Imagined Communities and National Identification of Singapore

A cases study of Ulysses by the Merlion

Zhao Long

Foreign Language Dept.
Ankang University
Ankang, PRC, 725000

Abstract—Imagined Communities is a classical book to research ethnic and nationalist issues which was written by Benedict Anderson [1]. It has provided us a new perspective for people to go beyond the traditional theories of nationalism and understand the issues of many areas in humanities and social sciences. Through the study of the theory reflected in the Imagined Communities and Singapore's national epic Ulysses by the Merlion [2], this paper tries to explore the emerging country's national and ethnic identity and the realistic predicament it faced.

Keywords- Benedict Anderson; imagined communities; national identity; predicament

I. INTRODUCTION

It has never occurred to the national researchers and critics to imagine that an ethnic group can be defined without thinking of their language, blood relationship and religion until Benedict Anderson's creative theory. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson creatively put forward the imagined community theory. He believes that the essence of a nation is an imagined political community. Meanwhile, the nation should also be thought of "inherently limited and sovereign". The theory of imagined community has provided us a totally new perspective to research the world-wide ethnic origin and expansion. Anderson has recalled the development of nations and nationalism. In his book, the development trend of nations and nationalism can mainly be divided into four periods. The first period is the development of the America. Because of the religious persecution in Western Europe, the European overcame difficulties and finally arrived in the American Continent. The second period refers the linguistic nationalism in Europe. The third period is the official nationalism and imperialism which relies on state power to achieve national Identification. The fourth period is the nationalism in Asian and African colony. As an emerging nation-state, Singapore surely belongs to the fourth period of nationalism spread trend described by Anderson. With different color, creed and language, people get together on the emerging city-state, and gradually forms a common imagine basis in the process of build their country and homes. But it should also be noted that the implementation of the multi-ethnic culture in Singapore make their own history, culture and national consciousness continue to be weakened. Thus, this emerging nation-state is inevitably facing realistic

problem to strengthen people's recognition toward their country and ethnic group.

II. IMAGINED COMMUNITY

There are mainly two reasons can explain an emerging ethnic group which are "Primordialismus" and "Construction". Primordialismus generally considered race, descent, language, religion and cultural traditions as the foundation of people to realize their specific national identity. Furthermore, along with individual cognitive recognition from cradle to grave, this national identity is innate and difficult to change. Based on the analysis discussed above, different cultural identity awareness results in different nations and to make the distinction between different ethnic groups. Under the guidance of primordialismus, nationalism is generally to awaken people's natural emotion, and thus promote the establishment of state power. This can be proved in the country with a long history such as India, China, Egypt, etc. By means of a long history and cultural heritage, these countries can aggregate the collective sense of the members, and gain the ability to enhance state and national cohesion. However, this argument presupposes the existence of a nation, and can not answer fundamental national origin questions. This is especially true in the newly emerging countries like Singapore. People with different race, descent, language, religion and cultural traditions converge to Singapore, and produced national identification within the country. Primordialismus can hardly explain the appearance of this phenomenon. The nationalism theory of construction regards modern nationality as the product of industrialization and modernization, and specific political identity sharing the same generated values. For lack of sufficient historical and cultural heritage, the emerging countries can not rely on these elements to maintain or build people's ethnic and national identification. Therefore, construction theory has been widely used to explore the identification of emerging nation-state. Anderson's imagined community theory surely belongs to "construction" system.

For a long period of time, "nation" is often seen as an objective item existing in a specific crowd, and emphasizes nature and properties of this group in common. However, Anderson creatively pointed out that people recognize their national existence in their own imagination. The basis or the key element to distinguish different nationalities lies not in history, blood, and faith, but in a different way of imagination. Benedict Anderson believes that the essence of a nation is an imagined political community. Meanwhile, the

nation should also be thought of “inherently limited and sovereign”. Anderson further explained his point of view: imagination is limited. Even the biggest nations, perhaps in different historical periods have different boundaries to imagine, has its limited boundary there. No one would imagine their fellow member to be the whole mankind. Nation has the inherently limited and sovereign. For individual members, the decline of religious communities is a psychological blow; they need a psychological sustenance and this kind of sustenance has no “universal” feelings on the religious significance. Nation is imagined as a community. Although there must be a member of injustice and exploitation within a nation, people always carry simple and equality feelings in the national members’ hearts. With the development of capitalism and print, such as newspapers, the traditional time and space concept and sense has already been reduced. For the certain action of the national members, people have their own clearly imagination and this imagination further reinforces the country and ethnic identity. Anderson’s theory of Imagined Community has a positive role in guiding the determined national identity of emerging independent Africa and Latin America states. Through the deep exploration of the theory in depth, the paper will analyze the typical example of such countries --- Singapore.

III. NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION OF SINGAPORE

Religious faith is gradually getting cold with the advent of the Enlightenment and rationalism in eighteenth century. Because the people’s suffering is not over, it’s followed by a crisis of faith. After the religious thinking foundation is denied, looking for a spiritual support again has become the people’s demands. However, there’s nothing better than nationalism can inspire people’s enthusiasm and belief. And in modern times, with the development national and liberation movement of countries in Asia and Africa, traditional colonials are gradually getting rid of the control of sovereign state and become the emerging independent countries. But these countries are also faced the problem on how to unite the people of solidarity and cultural identity issues. Anderson’s imagined community theory has opened up a new perspective for us to understand the issue of the emerging independent state’s national identification like Singapore.

Singapore belongs to the fourth wave of nationalism spread trend Anderson described. Intellectuals, who have literacy skills and multi-language capabilities, played a central role in the formation of colonies national community. Their reading ability makes adrift imagined community in time possible. Because of the economic, transport and strategic importance, Singapore was still occupied when the United Kingdom left Malaysia in 1957 and finally gained independence in 1965. Because people had long been colonized in this region, the discourse was controlled, and history, culture and national consciousness had been diluted. All these aspects have made the losing of ethnic and cultural memory. Singapore is facing urgent reconstruction of cultural and national identification issues after independence. Due to the lack of heavy historical and cultural heritage, Singapore has to blend the colonial history and all the

immigrant cultures together. Only in this way, this country can finally become a unified country. In order to adapt to the new cultural identity, people are forced to change their beliefs and traditions to accommodate multicultural Singapore. Singapore also created the imagined community model “Merlion” for Singaporean. It prompt people constantly adjustment, and finally makes the members’ cultural identity awareness to become the “Merlion”.

When examine the constructed multi-culture in Singapore, people can discover Singaporean elite tend to colonial cultural identity. They always explain their cultural phenomenon with consciously colonialism. Under the propaganda influences of these elite, ordinary people in Singapore has no hatred from the heart for the history of colonial aggression, but with a kind of gratitude. Common Singaporean people believe it is the colonists bring Singapore open and civilization. An obvious example is Singapore people’s attitude to the British colonist Stamford Raffles. Raffles landed in Singapore estuary in January 28, 1819. He was just a general staff in East India Company, and lived in Singapore for just a few months. However, he is regarded as a national hero to worship in Singapore now, and become a must people needed to be known when understand Singapore.

IV. ULYSSES BY THE MERLION WITH IMAGINED COMMUNITY

Edwin Thumboo, a Singapore poet, published his famous English poem *Ulysses by the Merlion* in 1979, which is regarded as the national epic of the Singaporean. The poem mainly describes the legendary Greek hero Odysseus crossing the sea. This hero in Greek mythology was originally the King of Ithaca, and becomes the leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War. People may find it has lots of similarities in the classic Greek epic *Odyssey*. He was a clever, well-known character with good strategies, who has traveled overseas for a decade. The image of the wandering Odysseus has become a symbol of the English colonist which praised colonial explorers’ the spirit of competition. In this poem, Edwin Thumboo also describes the colonial epic that the colonists and the local people are solidify cooperate and get well along with each other in barren land.

The author believes that Ulysses, who described in the poem of *Ulysses by the Merlion*, is actually the first English colonists---Raffles landing in Singapore. The poet uses the image of Ulysses to symbolize the British colonists Raffles. Therefore, Raffles has known as the Singapore’s epic hero. In this land, people lives, breeds and build their dreaming home--- “built towers topless as Ilium’s”. Though still retains some memories of ancestors, it is in the process that make Singaporean forming a common fellow feeling with the same imagined community. Meanwhile, a common national totem “Merlion” gradually appeared in people’s mind and imagination. Although the poet is a native Chindian Singaporean, his national consciousness is weakened or collapsed because he was brought up by an English education. Moreover, he also belongs to social elite. Since independence in 1965, Singapore’s cultural policies are basically coincide with this poem, because the mainstream of

Singapore government cabinet members are the English-educated elite. In order to explore the harmonious society and finding a common center, people are ordered to change themselves and their original faith of God. This images they seek is the "Merlion":

"Nothing, nothing in my days

Foreshadowed this

Half-beast, half—fish,

This powerful creature of land and sea"

This imagery "Merlion", founded by Ulysses, is still widely considered to be the best carrier and able to demonstrate complete Singaporean culture. This sculpture, neither a fish nor a lion, is placed in the estuary of Singapore, which can truly prove and reflect a clear demonstration of the unique culture of Singapore identification. At a deeper level, it is a perfect manifestation of western legal spirit and Eastern values.

The Eastern and Western hybrid cultural product eternally spit water at the estuary of the Singapore and constantly positioning its own cultural identity: What on earth did him belong to, a fish or a lion? Under the influence of multi-culture, Singapore is facing the increasingly realistic problems. He is a strange animal neither fish nor lion. They are Chinese with yellow skin, but don't understand any ideological and cultural connotation of Chinese. People may always get confused of their cultural identity in the world and do not know which ethnic group they belong to.

V. THE FEASIBILITY OF THE THEORY

Singapore's national identification image, Merlion, indicate the specificity of the Singapore experience. It not only symbols the East-West cultural exchange, but also has its own culture. Differences from China continue to "simplify" the complexity of its heavy culture; Singaporean culture itself is weak and has no rooted cultural tradition which forces them to continue "complicate" their culture. They have to absorb the essence of wide range of cultures and achieve effective integration. To some extent, hybridised nature, stressed after Singapore's culture independence, is also an advantage. It was the result of local repression culture. Because of the absorption of the East-West culture, Singapore experience and the Singapore model are then produced. The country is then quickly became one of the Four Asian Tigers. The mixture of Chinese, Indians and several other races makes Singaporeans adapt to different philosophy and management skills. The social and cultural pattern of Singapore has now been proven to be a successful model. Furthermore, it has also proved the correct and rationality of the imagined community theory.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Singaporean experience shows that people in a multi-ethnic society can be capable of peaceful coexistence and development, as long as they are able to tolerate each other

in terms of different religious or customs. They have shared the same imagined community and the same national image--"Merlion". If people are willing to play down the differences between different ethnic groups and emphasize the imagined community between them, multiracial society, while not the most efficient, is workable. Therefore, it can be surely indicated and pointed out that Benedict Anderson's theory---imagined community has provided a new way for the emerging new countries like Singapore. Meanwhile, this theory will help these countries a lot when they want to stress the identification of the common people and national cohesion. These are also the realistic problems they faced when develop the economy. Only the national identification gets overcome, people can adjust themselves in the new country and nation. Meanwhile, they will not lose themselves in the rapidly changing world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My first and deepest gratitude should be expressed and given to each colleague who has given me suggestions in the period of paper writing and work in Ankang University. Meanwhile, a special debt of gratitude should also be given to Ha Hongguang and Lu Kewei who have helped me a lot in collecting the corresponding materials. Thanks also should be given to Benedict Anderson. Without his creatively theory, this paper could not be possible.

References

- [1] Anderson Benedict. *Imagined Communities*, Revised ed. London: Verso, 1991, pp 3-10.
- [2] Thumboo Edwin. *Ulysses by the Merlion*. Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979.
- [3] Smith Anthony. *National Identity*. London: University of Nevada Press, 1991, pp.8.
- [4] Smith Anthony. "The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?" in Marjorie Ringrose and Adam J. Lerner (eds.), *Reimagining the Nation*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993, pp.15-16.
- [5] *State of Singapore Annual Report 1963*. Published by Authority Government Printing Office, 1965.
- [6] Chew Sock Foon, *Ethnicity and nationality in Singapore*, Ohio University, 1987.
- [7] Joel S. Kahn. *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, Vhps Distribution, 1998.
- [8] Webster J. Jonathan, ed. *Essay on Edwin Thumboo*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2009.
- [9] Webster J. Thumboo's David, presented at the 6th National Conference on Functional Linguistics held Shanghai, 1999.