them the power to speak. Indeed, certain Chinese-educated intellectuals did become true political rivals to PAP's stronghold as they garnered immense popular support from the majority of the Chinese population.<sup>8</sup> Such political rivalry with the Chinese-educated surely further motivated PAP's drive to systematically target and denigrate Chinese 'dialects' and their speakers. The scapegoating of the Chinese-educated as having dangerous associations with violent and socially disruptive forms of communism in the 1960s was perhaps symptomatic of such drives (Lau 1998; Hong and Huang 2008).

Tertiary-educated Chinese scholars constituted only a minority, compared to the majority who did not do well enough to enter university, or simply did not have the financial resources for higher education (Mauzy and Milne 2002). And as if being the minority was not bad enough, they would suffer some form of erasure when the government proceeded with its programme of completely denigrating Chinese-medium education, in favour of an English-medium one at a national level. In April 1980 Nanyang University was shut down<sup>9</sup> and its remaining students were transferred to the University of Singapore (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 101), now renamed the National University of Singapore. Degrees from Nanyang University were deemed useless, so those who had them found themselves unemployable. For others who went through the Chinese-medium schools and who aspired to enrol at Nanyang University, their chances for tertiary education were almost eradicated since they would not qualify for the English-based University of Singapore (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 101). Government campaigns to denigrate Chinese-medium education were so overwhelming that enrolment for Chinese schools eventually fell. With that, Chinese-medium education was officially ended in 1984 (schools of the other official languages, like the Malay- and Tamil-medium schools, were phased out in the 1970s due to poor enrolment). From 1984 onwards, Chinese-educated students had to abandon Mandarin as their primary mode of learning and try with whatever means to adapt to an English-medium education, so as to catch-up with their peers fluent in English.

Through the government's education and language campaigns and policies, a linguistic stratification of society was undeniably created.



10 This is in opposition to what is commonly known as Singlish (see note 11). For the politics of Singlish and a fuller discussion of the state's manipulation of it, see Goh and Tan (2007).

11 Singlish is a contact variety of English that has a phonological, syntactic and lexical system influenced by substratal local languages like Malay and Hokkien. The state has taken great pains to eliminate Singlish by means of the Speak Good English Movement launched in 2000 (see Goh and Tan 2007).

According to this distribution or hierarchy predicated on linguistic demarcation, those who are proficient in Standard English<sup>10</sup> (preferably proficient in Mandarin as well, in today's context, given the rise of China) will be favoured. By default, Chinese-educated Singaporeans would never be part of this group, and therefore would not benefit much from state resources. Many Chinese-educated Singaporeans thus fell and continue to fall to the second level, reserved for those who speak good Mandarin but who know little English, or speak what is frowned upon as colloquial Singapore English or Singlish.<sup>11</sup> At the lowest level are those who seemingly cannot erase the traces of their native tongues or Chinese 'dialects' (other than Mandarin) from their speech. In short, those predisposed to a Chinese-based linguistic medium could not go very far in terms of jobs or socioeconomic advancement. They would watch in disappointment as jobs were passed on to (younger) English-educated colleagues who might not even be as capable as they. Discarded, disgruntled and disillusioned, they would struggle to survive. And they could only suffer in silence, for they lacked 'the talent to speak' (with the proper accent) in the state-determined linguistic idiom that would allow them to be heard.

### The Politics of Contemporary Singapore Cinema: The Jack Neo Campaigns

12 Commercial in nature, Neo's films certainly not only seek Chinese-educated or Chinese-speaking Singaporeans, but also, in Neo's words, the 'masses', to maximize earnings. Box-office hits like *Money No Enough* and *I Not Stupid* reach a wide audience. Nevertheless, in terms of narrative and language medium his films speak to or resonate particularly with the Chinese-educated or Chinese-speaking milieu (Chua and Yeo 2003: 122; Chong 2011).

The unjust distribution described above is evident to almost all those who live in Singapore, and is even presented on screen by filmmakers such as Jack Neo. However, we should not be misled into thinking that Neo's films constitute some form of political intervention against the prevailing linguistic distribution.

As critics do not fail to note, Neo's films seek to speak to the layman in Singapore or the 'archetypal Singaporean' (Chua and Yeo 2003: 120). More often than not this 'archetypal Singaporean' would be Chinese-educated or linguistically more comfortable with Mandarin or Chinese 'dialects';<sup>12</sup> he or she would also constitute the majority of Chinese Singaporeans, according to the 2000 Singapore census report.<sup>13</sup> This 'archetypal Singaporean' as Neo's implicit target audience is not missed by Chong (2011: 893), who states that Neo's films have 'struck a chord with the average Singaporean'. That Neo's films aim to reach out to such 'archetypal Singaporeans' is further evident in his choice of protagonists. Millet (2006) has observed that Neo's films tend to revolve around a trinity of characters, and we suggest that this trinitarian structure of 'heartlander heroes' (Chong 2011: 893) reflects the three particular groups of Chinese-educated Singaporeans that are most disadvantaged by the state's language and education policies. In this way, Neo in

13 75.8 per cent of the Chinese population aged 15 and above speak only either Mandarin or the Chinese ‘dialects’ at home. Of this group, 51 per cent are aged above 40 and 75 per cent of this same group do not have education beyond secondary school, which would mean they would have most likely received a Chinese-based education. Neo’s protagonists, as we will explicate above, are undoubtedly representations of this group of Chinese-speaking and/or Chinese-educated Singaporeans.

fact senses a further – if not finer – distribution of the Chinese-speaking population, compared to the social hierarchy we have outlined above.

Thus, one of Neo’s protagonists will therefore represent the group of Chinese-educated Singaporeans who would have gone through Chinese-medium education at least till high school, commanding an almost immaculate fluency in Mandarin alongside their unbreakable grasp of their native Chinese ‘dialects’, but with a poor command of English. They would tend to hold office jobs, as compared to less educated Chinese Singaporeans that Neo’s second protagonist would represent, who would have had at best six years of basic primary education and hardly any high school education, and therefore would be relegated to take up more technical jobs in building sites, for example. This second group would usually be strongly armed with their own native ‘dialects’ and a reasonable grasp of Mandarin from their limited education. Neo’s third protagonist will represent the final group that constitutes the Chinese-speaking milieu. They would tend to be of an older generation, many of them in their sixties and seventies today; having had almost no education, their native ‘dialects’ are their main modes of communication. They can possibly speak a smattering of street Mandarin, but English will be almost totally absent from their linguistic repertoire.

*Money No Enough* would be the prototypical film in which the three protagonists represent this distribution. There is Chew (played by Neo himself) who, having post-high school Chinese education (and therefore speaking good Mandarin but poor English) but without a university degree, holds an office job and gets passed over for a job promotion, losing it to an English-educated university graduate. Then there is Ong who, less educated than Chew and therefore speaking a less refined variety of Mandarin but fluent in the other Chinese languages like Hokkien, finds a job only as a construction worker. The final part of the trinity is Hui. With less education than Ong and therefore a more limited range of Mandarin, he communicates effectively in a spectacular range of Chinese ‘dialects’, and has a place in society only by remaining in low-paying odd jobs. *Money No Enough* makes clear that if the protagonists find themselves in socioeconomically disadvantaged positions, it is because of the linguistic marks that they bear, and the rest of the film is a narrative of how these three Chinese-educated men struggle to make it in a system that favours the English-educated.

A similar trinitarian structure can also be found in *I Not Stupid*, which tells the story of three 10-year-old Chinese-speaking schoolboys – Terry, Kok Pin and Boon Hock. These boys are the legacies of Chinese-educated Singaporeans, i.e. they belong to a generation that had an English-medium education without any experience or memory of a Chinese-based one. Now, we have said that English-medium education became prevalent (and pervasive) at a national level by 1984. The generation that went to school in the mid-1980s would therefore have complete access to English-language

learning. In other words, almost all of contemporary Singapore society will be knowledgeable about the English language. However, one can find a further distribution or stratification of society based on one's degree of competence in the English language, and hence a continued targeting of those with a Chinese- or dialect-speaking background. The variety of English spoken now comes to determine one's social and economic standing within Singapore society. We do not have the space to elaborate, but suffice it to say that if one is capable of adopting the British or American variety of spoken English then one is perceived as having a higher social and economic standing. The almost mimetic endeavour here is surely open to anyone, but not everyone begins on an equal footing. One must not forget that the Chinese-educated parents of this generation were marginalized by their English-educated peers, and were alienated not only by the English language but also by western culture in general. These parents might have heeded the message of government campaigns to converse with their children in Mandarin rather than other Chinese linguistic idioms (including their mother tongues), but there was little real engagement with the English language for these children in their households. Thrown into a world that puts a premium on English-language education, it is not difficult to infer how most of these children were linguistically disadvantaged compared to their peers whose parents had the privilege to be educated in English schools. These children therefore face an uphill struggle should they wish to exit from the kind of linguistically marked distribution that delimited the socioeconomic mobility of their parents, and that constitutes precisely the story of *I Not Stupid*.

*I Not Stupid* begins with the children of Chinese-educated parents already defeated in any attempt to change the linguistically marked distribution. Having failed to excel in English (and mathematics) at the mid-point of their primary school education, the children find themselves in the lowest academic stream, the dignity and confidence-shattering end of a student distribution enforced by an unforgiving Singapore education system. Upon closer enquiry into the children's respective family backgrounds, the film suggests that the children's academic failures can be attributed to the fact that they are heirs to a speech heavily accented with Mandarin or other Chinese linguistic idioms. Kok Pin, the main protagonist, has Chinese-educated middle-class parents.<sup>14</sup> The language medium at home is of course Mandarin, and one even sees Kok Pin's mother trying (futilely) to drill Kok Pin in English – ironically in Mandarin – and mathematics, lamenting at the same time that Kok Pin is unable to excel in a language that is so important for future prospects in Singapore. Boon Hock, the second protagonist, converses in Mandarin with his mother. This is very much a nod to the success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign, since the audience will see that his mother, who runs a small noodle stall at a hawker centre, speaks Hokkien primarily in that environment, suggesting that she is representative of the

14 Reminiscent of Neo's character in *Money No Enough*, Kok Pin's father (played by Neo) is a copywriter whose boss denies him job advancement opportunities because he is Mandarin-speaking.

lowest group of the Chinese-educated milieu. The other protagonist, Terry, has a father who runs his own successful sweetmeat business. Terry's father in fact fits into the second group of Chinese-educated Singaporeans, i.e. those who have some basic education and are absolutely at home with 'dialects'. This is evident in his predominant use of Hokkien while running his business, even though he speaks Mandarin to his children (as if he is yet another success story of the Speak Mandarin Campaign). At first glance, Terry's father appears to be a symbol of the 'working class made good', an apparent proof that one can be rich and successful without the trappings of linguistic (in)ability. But he is in fact a caricaturized stereotype of the uneducated, loud-mouthed, rich Chinese boss. His business success also has little effect on the preconditioned distribution of those who are not proficient in English into the segment of the population that barely counts. The fact that Terry is Kok Pin's classmate suggests that the remnants of a linguistic mark explicitly inflected with a 'dialect' haunt the next generation, allowing the replay or perpetuation of the social distribution that the previous generation endured. Terry himself converses mostly in Mandarin. He does try to speak English once or twice in the film, but his proficiency in the language is evidently limited. Terry's mother and sister, on the other hand, speak only English, and both of them are unabashed about their monolingualism. Terry's sister even exhibits a hatred for the Chinese language – not an uncommon phenomenon among younger Singaporeans. Terry's family thus presents a strange linguistic picture, since it is rather unrealistic to have a mother monolingual in English and a Hokkien-swearing father.

With protagonists mirroring the three groups of the Chinese-educated, representing the distribution and the same redistribution for the next generation, and narrating their life stories as society's struggling underdogs, Neo's films have become 'synonymous with the Singaporean heartland' (Chong 2011: 892), which make them undeniably appealing and well positioned to speak to almost all Chinese-educated audiences. But this would not have been possible without also deploying the more common language of these subgroups – Mandarin for the children in *I Not Stupid* and Hokkien for the protagonists in *Money No Enough*.<sup>15</sup> As if giving voice to linguistic idioms and speakers who are otherwise silenced by the state's art of politics, Neo's films potentially offer a critique of the state's unjust system of distribution. In Neo's words, his films have the aim of 'creating mass awareness ... [that] would get everyone, including the authorities, to take notice of the current issues ... and address them for the good of society' (Tan et al. 2002: 9; also quoted in Chua and Yeo 2003: 121). Certainly, his films expose such unfair and unjust outcomes as the inability of a non-English-speaking and/or non-graduate Chinese to keep a job because he cannot compete with English-speaking graduates and/or Caucasian expatriates, and the sense of inferiority imposed upon those who are not proficient in English, which is also commonly

15 Critics have noted that since *Money No Enough* and another slapstick film in Mandarin and Hokkien – *Liang Po Po* – Neo has gained an immense popular following among 'heartlander' Chinese-speakers and/or Chinese-educated. Politics aside, the use of Mandarin and 'dialects' in Neo's films undoubtedly has entertainment value in terms of its comedic effects.

imposed on the next generation by a relentless and cruel education system. This is where critics are often led to agree that Neo offers a critique of the state. As Chua and Yeo (2003): 120) have argued, 'In the characters' confrontations with [state] policies, Neo presents a direct critique of the government.' However, we question the veracity of this 'critique'. Following Rancière, an authentic critique gives space to an alternative perspective or voice in relation to what it critiques. It would even be radical to the point that it refuses to offer any quick or convenient resolution. In relation to the state's art of politics in Singapore, one could then expect that an authentic critique would *not* accept or agree with the unjust distribution predicated on linguistic marks. That is what Neo's films fail to do ultimately: while they apparently give voice to the linguistically disadvantaged and rebelliously deliver anti-government jibes in the linguistic forms that the government seeks to erase,<sup>16</sup> what Neo's films actually do is duplicate the existing distribution. Worse, rather than disagree with that unjust distribution, it is depicted in such a way as to maintain, reinforce and even celebrate it. In other words, there are in fact no real 'confrontations with policies' in Neo's films. The films are not really interested in questioning the distribution but, working at a subliminal level, ultimately seek to validate and justify it.

In both *Money No Enough* and *I Not Stupid* the protagonists eventually prevail and succeed within the system, something that Chua and Yeo (2003): 124) refer to as the 'success myth'. However, they neither succeed because they break away from the system of distribution drawn on linguistic lines, nor on their own terms, but because they adhere to the state's formula for success. For example, in *Money No Enough* the Hokkien-speaking protagonists finally strike gold with a car-wash business, succeeding because they not only heed the government's call for an entrepreneurial spirit but, more importantly, because they 'upgrade' and learn to speak English. Neo's point here is clear for all to see: follow the path that the state language policies have dictated and one can achieve success and wealth. *I Not Stupid* is even more blatant in terms of acceding to state policies. At the beginning of the film, one might be led to think that Neo is against the paternalistic and oppressive nature of the state's management of its citizens. The caricature of the PAP government in the shape of Terry's mother can hardly be missed by a local audience. This obtrusive character (who incidentally seems English-educated, in contrast to her Hokkien-swearing spouse) is always adorned in white (the PAP uniform). Making her life's goal the incessant will to control every aspect of her children's lives, she has a refrain that she repeats ad infinitum in order to underscore the motivation behind her action – 'Whatever I do, it's for your own good'. This is undoubtedly a parody of the rhetoric deployed by the state to justify its policies.<sup>17</sup> It is then no surprise that her children are initially frustrated with their lack of freedom of self-expression. And yet, at the end of the film, the audience sees them happily

16 Such criticisms of the state and the jibes at government are already well known among the people. In other words, Neo's films offer nothing new at the level of opinion (or *doxa*) about state policies.

17 It is interesting that a maternal figure is deployed to personify the paternalistic state. Without the space to explore this point further, we offer the hypothesis that this shift may be an attempt to displace or repress any implication of Oedipal father-/state-killing. This would fit with Neo's essentially pro-state position.

conceding that maternal control is desirable, appreciative of the fact that a path has been predetermined – if not dictated – by someone else, for their own good. That is surely more than a nod to the state and its policies.

*I Not Stupid* also suggests there is hope for the children of Chinese-educated or even ‘dialect’-speaking parents, as long as one does not resist but adapts oneself to state policies. This is the case for Boon Hock, an intelligent boy who wants to work hard, and who succeeds in doing much better than his friends Kok Pin and Terry. This would no doubt earn the sympathy and admiration of many among the Chinese-educated audience in the lowest stratum of society, signalling to them that academic success, which has always been elusive for them, is not impossible.<sup>18</sup> The rewards for obeying state policies are also in fact *already* in place, as made manifest by the depictions of the living spaces of Neo’s protagonists. In *I Not Stupid*, for example, Kok Pin, with Chinese-educated, middle-income parents, stays in a tastefully decorated HDB flat.<sup>19</sup> Terry lives in (and will certainly inherit) his father’s big bungalow. These homes offer a glimpse of the promising lives the Chinese-educated audience can have if, and only if, they follow the trajectory set out for them.

In the final analysis, Neo’s films only seek to promote the state’s ideological fairytale that success remains possible or is within reach despite an unfair socioeconomic distribution defined by linguistic differences and heritage. In other words, the films seek the audience’s acquiescence to the state’s supposed good intentions behind what is undeniably regarded as unjustifiable discrimination. They suggest to the audience that if they wish to achieve success, they should support and subscribe to state policies, rather than disagree with them. Neo’s films have the effect of buying the audience’s trust by deploying their own linguistic idioms to express their discontent and grouses, and then subvert or invert it into eventual support and admiration for the state. To put it negatively, Neo’s films use language with a view to manipulating the audience, telling them their stories in a language they celebrate, as if giving them a voice. The films’ happy endings, however, render them voiceless, since they always imply that there is actually no reason to grouse, that there is nothing productive in disagreeing with the state. Neo’s films incite one to heed state policies, to remain in the non-privileged socioeconomic location the state has demarcated for one, and not to question or critique this distribution.

Of course, we do not presume an absolutely naive audience that simply swallows the message of Neo’s films. Chinese-educated or Chinese-speaking audiences and other groups frustrated with the state’s unjust distribution will surely continue to complain and criticize – largely in politically harmless settings such as the local coffee-shops shown in Neo’s films. Some will even be completely indifferent to the political dimensions of the films and watch them for their entertainment value alone, oblivious to their propaganda

18 Kok Pin, at the end of the film, is offered an arts scholarship to an American fine arts school – an echo of yet more government rhetoric that uncritically celebrates those who are educated in British or American schools.

19 HDB flats are high-rise public housing wherein the majority of Singaporeans reside.

effect. However, if cultural commentators can be led to think that Neo is a critic of the state, undoubtedly many popular audiences who regard Neo as a local hero for speaking for them *in their own voices* will be led to reconcile or submit to the state's unjust distribution.

In supporting the status quo, in not seeking to displace it or open it up to questioning, Neo's films cannot possibly serve as an authentic critique of state politics. On the contrary, they become instruments that propagate state policies, systematically discouraging disagreement. In that sense, Neo's films serve as supplemental state apparatuses for the continued silencing of those who hardly count in society. This political function has not been missed by the state, and the cordial link between Neo and the state is a testament to that. While criticism of state policies has landed many people (filmmakers or not) in trouble with a government that never hesitates to enact its law against 'defamation' of government officials, Neo has never had problems with his 'criticisms' and 'anti-language-policy' films. The state certainly recognizes that Neo's films are on the same side as its own art of politics: *I Not Stupid* won Neo praise from Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the National Day Rally in 2003. And that is also perhaps why the Hokkien-based *Money No Enough*, which apparently rebelled against the state's ban on 'dialects' in broadcast media, never ran into trouble with the government – which leads us again to question if the film constitutes a true rupture with the state.

*Homerun* (2003) cemented Neo's political alignment with the state. *Homerun*, set against the rustic charms of old-world villages of Singapore in the early 1960s and 1970s, is in fact an adaptation of the Iranian film *Children of Heaven*, which tells a simple story of a pair of siblings having to share a pair of shoes because they have no money for more. In Neo's hands it becomes a film about nationalism and patriotism, which in Singapore's terms are almost synonymous with allegiance to the government. References to strained relations with Singapore's neighbour Malaysia are evident, as key national issues that have often created discord between the two nations are highlighted – water supply, railway negotiations, land conflict, airspace and the Causeway. In *Homerun* Malaysia is depicted as the cheat and the tyrant, personified by spoilt and influential school bullies, while Singapore is represented by the poor, victimized, but righteous protagonists.<sup>20</sup> What is interesting for us here is that Mandarin is the only linguistic mode of the film. There is no trace of Chinese 'dialects' in this film, which is very unusual considering the film's 1965 setting, when Mandarin was hardly spoken. Contrary to Neo's constant claims to the contrary, language in this film is certainly not deployed to represent the 'real' or the 'reality' of 1965. One can interpret the total absence of 'dialects' in *Homerun* as Neo's success in his political campaign to manipulate his audience's sensibility and trust. It would seem that Neo

20 To further argue that Neo's films are always aligned with the state and its rhetoric, there is a road metaphor that pervades *Homerun*, and the overcoming of obstacles along this road is symbolic of how Singapore will always win out in the end. This is in fact a direct reference to Lee Kuan Yew's famous 'Next Lap', which describes Singapore's nationalistic journey and road to success. *Homerun*'s final theme song, with its message of perseverance and persistence, is also an echo of the state's nationalistic discourse.

believed that with the success of both *Money No Enough* and *I Not Stupid*, his audience would have been persuaded to accede to the distribution of the sensible along linguistic lines and not disagree with the state's systematic attempt to supplement Chinese 'dialects', if not erase and replace them, with Mandarin. *Homerun* can thus conjure another national narrative in which Chinese 'dialects' can be completely forgotten and create the myth, as the state would like it, of Mandarin as the original or common language of the Chinese population here.

It is not surprising therefore that *Homerun* earned Neo the highly prestigious Public Service Medal in August 2004, an accolade awarded by the state to 'Singaporeans who have made a significant contribution to the well-being of the nation' (Straits Times 10 August 2004). We see Neo's 'contribution to the well-being of the nation' only in the sense of *not* rupturing the socioeconomic distribution predicated on linguistic markers: his films speak the language of the people only to take on the role of the state's ambassador to an audience with whom the state has little or no linguistic access, in order to justify and perpetuate state policies. Neo's films thus 'contribute to the well-being of the nation' by silencing critique and criticism. *I Not Stupid* includes a saying first articulated by the mathematics teacher and then repeated by the children, which roughly translates as 'in the face of a challenge or obstacle, thoroughly understand what lies at the foundation of this challenge, and befriend it in this process, and eventually victory will be promised.' This might well be a message for the Chinese-educated or Chinese-speaking audience in the face of state language policies and its distribution of the sensible that denigrate or do not favour them. It can certainly also be applied to Neo's services to the state: as a filmmaker, he reaches into the depths of the linguistic idioms of the disgruntled, sceptical and disagreeing Chinese-speaking and Chinese-educated majority. By speaking their languages in his films, he befriends them and seeks to persuade them to abandon any disagreement with state policies.

In that sense, one could say that the friendship Neo is really seeking is political friendship with the state – affirmed in 2005 when he became the first film director to win the nation's Cultural Medallion, the state's highest honour accorded to artists who have contributed to the local arts scene. It is bewildering as to why a mainstream filmmaker such as Neo deserved this award, for unlike art-film directors such as Eric Khoo and Royston Tan, he has never won a film award locally or internationally. Unless, that is, it is a reward for Neo's art of politics in his films; that is to say, the re-presentation in his films of the art of state politics, which Walter Benjamin denounced as the insidious aestheticization of politics whereby the masses are led to think that they are given expression or voice through an artwork, while not realizing that an unequal socioeconomic and political distribution is kept intact. As we have tried to show in this essay, such an art of politics is



accomplished through Neo's deployment of Chinese 'dialects'. Given such mobilization of language, it would not be unreasonable to claim that Neo's films function very much as state politics by cinematic means.

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