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Making Inroads into a Taboo Subject: Film Production by Malaysian Chinese

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Abstract

This is a study of a sensitive subject seen in the context of the national and ethnic identities of the Malaysian Chinese community. Through the medium of the movie, a Malaysian filmmaker currently living and working in Taiwan explores his "multi-layered" identities based on his experiences and encounters as well as those of sections of the Chinese community. Films about the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) is a politically taboo subject in Malaysia. Drawing on an analysis of a film entitled *Absent Without Leave* directed by the filmmaker, this study begins by examining his self-identities in the larger international context. Textual analysis is then used to examine the representation of the MCP members in the film and their identities as the Chinese of Malaysia. The final part focuses on the film as a medium to portray personal narratives to throw light on certain untold episodes of the country's history.

Keywords: Malaysian Chinese films, *Absent Without Leave*, Malayan Communist Party, ethnic and national identities

Introduction

From its inception, Malaysian cinema is Malay-centric and films made in non-Malay languages are marginalised and considered as falling outside the category of national films. Chinese-language filmmakers generally produce, distribute, and seek affinity with the style of films made in other Chinese-speaking regions (Raju, 2008). Since 1980, several Malaysian Chinese filmmakers have moved to Taiwan and Hong Kong to pursue their careers (Bernards, 2015). Successful examples include Tsai Ming Liang who shifted to Taiwan and then to France, while celebrated actress Michelle Yeoh began her modelling career in Hong Kong and subsequently established a success career in Hong Kong movies. Her successes included

playing leading roles in Jacky Chan and James Bond movies and culminating in Ang Lee's box office hit *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* in 2000 (Barker, 2018). Several Malaysian Chinese filmmakers have followed their footsteps in recent years including Ho Wi Ding and Tan Seng Kiat in Taiwan, Edmund Yeoh in Japan, and James Wan in Hollywood.

This study examines Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Lau Kek Huat with special reference to his film *Absent Without Leave* in which he explores issues concerning the banned Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The discussion will centre on four aspects. The first deals with Chinese filmmaking in Malaysia, followed by a study of the collective experiences of Malaysian Chinese filmmakers in the international arena. The next aspect focuses on *Absent Without Leave* and the filmmaker's identity from the perspective of his personal experiences. This leads on to the final aspect that is based on the textual analysis of the narrative and the particular filmic language that is employed to address the issues of multiple identities of the MCP members as well as the search for the memory of the filmmaker's father and grandfather and, through his personal story, to remind the audience of the country's untold history and the idea of the nation.

Development of Chinese Filmmaking in Malaysia

The first film produced in Malaya was reported to be a Malay film entitled *Laila Majnum* that was shot in 1933 (Uhde & Ng, 2009). However, a study by Hee Wai Siam (2013) of a Chinese-language film called *New Friend* directed by Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Liu Bei Jin in 1927 was mentioned as the first locally produced film in Malaya and Singapore. It was pointed out that the contribution of the local Chinese-language films to the early history of the Malaya film industry had been overlooked. *New Friend* was overlooked possibly because it was a film in the Chinese language and its role was marginalised in the Malay-dominant film industry in Malaya and by researchers unfamiliar with Chinese films.

In the 1930s, the Shaw brothers (Runme and Run Run) who owned Tianyi Film Company in Shanghai started to explore the film market in Malaya. Shaw Brothers was the major distributor of films in Mandarin or the Cantonese dialect to its network of cinemas in Malaya and Singapore. These films relate to stories and historical episodes in China and were well-received by Chinese immigrants (Wong, 2018).

Shaw Brothers went on to establish the Malay Films Production (MFP) studio and introduced filming technology from China and talented directors from India to produce Malay-language films to cater to the local Malay audience (Nor Afidah, 2016). Featuring a surfeit of musical and dancing scenes adapted from the Indian films, these Malay films were popular among the Malay audience. Before its closure in 1967, MFP were to produce 162 films and ushered in the golden age of Malay films in Malaysia (Zheng, 2005).

Following the footsteps of Shaw Brothers, Cathay Organisation and filmmaking magnet Loke Wan Tho in 1953 collaborated with Keris Film Productions' Managing Director Ho Ah

Loke to establish a film production company called Cathay-Keris Studio. It soon emerged as the rival of Shaw Brothers' MFP in the Malay film industry. Among the Cathay-Keris productions were the 1957 box office hit *Pontianak* featuring a female vampire ghost. The film was later dubbed in Cantonese for the Hong Kong market, and even sold to an American television station to mark the first export of a local-made film overseas (Chia, 2018). Other successes followed when, in 1962, Cathay-Keris co-produced films with filmmakers from overseas. Among these works were *Your Shadow is Mine*, a collaboration with a French filmmaker, and *A Star of Hong Kong* with Cathay's Hong Kong studio. *A Star of Hong Kong* featured Hong Kong artist Yu Ming and Japanese leading actor Akira Takarada and was dubbed in English, Mandarin and Japanese. In 1963, Cathay-Keris produced its first overseas film, *Malam di Tokyo* (Night in Tokyo) that was shot in Japan. Unfortunately for the local film industry, these co-produced works met with little success (Chia, 2018).

In the early 1970s with the advent of television and the loss of the Indonesian market as the result of Indonesian Confrontation between 1963 and 1966,[1] as well as the implementation of Malay as the dominant language, Cathay-Keris ceased its film production operation (Chia, 2018).

Although early Malaysian Chinese-language films were focused on narrating the stories of Chinese immigrants in Malaysia, there were common infusions of Malay and the other local elements in these films especially in the use of Malay in the dialogue. Both Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris produce Malay films that paid better returns than Chinese-language films. However, their operations eventually folded up as the government adopted pro-Malay policies (Chia, 2018). In view of the history of co-production and circulation of Chinese films from Malaya and Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, these companies left a definite impact on the viewing habits of the Malaysian Chinese today.

With independence in 1957, the formation of Malaysia and the separation of Singapore followed in quick succession in 1963 and 1965 respectively. Following the riots involving mainly the Malay and Chinese communities after the Malaysian General Election on 13 May 1969, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 and shifted to a more ethnically-based policy that accorded preferential treatment to the Malays and other natives, who became known as "Bumiputera" (sons of the soil) to protect their interests. The Malay language and culture were given pride of place in official policies. The implementation of this policy was logically extended to the national film industry. Beginning in 1970, the Malaysian cinema industry entered the "Bumiputera" era (Chew, 2016).

The National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia (FINAS) was established in 1981 and tasked with the mandate to develop the local film industry. FINAS adopted a policy to develop "Malaysian cinema" with an emphasis on films shot in the Malay language but not in other languages (Balaraman, 2005). To encourage filmmaking, FINAS provided subsidies or rebates to the amount of RM150,000 upon application. To quality for these benefits, the

Malay language must feature in 60% of the dialogue in each film (Koay, 2010). All non-Malay-language films shown in local cinemas were to have Malay-language subtitles. The Malay-centric themes are now securely entrenched in Malaysian cinematography to portray Malaysian life and culture as locally produced Chinese-language films exited from the scene.

The 1980s witnessed the emigration of some Malaysian Chinese to overseas destinations such as Singapore, United States, Canada and Australia. Some found their way to Hong Kong and Taiwan, both dominated respectively by Cantonese- and Hokkien-speaking communities. Mandarin is also widely spoken in Taiwan and offers a linguistic environment rather similar to that of Chinese-settled areas in Malaysia (Bernard, 2015). Sarawak-born Tsai Ming Liang is among the best example who studied in Taiwan and subsequently remained to pursue a successful filmmaking career.

In 1991, Malaysia introduced the idea of Vision 2020 with the intention to transform the country into a developed economy (Mahathir, 1993). The adoption of high technology policies accelerated integration with globalization (Khoo, 2007). The entry of consumer digital video cameras encouraged a trend of independent low-budget filmmaking by several Malaysian Chinese by means of affordable digital camera and editing facilities. Among these independent filmmakers were Tan Chui Mui, James Lee, Ho Yu Hang and Liew Seng Tat. They attempted to release and screen their works by participating in various regional film festivals. Intensely conscious of social issues prevalent in Malaysia, filmmakers began to concentrate on subjects that touch on sensitive or even politically "incorrect" issues. For instance, Amir Muhammad's *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (*The Last Communist*, 2006) that portrayed the early life and legacy of Chin Peng, the exiled MCP leader, was banned from public exhibition. Other films address the anxieties of the newly emerging middle class, such as James Lee's *My Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004), or about everyday life such as Liew Seng Tat's *Flower in the Pocket* (2007) (Tilman, 2011). Several Malaysian independent films that have garnered awards in the international film festivals were not released in Malaysian cinemas because of censorship barrier and the non-commercial film style that have little appeal to the mass audience.

Independent filmmaking marks the resurrection of the Malaysian Chinese cinematography after a lapse of 40 years. This trend since 2000 is likened to the French New Wave Movement,[2] but was short-lived as the films are considered too artistic to appeal to an audience accustomed to action-packed commercial films (Mayer, 2010).

The Malaysian film market continues to be ethnically and linguistically fragmented into English, Malay, Tamil and Chinese segments. The options that are open to Malaysian Chinese filmmakers are limited. They may accept the reality of the limited domestic Chinese language film market, engage in the Malay film production, or to seek opportunities overseas. Several Malaysian Chinese filmmakers have thus opted for prospects to develop their careers specially in Taiwan and Hong Kong. From 2000 there was a trend of seeking employment in China as state-owned media companies are liberalised through a privatization policy (Thomas, 2018). There is a proposed special category of residency visa for "Overseas Chinese" who wish to

work in China (Luo & Li, 2018). One may cite Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Tan Chui Mui in her work in China toco-operate with prominent Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhang Ke. Others who are based in Taiwan to advance their filmmaking careers include Tan Seng Kiat, Ho Wi Ding and Lau Kek Huat.

The discussion that follows will draw attention to Lau Kek Huat and his film *Absent Without Leave* within the context of Malaysian Chinese studies and specifically to examine the ecology of the Malaysian Chinese-language film industry and the narrative content of the film.

Chinese Cinematography in the International Arena

In 1993, Malaysian novelist-cum-poet Chen Hui Hua (1993), in a discussion of the world Chinese-language literature, had employed the phrase "*Huayu Feng*" (Chinese language style) to which was associated the term "Sinophone" to highlight the literary works by Malaysian Chinese poets who use Mandarin, Chinese dialects and words of English, Malay and Tamil origins. This Malaysian literature, according to Chen, is idiosyncratic because it does not use standard Chinese as a literary medium. These literary works are also not considered as Malaysian literature which is written only in the Malay language. Chinese-language films of Malaysia are in a similar situation (Hee, 2018).

Films produced by Chinese filmmakers often experiment with cross linguistic and cultural themes free from the confines of national boundaries (Yue & Khoo, 2014). The study of this genre of Chinese cinematography would require conceptual tools that are capable of adequately addressing the reality of trans-lingual or trans-local filmmaking. Several scholars have resorted to "Sinophone Studies" in the discussion of Malaysian or Singaporean films and cinema. Audrey Yue (2014, 2015) discussed the connection between queer cinema within and outside China by looking at China's foremost gay filmmaker Cui Zi'en's films and examined Wong Kar-Wai's films that feature multi-accents and peripheral locations, highlights differences and heterogeneities to the singularity of China and Chinese-centrism, as well as challenge British post-colonial, Chinese post-socialist and Hong Kong neoliberal hegemonies. Christopher Lupke (2016) looks at Hou Hsiao-hsien works as well as the filmmaker who dwells in the contested terrain of political space between state and region and between national culture and transnational identity. Olivia Khoo (2014) looks at the sounds of language in the films of Singapore's leading contemporary documentary filmmaker, Tan Pin Pin, in relation to nationalism. Melissa Chan (2017) advocates "Sinophone Burmese" as an alternative to "Burmese Chinese" touncover different modes of subjectivity in a marginalised area through the analysis of Midi Z's films and to question the understanding of Chineseness as a shared identity unaffected by local differences.

These studies do not refer to an identifiable nation state or ethnic group as its origin but connotes a transcultural and imagined community consolidated through the circulation of Sinitic language cultural production (Wong, 2018). The emphasis is placed on languages

and not the ethnicity or race of the person (Shih, 2007). In this case, Malaysian Chinese may neither be understood as a Malaysian identified with a state nor a Chinese with an ethnic identity.

The next section is an account of the filmmaking experience of Lau Kek Huat, a Malaysian Chinese living in Taiwan, and his film *Absent Without Leave* (2016). The discussion will be framed within the context of Chinese diaspora studies specifically with reference to the ecology of the Malaysian Chinese-language film industry and the narrative content of the film.

Lau Kek Huat and *Absent Without Leave*

Born in Sitiawan, Malaysia, into a third generation Fuzhou family, Lau Kek Huat left Malaysia to work as a primary school teacher in Singapore for four years and in 2006 before moving to Taiwan to study filmmaking at the National Taiwan University of Arts. He has remained in Taipei since then to pursue his filmmaking career. His efforts have yielded several short fictional films which led him to garner several awards in international film festivals. To him, Taiwan provided the opportunities and freedom in filmmaking (Lau, 2015). A film produced in Malaysia and which touches on sensitive issues would face obstacles in the censorship process. The target audience too was severely limited. Like several other Malaysians, breaking away from the constraints of the national boundary has allowed him to release his spontaneous creativity in filmmaking. Through *Absent Without Leave*, Lau makes inroads into a taboo subject concerning the recent past of his home country. This film made the rounds in the international circuit before finally overcoming many obstacles to reach the Malaysian audience for a brief period via the online platform.

Lau's move to Taiwan and his filmmaking experience among the co-workers in China, Hong Kong and Thailand exposed him to cultural nuances and dissimilarities that aroused in him a consciousness of multiple and flexible identities in different contexts and circumstances. To accommodate diverse experiences and situations, he began to recognise the fluidity of his multi-layered identities that was anchored more on linguistic rather than ethnic or national affinities. Operating away from his homeland provided a setting in which nationality has lost its practical significance, and in which the dialogues in his films could break free from the identification with his nationality of his ethnicity. Instead he was unconstrained in the use of an eclectic mix of Mandarin and dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese and other languages including Malay, English and Tamil in his films to display the localised cultures and experiences associated with diverse dialect communities and to explore various Malaysian subjects in their historical, social and political contexts.

Absent Without Leave is a narrative based on the experiences of former MCP members who were engaged in anti-Japanese resistance movement in Malaya from the 1930s. The MCP role in contributing to the anti-Japanese resistance during the Japanese Occupation of 1941-1945 was acknowledged by the restored British authorities after the Japanese surrender. It soon

fought for independence from British rule. Following isolated incidents of violence, a state of emergency was declared in Malaya in 1948. The party was banned and sparked a spate of arrests and killings of suspected party members (Short, 1975). Members of the MCP were branded as "terrorists" who were accused of threatening the security of the land. Rural Chinese were re-settled in New Villages that were sited at the outskirts of towns to segregate the people from the insurgents.[3] The threat was eventually contained and the state of emergency was lifted in 1960. Former MCP members lived in exile in south Thailand. When the former leader, Chin Peng, passed away in 2013, his remains were denied entry to Malaysia for burial (Lee, 2013).

Despite having gained independence for more than six decades, the communist issue is still a taboo and sensitive subject in Malaysian public discourse. Several films have been inspired by the issue, such as *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (*The Last Communist*, 2006) by Malaysian filmmaker Amir Muhammad and *New Villages* (2013) by Malaysian filmmaker Wong Kiew Lit. Both were banned from public screening in Malaysia. *Absent Without Leave* (2016) was barred by the censorship board and was forced to seek a platform outside the country in international film festivals in Busan, Singapore and Taipei. To overcome censorship, the film was uploaded online for a couple of months in 2016 for viewing on cyberspace.

The "Imagined Home" and "Displaced" ex-MCP Members

Absent Without Leave recounted the life of former MCP members in Malaya prior to their deportation to China which took place after the declaration of emergency. They reminisced about their past in Malaya with nostalgic thoughts of the food such as durian and curry. In a way, they had returned to their ancestral "homeland" but missed the land where they had once lived and identified with and had defended it against Japanese aggression. They presented a collective portrayal of the sense of loss and displacement and an innate urge to associate with the land that is no longer their home. Despite the necessity to identify with their "motherland" or China, this identity has been coloured by their past experiences of living in Malaya. The prevalent feeling was one of a "fluid" identity that is independent of the influence of territorial loyalties.

Apart from the small Malay and Indian presence, the MCP has until today been perceived as a "Chinese external force" and the MCP movement as an insurrection (Kuan, 2018). Until today, politicians are not shy of branding certain local Chinese organisations as "communist" if this suited their purpose (Kuan, 2018). However, a scene featuring former MCP members performing a Malay traditional dance in a gathering in south Thailand was a sign of the appreciation of the multi-ethnic culture of Malaya and the memory of their land of adoption.

Absent Without Leave begins with a scene showing a traditional Chinese lantern rising into the night sky. This scene has been interpreted to symbolise the "floating" identities and "homelessness" of former MCP members (Kuan, 2018). The film also features the lyric of an Indonesian folk song known as *Terang Boelan* [4] (*Bright Moon*) and generally recognised as

the lyric of the Malaysia national anthem. One explanation was that it showed the sensitivity of former MCP members to respect the nationalist sentiment of the national anthem and at the same time to associate themselves with land and the life that they had led in the past (Kuan, 2018). Alternatively, the scene may be viewed as an attempt to avoid linking the national anthem with "communism" and thereby to pre-empt any form of misconceptions. It may also be understood as the filmmaker's effort to de-emphasise the idea of "nationalism", or the filmmaker's insinuation of the lack of recognition for the sacrifices and contributions of the MCP's fight for dependence.

On the key issue of the national identity of Malaysian Chinese, one of the scenes queried over what should be done to become a real Malaysian. Although the query was raised in relation to the sacrifice of a party that was politically rejected, it may also be argued that the filmmaker himself was seeking answers to the unequal treatment accorded to Chinese and others from that of the dominant ethnic community.

Another important issue revolved around the concept of recognition through the role of the "father". Lau recounted his father's absence in the family, a fact that he attributed to his father losing his own father who was an anti-Japanese fighter. He too confessed his absence from home for nine years without making any contact with his family. The role of the father or the patriarch was treated as a metaphor of the nation state. Hence the title of the film, *Absent Without Leave*, that alludes to the absence of the so called "homeland" to former MCP members as well as the "disappearance" of the party's contribution to national history. Voicing his views in an interview (Lau, 2015), he asserted that in an autocratic system of government, the "absence" of the MCP from national history as the theme of the film is related to other things that are also "absent" such as that of justice[5] and equal treatment for all sections of the population.[6]

The Entanglement of Personal and National Histories

Through *Absent Without Leave*, filmmaker also travels a journey in search of the memory of his grandfather who had joined MCP to defend Malaya from Japanese aggression. It is a personal story that is inseparable from political controversy because of the negative image of MCP. Lau's initial intention was to uncover the mysterious identity of his grandfather about whose life the family was silent. In an interview (Lee, 2017), Lau confided that he had wanted to film the subject that he was afraid to confront and, more importantly, the subject that was a family taboo.

The film features a scene in which Lau's father and some comrades were burning paper money in a plantation. The act was a depiction of an almost universal Chinese cultural practice of respect to the dead and to connect with the audience of the day. The plantation too was believed to be where Lau's grandfather was killed during the guerrilla war, symbolically for dying in defence of the land, and also where Lau's father used to play when he was young to serve as an episode of his personal memory. By blurring the vision between the personal and

the national, the filmmaker tactfully resorted to the rhetoric of the "personal" to speak about a forbidden aspect of national history, while at the same time to shift the focus of the film away from a strictly national interpretative context.

The filmmaking process had enabled Lau to uncover pieces of memory of his grandfather and his sacrifices for the family and the land. Featuring archival footages of the war and the voices of former MCP members, Lau had intended that, by recounting the stories of his grandfather and his fellow comrades, to rationalise the loss of thousands of lives that was attributed to the fight for independence. It was perhaps the appearance of former MCP members that led to its prohibition for public viewing in Malaysia (*The Sun Daily*, 2017).

That Lau was against supporting communist ideologies did not help the film to break down the wall that blocked the voice of the "terrorists" from being heard. The film had in effect reconstructed an untold episode of historical memory and had aroused social consciousness on how this history had been re-told or silenced. But viewed as going against the official sentiment, the authorities had banned the film from public screening and had also attempted legally to stop the viewing of the film online.

Conclusion

Through an examination of Malaysian Chinese cinematography, this study is as much a reflection of Lau's transnational filming experience as his own account of how he sees himself in the context of a network of transnational, national, and local identities. The theme is that of the use of biased official policies that has led sections of the Chinese community to view themselves as "outsiders" and some opting to seek opportunities outside the country. *Absent Without Leave* is an attempt to remind the audience, through footages of formal MCP members currently dispersed in parts of China, Hong Kong, Thailand and Malaysia, of a past episode of national history, and thereby to provide a platform for academic discourse on the "Communist" issue in post-colonial territories.

The General Election of 2018 saw the overthrow of the Malay-dominated government for the first time in 60 years. Little has changed in the broad policies on the film industry, though certain rules seem to have been relaxed. A Chinese Malaysian film *Banglasia*,[7] directed by Namewee and previously banned from screening due to touching sensitive issue, was approved for public screening in Malaysia after the change of government. Also, a Freedom Film Festival [8] was being held without much difficulty. The hope was that the more relaxed mood would encourage greater creativity in films as they present concepts and discussions of Malaysian life and history from different perspectives. A final note, however, is the sudden collapse of the new government in March 2020 and replaced by one dominated by Malay-based political parties. Whether this will usher in any change in film censorship for better or for worse is still too early to say.

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Notes

1 Indonesian Confrontation refers to the violent conflict which stemmed from Indonesia's opposition to the formation of Malaysia that was being formed by merging the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak.

2 French New Wave Movement is a French film movement that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. It is believed to have begun when filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut made the film *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (The 400 Blows) with a highly artistic film style, and subsequently led to the rejection of traditional mainstream French cinema (Stam, 2000).

3 New Villages have become a permanent feature of the Malaysian cultural landscape and largely inhabited by Malaysian Chinese. Many of the original wooden houses have been rebuilt with bricks and tiles.

4 In 2009, Indonesia officials alleged that Malaysia had adapted the folk song as its national anthem, causing a controversy amidst political disputes between the two countries (Wan Abu Bakar, 2018).

5 Under the previous National Front (Barisan National) government, several "criminal" cases were left unsolved. Among these were the death of Teoh Beng Hock, who was brought to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) for questioning about allegations of corruption but was found dead the next morning near the MACC premises. The Royal Commission of Inquiry concluded that Teoh had committed suicide but Teoh's family have rejected the findings and insisted Teoh was murdered (Tasneem, 2019). Another prominent case involved a Mongolian national Altantuya who was murdered by C-4 explosives in 2006. A close associate to former Prime Minister Najib Razak and two policemen were accused and sentenced to death but later on acquitted. The reasons behind the case are still unclear (*SCMP*, 2019).

6 Lau Kek Huat released a new documentary film entitled *The Tree Remembers* in 2019 which focuses on the native peoples of Malaysia.

7 *Banglasia* was made in 2013. But 31 scenes were cut by the Malaysia Film Censorship Board to seriously affect the film content. The producer decided to withdraw the film from screening (*The Hive Asia*, 2019).

8 Freedom Film Festival is organised by Freedom Film Network, a non-profit-organisation which is established to support and develop social documentary filmmaking within the context of freedom of expression and values contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in Malaysia (freedomfilm.my/about). Lau Kek Huat discloses on Facebook that the film festival has been under threat, arrest, and surveillance for 17 years (Lau Kek Huat Facebook).

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