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The Shadow of Archipelagos: (Un)Identified Identities in *Abang Adik* and The Stateless

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Abstract

In recent years, the adoption of archipelagic theories as a methodological framework has garnered scholarly attention. This approach challenges continent- and state-centred narratives, encouraging a reconsideration of cultural dynamics. As Epeli Hau'ofa argues in *Our Sea of Islands*, Oceania should not be seen as poor, small, and isolated fragments but as a network of islands connected by the sea. Such a perspective transcends Eurocentric and developmentalist frameworks, revealing how multilayered histories and cultures shape complex identities. Building on this view, this paper examines Jin Ong's (王禮霖) film *Abang Adik* (富都青年) and Nakazono Eisuke's (中薗英助) novel The Stateless. It explores the imagery of statelessness in both works and analyses how the state exerts power in defining identity. Drawing on the archipelagic perspective, which highlights the fluidity and multiplicity of boundaries, also enables this paper to consider the possibility of mutual recognition among diverse identities.

Abang Adik and *The Stateless* highlight statelessness and expose the contradictions of reducing identity to nationality. The protagonists of the film, *Abang* and *Adik*, are Malaysian-born yet become "outsiders within" due to their stateless condition. Their existence reflects unresolved displacements in the history of the Malaysian Chinese community and echoes Hannah Arendt's claim that stateless persons are the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics. Through textual analysis, this paper reveals the limits of state-centred definitions of identity and traces their un-

derlying historical legacies. Finally, it considers identity as an unfinished historical experience that remains mobile and open and as a potential basis for relations formed beyond national boundaries.

Keywords: stateless, Nakazono Eisuke, *Abang Adik*, identity politics, unfinished experience

Introduction

Over the past decade, academia has witnessed a growing interest in archipelagic studies. Compared with earlier continent-centred and linear narratives, disciplines such as literature, anthropology, and cultural studies have reconsidered the potential of the archipelago as a conceptual framework. This approach challenges state-centred narratives and highlights the fluidity and multiplicity of boundaries. In 1993, Epeli Hau'ofa (2008) published Our Sea of Islands, which marked a milestone in establishing an archipelagic perspective. Building on this intervention, Teresia Teaiwa critiques colonial imaginaries perpetuated by continent-centred perspectives, drawing from feminist, globalisation, and postcolonial viewpoints. Both scholars regard the sea as a dynamic cultural and identity network, complicating earlier notions of Oceania as defined solely by a single continent and fixed national borders.

Chinese-language scholarship has also incorporated the archipelagic perspective. This is not a simple adoption but a localised development shaped by specific geopolitical contexts. Wang Der-Wei's (王德威) Sinophone approach, for example, outlines the multiple dimensions - geocultural, political, and communal - emerging from the writings of overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (Wang, 2015). Similarly, the "Introduction" to *A Nanyang Reader: Literature, Sea and Islands* (2022) emphasises the relevance of using the sea and the islands as vantage points. This allows us to rethink migration routes and crossings and reconsider relations between island and island, ocean and continent, and centre and margin, as well as the shifting dynamics of boundaries (Wang & Gao, 2022). Neither Wang nor Gao categorises literature by nationality. Instead, they situate the writings of the Indochina Peninsula and South Pacific Islands as challenges to the rigid centre, foregrounding the fixity and mobility of borders. Similarly, in 2019, the Taiwanese journal *Cultural Studies* devoted a special issue titled "Archipelagic Thought and the World." This issue explores how the archipelagic perspective can reconnect the self and others beyond national borders, between dialects, and at the limits of imagination (Wang, 2019).

Moreover, the archipelagic perspective's challenge to continent-centred frameworks enables a reconsideration of identity recognition based on nationality or citizenship. This paper takes the imagery of statelessness in Jin Ong's *Abang Adik* and Nakazono Einosuke's *The Stateless* as an entry point to examine the state's exercise of power in defining identity. Beyond exposing the fallacy of

an assumed authenticity, the archipelagic perspective with its emphasis on fluidity and transgression offers a way to envision identity as an unfinished experience. Both works place statelessness at their core, directly addressing the contradictions of reducing identity to a single, nationality-based viewpoint. Ong and Nakazono incorporate their own transnational experiences into their works in different ways, utilising the complexity of history and memory to highlight the limitations of rigid identity definitions. By analysing the imagery of statelessness in these two works, this paper argues that the "absence" in statelessness (the absence of nationality) is not an empty void. Instead, it is a historical trauma obscured by state-centred narratives. Finally, the discussion draws on Nakazono's postwar proposal of "statelessness as a negative medium" to further consider how identity, understood as a dynamic state of (un)identified identities, can open dialogues between lived and unlived experiences.

In *Abang Adik*, *Abang* and *Adik* are not stateless persons who have fled to Malaysia from another country. Instead, they are insiders born within national borders yet positioned as outsiders. The film's dialogue and narrative style capture the everyday hybridity of Malaysia's multiethnic society, as well as the lingering historical displacement of the Chinese community. This unresolved historical legacy contrasts starkly with their stateless status. Khor (2022) criticizes Malaysia's claim of multiculturalism. He deems it superficial, noting its failure to be fully implemented in institutions and policies. Furthermore, he argues that achieving true multiculturalism requires pursuing "recognition" by acknowledging the differences in identity of minority and immigrant communities. Both *Abang Adik* and *The Stateless* underscore the essentialist assumptions underlying nationality. By analysing these two works and engaging with postwar Japanese discussions of identity and war memory, this paper examines the historical traumas suppressed by state power and proposes the possibility of understanding identity as an unfinished experience. From the fluid state of such an unfinished experience, relations between the self and others can be established, thereby opening a path towards cultural recognition.

State Power in *Abang Adik*

The 2023 film *Abang Adik*, directed by Malaysian filmmaker Jin Ong, garnered significant attention upon its release and was nominated for seven awards at the 60th Golden Horse Awards. In addition, it received recognition at multiple renowned international film festivals, including the China Golden Rooster, the Fribourg International Film Festival in Switzerland, and the New York Asian Film Festival. It also found box office success in regions such as Mainland China, Taiwan, [1]Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, and Singapore, solidifying its status as a highly acclaimed film in recent years.

Abang Adik tells the story of two brothers, *Abang* and *Adik*, who face numerous hardships in their work and daily lives due to their lack of Malaysian citizenship. The elder brother, *Abang*, cannot hear or speak. He is righteous, kind, and hardworking, but struggles to earn a living at the Pudu

Market in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. Although born in Malaysia, he lost his parents in a fire during his childhood and is unable to provide proof of his birthplace and parentage. Consequently, he is forced to work part-time jobs and live in Pudu flats to evade the immigration authorities. His younger brother, *Adik*, possesses a Malaysian birth certificate known as Sijil Lahir. However, due to losing contact with his biological father, he is unable to obtain an official identity card in Malaysia. With the help of Li Jia'en, a social worker, they attempt to apply for Malaysian citizenship, only to face an indefinite waiting period. After a series of unexpected events, *Adik* accidentally injures Li, and when *Abang* tries to handle the situation, he unintentionally kills her. Although neither of them intended to commit murder, they became criminals. Fearing arrest, they flee to the countryside, but ultimately, *Abang* returns to the Pudu flats to confess to the crime and atone for it.

As *Abang Adik* addresses issues such as migrant labour and citizenship, extensive reviews followed the release of the book (Zheng, 2023; Yang, 2024; FLiPER 2024). However, most of these discussions focused only on the current situation of foreign workers in Malaysia or on regulations concerning the acquisition of nationality. More in-depth research has yet to be undertaken. Debates confined to legal frameworks risk overlooking the essentialist assumptions underlying identity. Furthermore, they make it difficult to examine the complex historical legacies embedded in different forms of identity, as well as the challenges of intercultural recognition. Therefore, the following analysis focuses on the representations and meanings of the imagery of statelessness in the film, using this approach to trace the underlying historical legacies.

The dialogue in the film reflects Malaysia's multilingual environment, with Cantonese, Hokkien, Mandarin, Malay, English, and Bengali interwoven throughout. The title *Abang Adik* also derives from Malay *abang* means "elder brother" and *adik* means "younger brother" (Onozawa, 2007). Malaysia is situated at a strategic crossroads of the South Seas, with its geography encompassing the peninsula, archipelagos, and the surrounding seas. Instead of functioning as barriers, the waters have historically served as corridors of migration, linking different islands and shaping a diverse linguistic landscape. This includes Malay, colonial-era English, Cantonese, and Hokkien spoken within Chinese communities, as well as Tamil among Indian communities.

Centuries of trade, migration, and colonial encounters have interwoven to form a distinctive cultural mosaic in Malaysia. Following the country's rapid economic growth in the 1970s, a large number of foreign workers were recruited from the 1980s onwards. In the 1990s, a series of state measures were introduced to regulate the employment and residence of migrant labourers. These included the 1991 Immigration Act amendment, which provided the legal framework that enabled the 1992 "Legalisation Programme." This, in turn, was a key pillar of the country's comprehensive foreign workers policy aimed at controlling and managing its labour market (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2015). In this social context, the number of foreign residents in Malaysia has steadily increased. According to government census data, the proportion of foreign residents in Malaysia's total popu-

lation has risen consistently: 4.4% in 1991, 5.9% in 2000, 8.2% in 2010, and 8.3% in 2020 (Torii, 2023). As of the 2010 census, the majority of foreign residents were from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh, accounting for approximately 70% of the total migrant population. Other significant migrant groups included people from Myanmar, Nepal, India, China, and Thailand (Torii, 2023). Most foreign migrants in Malaysia are low-wage, unskilled labourers employed in so-called 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs.[2] Under increasingly stringent regulations, many foreign workers have been confined to specific occupational sectors and depend on employers to pay heavy levies. Consequently, many migrant labourers choose to abscond, thereby becoming undocumented workers. After the amendment of the Immigration Act in 2002, the number of such cases has risen significantly. In 2005, 19,406 workers were recorded as absconding. This number rose to 30,000 by 2007, representing approximately 10% of all regular migrant domestic workers in Malaysia (Blanca, 2015). In addition to these cases, there are also stateless persons, such as *Abang* and *Adik* in *Abang Adik*. As they failed to complete the required registration procedures, they were unable to obtain legal identification documents. This lack of status renders them vulnerable to detention or arrest at any time.[3]

From the beginning, the film sets the stage for Malaysia's complex immigration landscape. In a damp, dimly lit abandoned building, shadowy figures emerge, revealed to be illegal foreign workers. *Adik* negotiates between the Bangladeshi workers and a middleman in Malay. Afterwards, the police stormed the building to arrest undocumented immigrants. While the camera lingers on a smoking police officer, in the background, an unidentifiable migrant worker falls to his death from a building (Figure1). Through this scene, the director foreshadows the film's central theme, bringing the faceless and unidentified individuals to the forefront and telling their stories. *Abang*, the elder brother, works at the market carrying vegetables. The vegetable stall owner underpays him, and when *Abang* uses sign language to indicate the shortfall, the owner disregards him and instead berates an Indonesian worker off-screen. The camera follows *Abang* as he finishes his work and returns to the Pudu flats - a narrow, dilapidated housing complex. The Pudu flats in the film are home to a diverse community, including a Filipino single mother and her daughter, a Burmese family seeking asylum from political persecution, a Cantonese-speaking gender minority named Sister Money, and several young children who arrived in Kuala Lumpur from China. These flats house individuals with expired visas, those without valid identification, and stateless persons. Whenever the immigration authorities conduct sudden inspections at night, the residents must flee to avoid detection. During one such raid in *Abang Adik*, bright searchlights relentlessly illuminate the residents' faces. The director uses the contrast between light and shadow to depict how state power penetrates every corner of the Pudu flats, making the intrusion of authority visually palpable (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 1

The Symbol of State Power: A Smoking Police Officer in the Foreground and an Unidentifiable Migrant Worker Falls from a Building in the Background.

Source: *Abang Adik* (Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Figure 2

Midnight Inspection by Immigration Officers at the Pudu Flats Complex, Kuala Lumpur.

Source: *Abang Adik* (Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Figure 3

A Composition of Light and Darkness Contrasts to Present the Dominance of State Power over Pudu Flat Residents.

Source: *Abang Adik* (Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Kuala Lumpur, a tropical capital city that should be bathed in bright sunlight, is instead shrouded in gloom throughout the film. The overcast sky looms heavily, chain-link fences cover two-thirds of the frame, and tight close-ups of *Abang*'s head create a sense of confinement. These cinematographic compositions convey distress and oppression, mirroring *Abang*'s inability to speak (Figure 4). Ong mentioned in an interview that the film's primary aim is to portray the plight of Malaysians who are unable to obtain identification cards (G. G. Huang, 2024). Regarding stateless persons within Malaysia, the authors of *The State of Being Stateless in Malaysia, Thailand and Australia* list the following among those affected: abandoned children with no information about their parents; children born overseas and out of wedlock to a Malaysian father and a non-citizen mother; children born overseas to Malaysian mothers; children born to stateless parents; children who were born to non-citizen mothers and unknown fathers but were subsequently adopted or raised by Malaysian citizens; and the nomadic Bajau Laut, the sea gypsies off the coast of Semporna, Sabah (Yusof, 2024). Although these individuals are born and raised within Malaysia, they become stateless because they cannot complete the required registration procedures. Stateless persons in Malaysia are unable to access education, gain employment, marry, open bank accounts, obtain a driver's licence, or secure other official documents. Not only does this lack of legal recognition engender severe difficulties in their daily lives, but it also exposes them to the constant risk of de-

tention or arrest. Furthermore, the children of stateless persons are also forced to remain stateless, perpetuating a cycle of social exclusion across generations.

Figure 4

Close-up Shots that Consistently Frame Abang's Head to Convey a Sense of Spatial and Psychological Confinement.

Source: *Abang Adik* (Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Abang Adik does not specify the background of *Abang* and *Adik*'s parents. It explains that *Abang*, due to a fire in his childhood, lacks any documents to verify his place of birth or his parents' identities. *Adik*, in contrast, possesses a birth certificate, but he cannot obtain citizenship because he lacks proof of his biological father's identity. Together, they embody the condition of being "outsiders within." The film's cinematography frequently employs framing and shadow as visual motifs. State power is made visible on-screen. When the inspectors enter the Pudu flats, the shadows cast by the doors and windows surround *Abang* as he flees (Figure 5). Other notable scenes include the layered framing of doorways as *Abang* and *Adik* peel vegetables (Figure 6); the tiled wall behind *Abang* when he returns to the Pudu flats (Figure 7); the iron bars separating *Abang* and *Adik* during a prison visit (Figure 8); and the prison gate marking their final meeting (Figure 9). These scenes underscore how state power dominates and oppresses the stateless.

Figure 5

Abang Flees from Inspectors

Source: *Abang Adik* (Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Figure 6

Abang and Adik peel Vegetables

Source: *Abang Adik* (Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Figure 7

Abang Returns to the Pudu Flats

Source: *Abang Adik* (Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Figure 8

Prison Visit

Source: *Abang* Adik, Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment

Figure 9

The Final Prison Visit

Source: *Abang Adik*, Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Stateless persons in Malaysia lack legal identification and are thus uncounted, unallocated, and rendered invisible in official data. However, this does not imply that they lack a sense of identity or local connection. Their stateless status contrasts sharply with the historical memories and traumas they carry. In the final scene of *Abang Adik*, *Adik* finds his biological father, who runs a small eatery called Dung Gun Zai. The image of his father, who is busy preparing wonton noodles, reflects the complexities of Malaysian Chinese history behind *Adik*'s stateless identity.

In 1946, the British colonial government conceived the Malayan Union plan, which sought to expand citizenship eligibility based on the principle of racial equality. Under this plan, local Chinese individuals who met the qualification criteria could renounce their Chinese nationality and obtain Malayan citizenship. However, those who became citizens of a non-British country would lose their Malayan Union citizenship. If Chinese residents chose to retain Chinese nationality, restrictions would be imposed on their rights to engage in commerce and purchase property. Thus, British citizenship was the more practical choice, particularly for business-oriented Chinese communities (Chen, 2009: 83-84). However, the Malayan Union plan faced intense opposition from the Malay population and was ultimately replaced in 1948 by the Federation of Malaya, which formally recognised the special privileges of the Malay people. In the same year, the Malayan Communist Party instigated armed uprisings, prompting the British colonial government to declare a state of emergency in Malaya. In contrast, the newly established People's Republic of China, aiming to ease diplomatic tensions and gain support from Southeast Asian nations, signed the Sino-Indonesian Dual Nationality Treaty in April 1955. This treaty marked a shift in China's policy, as it ceased to

recognise dual nationality, forcing overseas Chinese individuals to choose between Chinese nationality and the nationality of their country of residence. From this point onwards, nationality became a definitive criterion by which Southeast Asian governments assessed the identity and allegiance of overseas Chinese individuals (Hee, 2018). Malaysian Chinese communities were repeatedly forced to choose sides amid the geopolitical tensions, shifting policies, and historical transformations during the Cold War period. In some cases, individuals found themselves stateless, caught between the political divide of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China, or unable to choose between China and their country of residence (Chen, 2017).

Abang Adik also depicts other residents of the Pudu flats, including Chinese children long awaiting identity cards; Money, who speaks Cantonese; *Adik*'s lover, who plans to return to East Malaysia; and friends conversing in Hokkien during a birthday party. This diversity demonstrates the historical complexity embedded in Malaysian Chinese identity. The local Chinese population in Malaysia has continuously faced dilemmas regarding their identity. The plight of the Chinese labourers who arrived in the 19th century, as well as the wartime refugees and Chinese repatriates during and after World War II, reflects this. Later, those navigating the political shifts from the Malayan Union and the Federation of Malaya to Malaya's independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963 underwent similar turmoil. Yet, they have never been fully encompassed by any singular definition of nationality, identity, or cultural belonging. In *Who Are the Malaysian Chinese?*, Yamamoto Hiroyuki presents a striking contrast between two case studies in Malaysia. Both individuals' grandparents were ethnically Chinese. Years later, one became Malay, while the other became a mixed-race Chinese-Indian (Yamamoto, 2014). By juxtaposing the two cases, Yamamoto highlights how Malaysian Chinese identity becomes increasingly blurred through intermarriage, migration, and religious conversion. At what point do they cease to be recognised or recognise themselves as Chinese? This question challenges the very boundaries of Chineseness. Yamamoto critiques certain Chinese studies that presuppose an essentialised Chineseness. These studies assume that if Chinese descendants do not exhibit "Chinese" characteristics, it must be due to external societal pressures suppressing their identity. Once these pressures are removed, their inherent Chineseness will naturally resurface (Yamamoto, 2014). Such an approach not only reflects an authentic perspective but also oversimplifies the complexity, dynamism, and fluidity of the Malaysian Chinese experience.

According to the Malaysian government's 2024 population survey,[4] Chinese individuals comprise approximately 22.8% of the total population. However, the current ethnic classification system in Malaysia only includes Bumiputera, Chinese, Indian, and other citizens, as well as other non-citizens. There is no category for mixed heritage. For example, the *Peranakan* are usually classified as either Chinese or other (Yamamoto, 2014). State-centred definitions of ethnicity often overlook the historical multiplicity and complexity of the Malaysian Chinese community. As Tan Chee-Beng

notes, the Malaysian Chinese community is not homogeneous. Variations in language and dialect, regional residence, socioeconomic status, and occupation all contribute to distinctly different Chinese experiences. According to Tan, the category "Hokkien" is further divided into various types of Hokkien. He uses Penang Hokkien as an example, noting that it may be considered a product of Baba culture, which in turn was a product of Malay and Thai influences on Chinese culture (Lee & Tan, 1999). Thus, the multilayered formation of Chinese identity does not lend itself to a single, flat definition; rather, it is a complex assemblage. This concept resonates with Hau'ofa's argument in Our Sea of Islands that Oceania should not be seen as isolated, fragmented units. Instead, they form interconnected networks through movement and exchange. Similarly, the formation of the Malaysian Chinese community should be understood as the result of cross-regional cultural interactions, rather than as a static nationality or identity. State-centred narratives erase the hybridity of lived experiences across historical and cultural flows through rigid classification. In *Abang Adik*, the multilingual contexts reveal Malaysian Chinese experiences layered across different historical and geographical spaces. Although these characters are rendered stateless under the division imposed by state power, their statelessness carries deep historical traumas. In the following section, this paper turns to Nakazono's postwar novel The Stateless, which also addresses statelessness, to examine critical reflections on nationality and identity in postwar Japan.

Proof of Being Japanese in Nakazono Eisuke's The Stateless

Nakazono Eisuke originally published the novel *The Stateless* in 1962 under the title *Lead in Flames* (Nakazono, 1962). When it was republished in 1978, the title was changed to The Stateless. The story follows the case of Ōmura Fukuo, who is found aboard a Dutch vessel arriving in Japan from Bangkok, Thailand. Although he claims to be Japanese, Ōmura speaks only Chinese and possesses no identification documents. Consequently, he is temporarily detained at the polluted Kamosaki Immigration Detention Centre. After Ōmura's case is reported in the newspapers, three people step forward to identify him. The first identifier, Ōmura Fusako, believes he is her long-lost elder brother who was deployed to the Burmese front during the war. The second, Liu Namie, claims that Ōmura is a Taiwanese expatriate who had moved to Thailand for business but was caught during the postwar chaos. The third, Tange Unzō, insists that Ōmura was a military espionage agent dispatched to northern Thailand and the China-Vietnam border to infiltrate communist networks. Determined to verify Ōmura's nationality, the investigating officer, Kuroshima, employs various methods, including psychiatric and racial testing. However, no conclusive proof emerges.

In the novel, the Kamosaki Immigration Detention Centre is located in a suburban area severely affected by industrial pollution. Factories produce unbearable fumes and noise. The air is filled with a foul stench, and orange flames rise from chimneys, emitting bluish-white smoke. Confronted with such harsh detention conditions, the centre's chief, Ichinari, remarks,

> This is neither a welcoming facility for foreign guests nor a prison for criminals.
> Instead, it is an administrative institution aimed at regulating the entry and exit of foreigners in an orderly manner' […] It is, in essence, a state-operated budget hotel;
> we are both government officials and service staff. … As for the industrial pollution,
> such as the foul stench and toxic fumes, we are currently negotiating with the factories and considering measures to mitigate these environmental hazards. However, at this stage, these are still under discussion. Due to the budget constraints, it is difficult to take immediate action to address these issues (Nakazono, 1995: 19).

The chief, who consistently downplays issues and avoids confrontation, embodies the inertia of the bureaucratic system. Ironically, while the detention centre serves as a manifestation of state power, it is far from a prestigious institution. Undocumented immigrants with unclear identity are repeatedly described as abscesses or phantoms by the chief of the centre in the novel (Nakazono, 1995).

Due to the harsh detention environment, the Western detainees on the first floor of the First Dorm loudly protest, shouting "Monkey House." In contrast, the Chinese detainees on the second floor silently endure the situation despite their discontent. There is a significant difference in the meal budgets between the Western and Chinese inmates, owing to the varying financial support from their respective consulates or shipping companies. However, it is always the Westerners, who generally receive better treatment, who protest the most. In addition, Chen Dong-Yi - a Taiwanese detainee who has been held in the centre for a long time is responsible for gathering gossip and information within the detention centre, and he trades the gathered intelligence for various benefits. The segregation of detainees by nationality and race and the use of a Taiwanese intermediary as an agent of indirect rule may evoke a sense of familiarity in Japanese readers, as these elements resemble Japan's prewar system. This, in turn, serves as Nakazono's sharp critique of postwar society in Japan.

According to Sarah Kovner in *Prisoners of Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps* (Kovner, 2020), the prewar Japanese military deliberately refrained from framing its series of invasions into China as acts of war, instead referring to them as "incidents." Consequently, while Allied prisoners of war (POWs) were recognised as subjects of protection under the Geneva Conventions, the Chinese POWs were not. The latter were massacred or subjected to forced labour by the Japanese military. Under the Geneva Conventions, POWs were entitled to fixed food rations and specific standards of treatment. However, as Japan's war situation deteriorated, the treatment of POWs worsened accordingly, leading to protests among them. Despite these hardships, from the perspective of resource-starved Japanese civilians, the rations and living conditions of Allied POWs still appeared more favourable than those of ordinary Japanese citizens, especially during the final stages of the war (Kovner, 2020). In The Stateless, the depiction of nationality, race, and differential

treatment reflects postwar Japan's failure to critically reflect on its wartime experiences, instead repeating old patterns. Bureaucratic negligence continues to mirror prewar structures. Living in a dilapidated single room in a pollution-stricken area, Kuroshima watches European and American protesters and indignantly thinks to himself,

> If only I could also shake the barred door of my solitary room and shout, "Break down Monkey House," how much lighter I would feel. The Western detainees complain about cracks in the concrete roof, with rainwater seeping down the walls into their rooms. But compared to my roof, which feels like it could be torn away entirely whenever a typhoon hits, my living conditions are far harsher than theirs (Nakazono, 1995: 18).[5]

The detention centre officials are wary of international public opinion. They fear that, if Ōmura is revealed to be a U.S. citizen, it will provoke condemnation and accusations of mistreatment from the West, similar to wartime. Furthermore, the segmentation models within the detention centre mirror the crude racial hierarchies of prewar Japan. By tracing the intractable problem of Ōmura's nationality, Nakazono ironically exploits the difficulty of obtaining "proof of Japanese identity" to gradually expose the fallacy of assumed authenticity in nationality.

The echo of Japan's prewar irresponsible bureaucracy reverberates throughout The Stateless. Ichinari consistently avoids taking responsibility, repeating formal and righteous-sounding language to insist that he has no choice but to follow standard procedures. All he can do is expel Ōmura, whose identity cannot be verified. The oil refinery factory, which emits harmful gases, insists that its management process is flawless, attributing the air pollution to unfortunate weather conditions and poor air circulation. Similarly, the Japanese military stationed on the China-Thailand border during wartime remained in the region even after Japan's defeat, merely shifting its mission to gathering intelligence for the United States. The disregard for wartime experiences let Japan's system of non-accountability persist into the postwar era.

Both *The Stateless* and *Abang Adik* focus on stateless persons. In *Abang Adik*, the "state-less" (the "absence" of nationality) is laden with the historical displacements and multilayered, complex identities of the Malaysian Chinese community. Similarly, *The Stateless* uses this very condition to critique postwar Japan's failure to confront and reckon with its wartime history. Instead, the Cold War framework allowed prewar modes of thinking to persist. This compels us to ask: After experiencing a brutal and inhumane war, what kind of postwar rebirth did Nakazono envision? (Nakazono, 1995, 239).[6] This also raises broader issues of how Japan's wartime experiences should be confronted, and how Chinese identity, shaped by historical processes, carries layered complexities. In the novel, after Kuroshima learns that psychiatric testing cannot definitively determine whether Ōmura is Chinese or Japanese, he consults Professor Somiya Suzuhiko, an expert in racial anthro-

pology. The professor conducts a thorough examination of Ōmura, photographing his entire body, taking X-ray images, and collecting various physical data such as blood type, fingerprints, and cranial length-to-width ratio. After analysing these indices, he concludes that Ōmura's measurements fall precisely on the borderline between those typical of Chinese and Japanese individuals, identifying him as an ethnological "borderline person" (Nakazono, 1995, 198). This persistent inability to obtain any definitive scientific proof of Ōmura's identity prompts Somiya to share a personal, thought-provoking remark with Kuroshima:

> The so-called racial zones and the boundaries between closely related ethnic groups are inevitably blurred. In reality, people do not have clear dividing lines; this is only natural. … There is a saying that Japanese people are at the centre of all races, but being at the centre does not imply superiority. … Over thousands of years, people from various ethnic groups came to the geographic region now called Japan, and thus the Japanese people emerged. If we were to examine individuals one by one and trace each person's origins back to different races, it seems theoretically possible. I am not trying to revive outdated slogans like Hakkō ichiu (universal brotherhood). … Rather, what makes the Japanese most proud is that we can negate all national borders and nationalities, standing from the perspective of the human spirit (Nakazono, 1995, 199).

We can speculate that the idea of "negating all national borders and nationalities, standing from the perspective of the human spirit" represents Nakazono's vision for postwar Japan. In his September 1970 essay "The Illusory and Images of Koreans," he references the renowned Jewish Marxist writer Isaac Deutscher, re-examining the position of Koreans in Japan through the lens of Deutscher's concept of the "non-Jewish Jew." Nakazono argues that Japanese society exemplifies what Deutscher criticised—a culture that situates itself within a fixed national or social framework, viewing its own way of life and thought as the absolute standard and perceiving any deviation as a threat. To challenge this entrenched epistemological framework and enable a renewed relationship between Japanese and Korean people, Nakazono emphasises the need to reconsider the cultural borderland position occupied by Koreans in Japan. This reassessment fosters the creation of the "non-Japanese Japanese" and the "non-Korean Korean," allowing for transformation and reconciliation through the reciprocal movement of shared human experiences (Nakazono, 1971). This paper argues that Ōmura, the "bordered person" in The Stateless, provides a pathway towards understanding the postwar rebirth that Nakazono envisioned.

The Stateless was published in the 1960s, during a period when Japan was engulfed in widespread social opposition to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Intense mass protests erupted across the country, reflecting what was referred to as Japan's "political season." The protesters came from

diverse social backgrounds, including students, labour union members, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens. They primarily opposed Japan's incorporation into the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union and resisted being drawn into war again. The movement reached its peak in 1960, with fierce demonstrations occurring throughout Japan. In 1964, the entry of the U.S. nuclear submarine Sea Dragon into Yokosuka Harbour sparked widespread controversy and social conflict. During the protests, Nakazono sharply criticised Japan's security and military alliance with the United States under the Cold War framework, viewing it as a disregard for and a lack of reflection on Japan's wartime experiences. Consequently, he actively participated in the Afro-Asian Writers' Association (AAWA), advocating for non-alignment and the demilitarisation of foreign bases. In 1961, he published an article in Yomiuri Shimbun expressing these views:

> We must think of the Earth from a global, human-centred perspective. In facing the world, there exists a form of internationalist thinking that disregards national borders. This form of thought is an internationalist perspective that uses statelessness as a negative medium (Nakazono, 1971: 32).

The "stateless" (the "absence" of nationality) in *The Stateless* functions as a critical tool for challenging singular notions of borders and nationality. Nakazono's concepts of the "non-Japanese Japanese" and the "non-Korean Korean" similarly emerge from this position of negation, revealing the fallacy of assumed authenticity in nationality and envisioning the possibility of crossing cultural and national boundaries. The following discussion employs Hau'ofa's deterritorialising perspective, combined with the cross-border experiences of Ong and Nakazono, to examine the fluidity of identity.

Identities as Unfinished Experiences

In Our Sea of Islands, Hau'ofa criticises Western colonial and developmentalist frameworks for viewing Oceania as fragmented, isolated, and impoverished. He argues that Oceania should be understood as a "sea of islands," rather than as "islands in a far sea" (Hau'ofa, 2008). The sea is not a barrier, and the islands are not disconnected. Through navigation, trade, marriage, and cultural exchange, the islands form a vast and vibrant network of interaction. Hau'ofa describes this perspective as follows:

> We cannot see the processes outlined here clearly if we confine our attention to things within national boundaries and to events at the upper levels of political economies and regional and international diplomacy. Only when we focus on what ordinary people are actually doing, rather than on what they should be doing, can we see the broader picture of reality.

This perspective directly challenges the borders imposed by colonial regimes and state power within the global economic order, which partition the sea as if to delineate separations. Such partitioning mirrors how life experiences and historical experiences are cut and moulded into fixed identities, reducing diverse experiences to mere appendages of a state-centred narrative. However, as Hau'ofa emphasises, life experiences of identity often exist in the flow, interaction, and everyday practices of people. Based on this understanding, this paper draws on Ong's and Nakazono's cross-border experiences to discuss how these experiences shape the fluidity of identity depicted in their works.

Ong lived and worked in Taiwan as a migrant in 1999. In interviews, he recalled living in an illegal rooftop extension and working every day in an iron factory, surviving on bread day after day. Not only did he have to adapt to Taiwan's climate and language, which were markedly different from those of his hometown in Malaysia, but he also experienced the challenges of navigating an unfamiliar cultural, social, and work environment. This was a challenging period in Ong's life, but the encouragement he received from his Filipino co-workers often lifted his spirits, helping him endure and survive. Ong's experiences as a migrant worker in Taiwan enabled him to portray the hardships of life in a foreign land through rich description in *Abang Adik*. Emotional bonds that transcend nationality and identity lie at the heart of his storytelling. Reflecting on the warmth shown to him by his Filipino co-workers, Ong wonders, "Why were they so kind to me? Even though they faced the same social injustice and cruelty, they still supported someone whose nationality was different from theirs" (S. Huang, 2023). In *Abang Adik*, Ong not only addresses the violence of state apparatuses and state-based classifications but also captures the empathy, understanding, and friendship that form and persist across differences.

In preparation for producing the films Shuttle Life and *Abang Adik*, Ong conducted long-term field research in the Pudu area. He immersed himself in the local markets, experienced the living environment firsthand, and personally engaged with the area's unique history and spatial character. Pudu, originally known as Bun Shan Bah (Half Hill Market) in Cantonese, was one of the three earliest developed market districts in Kuala Lumpur.[7] It is located near Kuala Lumpur's famous early Chinese quarter, Petaling Street, which began to thrive in the late 19th century. As the city expanded rapidly, many Chinese residents moved from Petaling Street to Pudu, naturally transforming it into another Chinese quarter. After World War II, with Malaysia's economy gradually recovering, the Pudu Market building was completed in 1956. This led to a period of prosperity, as the area became a bustling commercial district filled with cinemas, restaurants, and shops. However, on May 13, 1969, severe racial conflict erupted between the Malay and Chinese communities in what came to be known as the May 13 Incident. During this incident, riots broke out in several areas around Kuala Lumpur. Pudu, due to its large Chinese population, became one of the main sites of conflict. Despite night curfews and

martial law being imposed in an attempt to ease tensions, the casualties in Pudu remained severe (Khor, 2022; Lee, 2023).

Following the May 13 Incident, the Malaysian government imposed strict controls on public discourse, prohibiting any open discussion of politically "sensitive" topics that could incite racial division. During election periods in particular, the May 13 Incident resurfaces as a symbol of fear and historical trauma for the Chinese community in Malaysia - a spectre haunting their collective memory (Lin, 2020). After the 1990s, urban renewal in Pudu slowed down, prompting many Chinese residents to relocate. Consequently, the area gradually transformed into a hub for immigrants and foreign labourers. This landscape forms the primary setting of *Abang Adik*. Ong often uses transition shots featuring Merdeka 118 - the tallest building in Malaysia - alongside Pudu's rundown open-air market (Figure 10). The stark contrast between the luminous high-rise building and the decaying market highlights the tension between Malaysia's official narrative of multiculturalism and the marginalised communities left in its shadow. Within the state-led public memory, the Chinese community's traumatic memory becomes a fragmented collage, similar to the landscape of Pudu itself. Notably, at night, the imposing silhouette of Merdeka 118 fades into darkness, while the seemingly dilapidated Pudu Market comes alive, illuminated by scattered lights and bustling sounds (Figure 11).

Figure 10

The Rundown Pudu set against the Backdrop of Towering Modern Skyscrapers

Source: *Abang Adik*, Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

Figure 11

The Pudu Market at Night

Source: *Abang Adik*, Photo provided by Applause Entertainment / More Entertainment)

The erasure of memory under the control of state power transformed the May 13 Incident into a ghost within public memory, while identities that could not be recognised or classified were forced into suspension as stateless persons. In Nakazono's The Stateless, Ōmura is diagnosed with total autobiographical memory loss after a psychiatric test. To regain his memory, he must retrace his steps through the "island of memory" (Erinnerung Insel). In Nakazono's essay *Conditions for Restoration* (1957), he critiques the tendency to forget the trauma of war and uncritically extend prewar ideological frameworks into postwar Japan. He argues that, unless Japan objectifies its internal contradictions, it will remain trapped in a cycle of self-hatred and self-retribution. If Japan does not truly confront its wartime past, in which its imperial ambitions drove its aggression across Asia, any prospect of renewal will be rendered unattainable. According to Nakazono, to facilitate such a confrontation, these historical traumas must be externalised as objective realities, thus intellectualising the historical experience of the past. Only through this can Japan break free from entrenched prejudices and autonomously create new conceptions of subjectivity. For Nakazono, this act of subjectivity creation "can only be realised through an unceasing, self-transformative engagement with the self." (Nakazono, 1971: 10). This, he contends, is the fundamental condition for the restoration of the wartime generation - a subjectivity creation of new and pluralistic centres of value (Nakazono, 1971).

By retracing the "island of memory" and gradually restoring the fragments of an erased past, one can break free from the spectral state and be reborn. This is not only Nakazono's vision for postwar Japan but also a reflection of his own personal experiences. In 1937, Nakazono travelled to

China and later worked in the Ministry of Economic Affairs of Manchuria. In 1940, he moved to Peking (now Beijing) to work for a Japanese newspaper company; during this period, he became acquainted with Qian Daosun, Yuan Xi, and Lu Bainian. As a Japanese national in occupied Peking, Nakazono was deeply troubled by the question of whether mutual understanding could exist between different national groups, particularly in a wartime context in which friend and foe were strictly delineated. This paradox was a recurring theme during his lifetime. After returning to Japan in 1946, Nakazono joined The Sekai Nippo and actively participated in labour unions and strike movements. In 1949, he became a member of the Communist Party in Japan but left the following year due to internal divisions. Despite leaving the party, he remained engaged in social movements and literary pursuits. In February 1950, he published his first short fiction, titled *The Brand*. Throughout the 1960s, he was actively involved in protests against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, the Mitsuimiike coal miners' strike, and anti-military-base movements. In addition, he continued publishing works of reportage literature related to social movements (Nakazono, 1971). *The Stateless* is his second espionage novel.

Ong and Nakazono each incorporated their cross-border experiences into their works, portraying the complex and layered identities and historical residues behind stateless persons. Their works reveal multiple identities and histories that are otherwise obscured by state-centred narratives. In *Abang Adik*, the protagonist *Abang* is sentenced to death. Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (2017) points out that the plight of minorities and stateless persons reflects the decline of the nation-state. Arendt argues that minorities are only half stateless: They belong to some political body and receive partial protection. In contrast, stateless persons are not protected by any nation state and do not belong to any political organisation. Consequently, human rights predicated on the nation state appear fragile and powerless. This group of stateless persons represents the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics, as the nation state cannot exist once its principle of equality before the law has broken down (Arendt, 2017). Therefore, statelessness is not merely a legal or administrative issue; rather, it also concerns identity, state sovereignty, and cultural recognition.

In *Abang Adik*, *Abang*'s death alters *Adik*'s fate. He begins to work hard and eventually finds his biological father at the Dung Gun Zai noodle eatery. Similarly, *The Stateless* concludes with a path towards postwar rebirth in Japan. Ōmura does not reclaim his real name, Shimoe Shigemitsu. Instead, he leaves Japan as a stateless person. Confronting the war that claimed countless lives, Ōmura states that the only position he can take is to refuse any national border or nationality (Nakazono, 1995). In an essay on the Hiroshima atomic bombing, Nakazono writes,

> I do not intend to either place atomic bomb survivors on a pedestal or pull them down. More than ever, we need a thorough understanding of the unfinished experience of the atomic bombing. A full understanding of the human experience is inseparable from the

> literary imagination. However, what I wish to emphasize once again is the necessity of developing a method that allows us to comprehend atomic bomb survivors as being who traverse past, present, and future, carrying multilayered consciousness. In other words, we must conceptualize the experience of the atomic bombing as a form of thought. This is precisely why I continually preface the experience of atomic bomb survivors with the term "unfinished." (Nakazono, 1977: 245)

Nakazono argues that simplifying the Hiroshima atomic bomb survivors' experience to a mere utopian vision of peace through commemoration only reveals the complacency, confusion, and avoidance of those who were not directly affected. This complacency, he contends, detaches the atomic bombing experience from its ongoing process as an unfinished movement, not only hindering non-survivors from engaging with the experience but also absolving them of the postwar responsibility they should bear. Although Nakazono himself was not a Hiroshima survivor, his various essays and articles abound with references to his experiences in China during the war. By positioning his personal experiences as his own form of a "HIROSHIMA" experience, he sought to create a shared experience between survivors and non-survivors, ensuring that the experience remains an ongoing and unfinished process.

Resisting the weathering and erasure of historical traumas, as well as rejecting the delimitation and segmentation of a singular identity, also challenges the fixity of identity boundaries. Even though the Malaysian Chinese community has long been rooted and culturally interwoven across the peninsula and archipelagos, the participants of the May 13 Incident have aged. Similarly, Japan's wartime generation is gradually passing away. Nakazono likens the sharing of experiences between individuals, generations, or ethnic groups to a horizontal bar exercise: Without athletes, the bars exist only as gaps and unevenness, and it is only through the athletes' flexible yet resilient bodily movement that one can traverse between them (Nakazono, 1977). Whether it is Ōmura, *Abang*, and *Adik*, who are unable to obtain official identification, or the Japanese, Malay, and Chinese individuals categorized by nationality or ethnicity, a shared thread runs through their experiences. If we regard identity, ethnicity, and history as unfinished experiences, we may generate open and plural forms of experiences - "Japanese" experiences, "Chinese" experiences, May 13 Incident experiences, or wartime experiences. Like a network of islands connected by the sea, such a view resists the prewar Japanese imagination of a pure and continuous lineage, as well as the constraints of linear time and progressive historiography. Returning identity and historical experience to an impure, multiple, and dynamic state of unfinished movement allows these open experiences to mutually affirm one another, potentially realising the polycentric act of invention that Nakazono envisions.

Conclusion

In recent years, the "archipelago turn" has attracted sustained attention in the humanities and social sciences. The archipelagic perspective helps us imagine islands not as isolated units but as connected networks. It prompts a reconsideration of the fluidity of boundaries and the generative quality of identities. From this perspective, this paper conducts textual analyses of *Abang Adik* and The Stateless, focusing on the imagery of statelessness to highlight the complex significance of being "state-less" (the "absence" of nationality) in both identity and historical memory. *Abang Adik* not only depicts the humanitarian plight of stateless persons but also reveals how state apparatuses discipline individuals through singular identity classifications. The linguistic, regional, and cultural complexities of Malaysian Chinese communities in the film starkly contrast with the "absence" imposed by statelessness. Similarly, in The Stateless, Nakazono offers a sharp critique of postwar Japan, showing that even "scientific" measures such as psychiatric or racial tests cannot definitively establish what it means to be Japanese.

In both works, the "stateless" persons do not just signify the "absence" of nationality. Ong's experiences with migrant labour in Taiwan and Nakazono's wartime dilemmas in Peking offer cross-border perspectives that deconstruct the state's construction of nationality. This deconstruction, mediated through negation, continually triggers possibilities for historical rediscovery, rendering experience "in motion." Within this framework, Nakazono's concepts of the "non-Japanese Japanese" and the "non-Korean Korean" provide a pathway towards understanding statelessness as a medium of negation. Only through shared and reciprocal experiences can identity maintain its dynamism and sustain its "unfinished" status. As Hau'ofa emphasises, the "sea of islands" is a dynamic network of connections; identity and history should not be understood as fixed borders or static affiliations but as processes continuously generated and circulated. If identity and historical memory are treated as unfinished experiences, multiple identities Malay, Chinese, Japanese, and others can transcend fixed, relativist frameworks. Furthermore, by opening personal experiences, such as those related to Japanese culture, Chinese culture, the May 13 Incident, or wartime experiences, they can pave the path to a pluricentric creative movement.

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Notes

1 *Abang Adik* is the first Malaysian film to surpass 100 million NTD at the Taiwanese box office (Sun, 2024).

2 In addition to the officially reported number of documented migrants, the estimated number of undocumented or irregular migrant workers is roughly three times that of the documented migrant population (Yoshimura, 2018: 14).

3 In the film, Sister Money complains that it was the government that allowed them to come in but later wanted to drive them out. According to Wu (2023), during Malaysia's authoritarian era, the government brought in a large number of foreign workers to increase the electoral base, issuing them identity cards. However, after the elections, many of these workers were arrested and deported. To this day, the government has allowed recruitment agencies to bring in foreign workers to quickly address labour shortages, but it has not assisted these workers in obtaining legal documentation. Foreign workers are often already employed in Malaysia, but their documents are still stuck in bureaucratic processes, leaving them in illegal work and at risk of being arrested at any moment.

4 See Department of Statistics Malaysia. https://open.dosm.gov.my/data- catalogue/population_malaysia/. Accessed October 24, 2025.

5 Chinese people were often regarded as bandits or spies and were either executed immediately or subjected to forced labour. When the Japanese army occupied Singapore, many Chinese people were persecuted and many were massacred, as they were suspected of being anti-Japanese resistance fighters or communists.

6 The protagonist's real name is Shimoe Shigemitsu (下江重光), which literally conveys the meaning of regaining light."

7 The biggest market in 1890s were Central Market, Pudoh Market, and North Market (Ibrahim 2018).

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