

Doctoral Dissertation

**A Study of Identity, Aesthetics and
Politics in Sinophone Malaysian
Cinema since the 2000's**

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A Study of Identity, Aesthetics and Politics in Sinophone Malaysian Cinema since the 2000's

Chew Hui Yan

Abstract

By using Sinophone studies as theoretical framework, and in conjunction with diaspora studies, accented cinema, this research studies the contemporary Sinophone Malaysian films since 2000 in relation to Malaysia's socio-historical, and political contexts.

This research focuses on four dimensions. First, it examines the Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers' articulation of their own identity and how they address the issue of identity through the films. Second, I use textual analysis to study the place-based culture and experience of the Sinophone Malaysian communities and the other ethnic groups in Malaysia as they are portrayed through the films' narrative and style. Third, I explore the process of production and distribution of Sinophone Malaysian films that transcends various Sinophone communities beyond Malaysia using the critical frameworks of globalization. Fourth, I discuss the contribution of diaspora studies, accented cinema, minoritarian and cosmopolitanism as complementary concepts to Sinophone studies in studying the Sinophone Malaysian cinema and its interconnection with other Sinophone communities.

There are five chapters in total. Chapter one focuses on how "Chineseness" is employed by Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan as a strategy to draw the local Sinophone audience to watch his local-made Sinitic language films as well as how his films debunk the myth of multiculturalism and the view of harmonious ethnic relation as "imagined nation" through two films *The Journey (2014)* and *Ola Bola (2016)*. Chapter two investigates the interrelation between Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers who make Malay language films and Malay filmmaker who makes Sinophone film through three case studies: *Fly By Night (2018)* by Zahir Omar, *Lelaki Harapan Dunia (Men Who Save the World, 2014)* by Liew Seng Tat and *PASKAL: The Movie (2018)* by Adrian Teh. Chapter three examines Taiwan-based Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker Lau Kek Huat with reference to his trilogy: *Absent Without Leave (2016)*, *The Tree Remembers*

(2019) and *Boluomi* (2019) in which he explores issues concerning the banned Malayan Communist Party (MCP), racial riot, ethnic minority and the special rights given to the Malay. Chapter four scrutinizes the female perspective and aesthetic in relation to the sociopolitical, historical, economic context in the postmodern Malaysia through the works *Love Conquers All* (2006) and *Letter from the South* (2013) by filmmaker, Tan Chui Mui, who is one of the pioneers in the independent filmmaking industry in Malaysia. Chapter five contrasts two Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers Edmund Yeo and Namewee in order to tease out the tensions and contradictions latent in cosmopolitanism. The first part of the chapter studies the border-crossing experience of Yeo from the periphery to the center of Asia, and analyses Yeo's film *Aqerat* (2017) in relation to both localized and globalized contexts. The second part of this chapter focuses on how Namewee contests the Malay-prioritized nationalism and concomitantly deconstruct China-centrism idea by analyzing dimensions such as localization, multiculturalism and cultural hybridization in his films, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) and *Banglasia* (2013).

Keywords: accented cinema, Chineseness, identity politics, diaspora studies, Sinophone studies, Sinophone Malaysian cinema

2000 年以降の華語語系マレーシア映画におけるアイデンティティ、美学、政治

周蔚延

論文要旨

本研究は、マレーシアの社会歴史のおよび政治的文脈を参照しながら、2000 年以降の華語語系現代マレーシア映画について、華語語系（サイノフォン）概念と隣接するディアスポラ、アクセント映画概念を擦り合わせながら考察する。

具体的には次の 4 つの側面に着目した。まず、華語語系マレーシアの映画製作者自身によるアイデンティティの語りに着目し、さらに映画を通じてアイデンティティの問題がどのように対処されるかを調査した。次に、マレーシアの場所性に根差した華語語系コミュニティとその他の民族グループの文化と経験が映画の物語と美学を通してどのように表象されるかをテキスト分析から明らかにした。第 3 に、マレーシア内の華語語系映画の制作と配給のプロセスに着目し、国外のさまざまな華語語系コミュニティを越境的に横断する循環現象をトランスナショナリズムおよびグローバリゼーションの言説に引き寄せて検討した。最後に、マレーシアの華語語系映画とその他の華語語系地域の映画との相互関係に着目し、ディアスポラ研究、アクセント映画研究、少数派（マイノリティアン）およびコスモポリタニズムなどの理論的概念が華語語系概念を補完する側面を持つことを明らかにした。

本稿は 5 つの章から成る。第 1 章では、『君はずっといる（一路有你）』（2014 年）と『オラ・ボラ（Ola Bola）』（2016 年）の 2 本の映画を調査対象とし、華語語系映画製作者のチウ・ケングアン（周青元）がどのようにして「華人性」を戦略的に用いて華語語系映画への在マレーシア華人観客の動員を図ったかを分析し、さらに彼の映画がどのようにして多文化主義と調和のとれた民族関係に下支えされた「想像上の国家」の神話を暴くかを考察した。

第 2 章では、ザヒル・オマールの『非常盗/Fly By Night』（2018 年）、リュウ・センタット（劉成達）の『世界を救った男たち』（2014 年）とアドリアン・テイ（鄭建国）の『パスカル』（2018 年）を調査対象として、マレー語の映画を制作する華人系映画製作者と華語語系の映画を製作するマレー系映画製作者の相互関係について調査した。

第 3 章では、台湾を拠点とするマレーシアの華人系映画製作者であるラウ・ケクフアット（廖克發）の『不即不離—マラヤ共産党員だった祖父の思い出—』（2016 年）、『斧は忘れても、木は覚えている』（2016 年）と『ボルオミ（菠蘿蜜）』（2019 年）三部作で描か

れるマラヤ共産党、民族暴動、少数民族、およびマレー系の人々に与えられた特別な権利などのテーマを分析した。

第 4 章では、マレーシアの独立系映画製作業界の開拓者の一人である女性映画製作者タン・チュイムイ（陳翠梅）の作品『愛は全てに打ち勝つ（愛征服一切/Love Conquers All）』（2006 年）と『南からの手紙（南方來的信）』（2013 年）を対象として、ポスト近代マレーシアにおける社会政治的、歴史的、経済的文脈に即した美学と映画撮影術（シネマトグラフィー）を分析した。

第 5 章では、コスモポリタニズム概念を用いてエドモンド・楊とネームウィー（黃明志）からなる 2 人の華語語系の映画製作者の経歴と作品を分析した。前半ではアジアの周辺から中心部までの国境を越えた経歴を持つ楊の短編映画や長編映画『アケラット-ロヒンギャの祈り』（2017 年）を局地化とグローバリゼーションの両方面から分析した。後半では『ナシレマ 2.0』（2011 年）と『バンガラシア』（2013 年）を対象として、局地化、多文化主義、文化的混濁性の映画中での表象に着目して、これらの映画がどのようにしてマレー優先のナショナリズムと「中国中心主義」の双方に対して同時に異議を唱えるかを分析した。

キーワード：華語語系研究、マレーシア映画、華人性、アイデンティティ政治、ディアスポラ研究、アクセント映画

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Introduction

0.1 Research Motives

In my master thesis, I wrote about films made by the late Malaysian filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad before she passed away in 2009. She was renowned for featuring characters of different ethnicities speaking in multiple languages in her films and often focused on sensitive issues such as inter-ethnic relationship, religion, social inequality, as well as speaking on behalf of the minority groups despite being of Malay decent. Yasmin's works challenged the conventions of the "Malaysian film" which typically only used the Malay language by depicting societal taboos and injustice on the cinematic screen although there were critics that condemned her films as derogating the Malay culture. Yasmin had also played an important role in founding the Malaysian New Wave in the beginning of year 2000 when a group of indie-filmmakers, including Yasmin herself worked together to make films with low budget but would send them to multiple international film festivals. Their activities paved the way for locally made films to be brought onto the world stage (Yuen, 2015).

As a politically sovereign nation-state crafted by European colonialism, Malaysia is ethnically constructed (Loo, 2007; Cheah, 2005). In the post-independent state, people of different ethnicities were separated into communal blocks namely the Malay, the Chinese, the Indian, and Others. Likewise, the Malaysian film industry is highly compartmentalized based on ethnicity and language too. There are Malay language films, Chinese language films and Indian language films being produced within the state. The audience's viewing habits can also be categorized based on the film language, wherein, the Malay mainly watches Malay language films; the Chinese watches Chinese language films as well as Cantonese films from Hong Kong; whereas the Indian watches Tamil films and Bollywood films, not to mention the Hollywood films are well received by all the audiences. The local film production companies and distributors specify on making and distributing films based on language, such as Woohoo Pictures centres on making Chinese-language films while SKOP Productions mainly produces Malay films. Lim T.P,

the Chief Executive Officer of Infinitus Entertainment Limited¹ points out that film language is the biggest concern in local film marketing. The language decides which ethnic group is the target audience and which television channel and radio station to approach for the film publicity and promotion. Malaysian filmmakers Joel Soh and Adrian Teh echo Lim by adding that, the Malay audience has higher tolerance than other ethnic groups as they can accept local films shot in Chinese language or even Tamil language. The Malay audience understands the fact that there is no way to compare a local film to a Hollywood film, so they are willing to watch the films shot in other languages in the cinema as long as the films are dubbed with subtitles. However, Chinese audiences are not so interested in going to the cinema to watch a Malay language or Tamil language film (Liew, 2019)

In a state in which Malay language is given special status, films shot in other languages are not given much attention and support from the government. The former Malaysian Film Producers Association president, Ahmad Puad Onah once said: “Unfortunately, Malaysian-made films in other languages don't get similar incentives...” (Meor, 2010). Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that these films should be overlooked for their contributions to the overall cinematic output of Malaysia, since they have been taking part and winning awards in the international film festivals.

For the reasons mentioned above, my doctoral thesis focuses on the Malaysian Chinese language cinema. There has been a lot of research discussing the Chinese language films from (East) Asia, particularly from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong as well as those films made by Chinese diasporic filmmakers living in Western countries such as North America. However, not much has focused on the Chinese language films from the Southeast Asia region.

This in spite of Malaysia being home to Southeast Asia's largest ethnic Chinese population of about 6.53 million people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020), more

¹ Infinitus Entertainment Limited engages in film production, film project management and television project investment. It is a subsidiary company based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia but under control and ownership of Focus Group Holdings Limited which is formed by Hong Kong popular artist Andy Lau.

than the total population of multi-ethnic Singapore estimated at 5.89million (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2020). Likewise, Malaysia produces the highest number of Chinese language films each year in the Southeast Asia region. For instance, the country produced about 20 Chinese language films in 2019 (FINAS, 2020) whereas Singapore had only 6 Chinese language films released in the same year (Singapore Film Commission, 2020). Therefore, I find it necessary to study the Malaysian Chinese language cinema, especially by taking into consideration how the Chinese language cinema develops within the Malay-dominated nation as well as engages with the audience outside of Malaysia.

Among the significant research regarding Malaysian Chinese language cinema are such as works by scholar Hee Wai Siam, who writes about Malaysian Chinese language films within the Sinophone studies framework. He released a book titled *Post-Malaysian Chinese-language Film: Accented style, Sinophone and Auteur Theory (2018)*, that discusses Malaysian Chinese language films after 2000 within the framework of Sinophone studies in conjunction with accented style and auteur theory. This book has inspired me in developing this research. Hee has also written other journal papers regarding Malaysian Chinese language cinema which he contends Sinophone studies can also be applied to study the Chinese language films in Singapore and Malaya in the 1930's as the anti-colonialism and anti-nationalism were strong among the Chinese community in Malaya. He also studies the Malaysian independent filmmaking within the framework of Sinophone studies.

Another Malaysian scholar, Kuan Chee Wah writes about national identity and ethnicity and examines how the Chinese language cinema survives under the Malay dominant filmmaking policies within the national boundary.

From the National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations in Taiwan, there are several Master and Doctoral theses about Malaysian Chinese language cinema, such as *Malaysian Chinese cinema and identity politics: Implications from Chiu Keng Guan's Films* (Phooi, 2016), which is about the representation of Chinese identity in Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan's films and *Exploring National Imagination and Chinese Identity in Malaysia: On Political Representations* in Wee Meng Chee's Works

(Ng, 2016) which discusses national imagination from the “Chinese” perspective through Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Wee Meng Chee’s films.

There is also research which discusses Malaysian Chinese language cinema in the transnational context by Raju as well as research focused on the independent productions and censorship within the Southeast Asia context by Baumgartel, Tilman and Saw Tiong Guan.

After a careful review of the research so far, it is clear that there are some gaps in studies of Malaysian Chinese language cinema, namely in the different approach that have been used. In this research, I take departure from the theoretical framework of Sinophone studies to study the Malaysian Chinese language cinema, however, I will redefine Chineseness in a discursive way in order to study the complexities of the socio-political structure and background of Malaysia. Since this research primarily focuses on contemporary Malaysian cinema after the year 2000, I pay particularly close attention to the policies and changes in the political structural after the change of government in 2018.

0.2 Research Background

0.2.1 *New Friend* (1927), the first Chinese language film in Malaya

Most studies on film in Malaysia (or “Malaya”, as it was called before independence) that focus on cinema’s early years in the country refer to the Malay film, titled “*Laila Majnum*” which was made in the year 1933 as the first Malayan film. For instance, Canadian scholar Uhde Jan and Singapore scholar Ng Yvonne write about this film in “*Latent Images: Film in Singapore*” (2009), one of the most comprehensive works that focuses on the Singapore and Malaya film history (Hee, 2013).

In 2013, Singaporean Chinese scholar Hee Wai Siam wrote an article about a Chinese language film, titled “新客” (New Friend) produced by Malaysian Chinese Low Pui Kim (1902-1959) in the year of 1927 as the first Sinitic language film as well as the first local produced film in Malaya and Singapore². The film which revolves around the

² Malaya became independent in 1957 whereas Singapore was part of the Malaya peninsula until it became independent as a sovereign country in 1965. So *New Friend* can be seen as Singapore as well as Malaya first film.

living experience of a Chinese immigrant in Singapore, is a collaborative production between Malaya and Singapore. The film uses Chinese Mandarin as the main film language, but also utilizes the Malay language and culture, such as in scenes featuring Malay traditional dances.

Hee (2013a) criticizes Uhde and Ng for overlooking the contributions of the local Sinophone films to the formative period of Malaya's film history. According to Hee, the title of the first Malay film should be given to *New Friend*, a film produced 6 years before *Laila Majnum*, has been negated and marginalized within the Malay-dominant film industry due to the film's use of Chinese as its primary language. Scholars have overlooked the film as well, given that any relevant information about the films is only in Sinitic languages. In 2019, Uhde and Ng released a new book titled "*New Friend, The Story of Singapore and Malaya's First Feature Film*", sponsored by Singapore Film Commission. In this book, they finally recognize *New Friend* as Singapore and Malaya's first film.

The incident reveals how Sinophone films during the early period have been overlooked in representing Malaya by scholars until the studies of Sinitic language films become prevalent. This has led to the rise on the studies of Sinophone cinema in Malaya and Malaysia.

0.2.2 Malaysian Chinese Language (*huayu*) Films

In recent years, Malaysian films shot in Chinese language are referred to as Chinese language films (*huayu dianying*). *Huayu* does not only refer to the standard Chinese Mandarin, but includes Chinese dialects as well as a mixture of local languages such as Malay, English and Tamil. *Huayu* referred to here is not the same as the standard Chinese Mandarin "*hanyu*" of China.

Chinese scholar Sheldon Lu (2014) proposed the term "Chinese Language Cinema" to describe the films that predominantly feature Chinese dialects and are made in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong as well as those produced through transnational collaborations. The term is widely used in academia as a "comprehensive term that covers all the local, national, regional, transnational, diasporic, and global cinemas relating to the Chinese language" (Lu & Yeh, 2005, p.2). The notion of "Chinese

language film” has in fact a longer history if we look at the “*Nanyang*³” area (Chung, 2003; Wang, 1992) as in 1950, Yi Shui, a film director of Cathay Studio based in the Malaya Peninsula had already coined the term “Chinese language film” to refer to the films that featured Chinese Mandarin as well as Chinese dialects such as Cantonese and Minnanese films imported from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Hee, 2013a).

However, in the English speaking world, the word “Chinese” has been understood to refer to people from China, “*zhongguoren*”, or the standard Chinese Mandarin language “*hanyu*”. “Chinese” becomes limited when it is used to study the Chinese community and Chinese language cinema in Malaysia where the languages used are not limited to standard Chinese Mandarin, but includes other Chinese dialects and local languages.

0.2.3 Review of Sinophone studies

In 2013, America-based Taiwanese scholar Shih Shu-Mei introduced “Sinophone studies” as an attempt to overcome the limitation of the term “Chinese language”. Shih proposes Sinophone studies is the study of Sinitic language communities and a network of cultural production places outside China where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has taken place for several centuries (Shih, 2007, p.4). Sinophone spaces are scattered around the world, and differ from place to place, constantly undergoing transformations that reflect local needs while in dialogue with other cultures of that specific location (p.30). Sinophone studies engages with new sites of localization, multilingualism and difference that have emerged in Chinese film studies. Significantly, these localisations are not fixed geographically; rather they are multidirectional (Hee, 2019).

Sinophone studies does not refer to an identifiable nation-state or ethnic group as its origin but connotes a transcultural imagined community consolidated through the circulation of cultural productions in Sinitic languages (Wong, 2018). The emphasis on language, “foregrounds not the ethnicity or race of the person but the languages he or she speaks in either vibrant or vanishing communities of those languages” (Shih, 2007, p.30).

³ The “*Nanyang*” literally means the “South Ocean”, refers to the region reached by earlier Chinese migrants via the South of China, in particular the Southeast Asian countries.

Shih developed the idea of Sinophone based on the idea of Francophone studies, which refers to the cultural productions such as cinema and literature in French-speaking colonies outside the sovereign state of France (Shih, 2007, p.xi). In turn, Sinophone studies use a similar model as Francophone studies to look at the Sinitic language communities outside China. Nonetheless, despite Sinophone studies adopting the strategy of counter-hegemonic formations in its stance against the ideas of China-centric or Han-centric, it is still bound up in the idea of “anti-China-centrism”, which conforms to a different kind of binary: that of the Sinophone versus non-Sinophone, positing China as the center while the Sinophone communities outside China are considered the periphery. For instance, Lu (2008) asks if a Minnanese dialect user in Fujian Province under direct Chinese rule within the Chinese nation-state feels less frustrated than the Taiyu dialect user from Taiwan. This proposes some of the insufficiencies of Sinophone studies, where seeing China as a monolithic entity—despite its population of 1.3 billion people—and excluding it altogether can be problematic. Lu also questions whether this exclusion of China in Sinophone studies is politically motivated in lieu of the Chinese government’s policies toward Hong Kong and Taiwan.

David Wang Der-Wei (2018) also criticizes Shih’s idea of Sinophone studies, given its framing of Sinitic languages is limited to study the localized cultural experience of a specific Sinophone community without regard to other ethnic communities in the same space. For instance, if we are going to examine the complexity of the Sinitic languages used in the Sinophone community in Malaysia, the “others” (non-Sinophone), which Wang refers to as “xenophone” should also be taken into account.

Sinophone studies is also criticized for its rejection of the “Chinese diaspora” in its promotion of “a universalizing category founded on a unified ethnicity, culture, language, as well as place of origin or homeland” (Shih, 2007, p. 23-24). According to Shih, diaspora studies tends to overlook the differences and distinctions of each diaspora community in the host country. As she contends, Sinophone experiences vary from community to community and from generation to generation, and thus “diaspora” has expiration, as the second and third generations are become more integrated to the local (p.185). Chinese diaspora will sooner or later adapt to their new settlement and the

diasporic identity will end when the diaspora become legal citizens of the new settlement. However, scholar Tan Eng Keong (2013) suggests diaspora studies would be useful in understanding the process of being geographically “in place” and “displaced” within the context of globalization and transnationalism, also an important element in Sinophone studies.

0.2.4 Previous Sinophone Cinema Research

Sinophone studies is not centered solely on Sinitic language communities. The Sinophone has also been helpful in studies of literary works as well as visual media. Shih (2007, p.32) notes the importance of cultural productions to understanding the Sinophone, noting that “the visual media through which the Sinophone is more clearly articulated are the cinema and television”.

In turn, there has been a wealth of research that involves the study of film through the lens of Sinophone studies. For example, Audrey Yue uses Sinophone studies in discussing the connection between queer cinema within and outside China by looking at China’s foremost gay filmmaker Cui Zi’en’s films (2012) as well as proposing Wong Kar-Wai’s films that feature multi-accented and peripheral locations, introduce differences and heterogeneities to the idea of a singular China and Chinese-centrism, while at the same time challenge British postcolonial, Chinese post-socialist and Hong Kong neoliberal hegemonies (2016). 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. Lupke Christopher (2016) looks at Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien works as well as the filmmakers who dwell in the contested terrain of political space between state and region and between national culture and transnational identity. Melissa Chan (2017) advocates “Sinophone Burmese” as an alternative to “Burmese Chinese” to uncover different modes of subjectivity in a marginalized area through the analysis of Midi Z’s films and to question the understanding of Chineseness as a shared identity unaffected by local differences. Hee (2018) discusses the Malaysian Chinese-language films in the Post-Malaysian context as well as in the intersection of several theories and concepts including Sinophone studies, auteur theory and accented style. This book is one of the most significant sources for my study and has inspired me

to conduct this research with the hope to open up further discussions about Malaysian Chinese language cinema.

0.3 Framing Sinophone Malaysian Cinema

In the 56th Taipei Golden Horse Award 2019, due to political tensions between Taiwan and China, films from China were completely absent from the nomination list. The absence of these films made room for Sinophone films from other Sinophone regions, especially Sinophone Malaysian films and Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers, who were nominated in a total of 10 award categories for the first time (TGHFF, 2019). This phenomenon echoes the Sinophone studies proposed by Shih (2013) which excluded China.

In this research, Sinophone studies will be used as the main theoretical framework to study Malaysian Chinese language films. The idea of Sinophone studies will be employed in discussing three core issues of my research: language, identities and space.

0.3.1 Language

When observing the Sinophone Malaysian writers and filmmakers, Shih (2011, p.716) uses “multivocal” and “multiwords” to describe the language varieties in their works. As the linguistic community is an open community for change, this would allow the Malaysian Chinese language films which are multilingual and contain multiple dialects. These films delineate the stories of the local Chinese community in connection to the other ethnic groups to be examined under the framework of Sinophone studies.

The limit of Sinophone studies, however, lies in its narrowly linguistic conception which only includes Sinitic Mandarin and other dialects. Although Sinophone studies emphasizes the place-based lingual creolization process, it would be limited to elucidate the linguistic diversity in the Malaysian Chinese community.

As Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese scholar Ng Kim Chew (2013) points out, Chinese Mandarin “*huayu*” spoken in Malaysia is not the *lingua franca* of immigrants from China but instead involves dialects and influence of other local languages. A Malaysian Chinese who speaks *huayu* tends to mix in English, Malay and other Sinitic dialects, mingled with varied linguistic expressions, inflections, and intonations. Ng (2013) highlights how the Sinitic dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew,

Hailam, and Fuzhou all have a longer history in Malaysia than the Chinese Mandarin. Among the Sinitic dialects, Hokkien, which is one of the mostly used dialects in the Malaysian Chinese community, has a great number of vocabularies derived from the Malay language: for instance, “*gao-win*” in Hokkien actually originated from the Malay word “*kahwin*” which means “married”. At the same time, Malay language has also been penetrated by a lot of Hokkien words, for example, “*taugeh*” means “bean sprout” in both Malay language and Hokkien (Hong, 2007, p.74). Sinitic languages within the context of Malaysia are so diverse that their speakers are often mutually incomprehensible to each other, not to mention the inevitable creolization and localization of these languages that has occurred and continues to occur.

Also, *huayu* is not merely synonymous with hybridity, intermixture, and syncretism, but more broadly denotes a cultural process and practice informed by the multisited and multivalent historical expressions of the “creole” (including its checkered past) (Bernards, 2015, p. 20). Creolization can be understood as a reflection of long time localization, intercultural appropriation, and multilingual code switching. It is also a metacognitive parody of the political conditions of colonial racialization, indigeneity, and interethnic friction that simultaneously shapes and represses these processes (Bernards, 2015, p. 26). The creolization process of *huayu* that occurred within the Malaysia Chinese community is so complex that it is almost impossible to identify the origins of the words used in a sentence that mingles different languages, including Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages.

Since Sinophone studies may not be comprehensive enough to study the creolization process of the Sinitic language used in the Malaysia’s Chinese community as well as in the films, I employ the theoretical concept of accented cinema by Naficy Hamid (2001) to overcome the insufficiency of Sinophone studies. Apart from the language issue, accented cinema can also be used to study the connection of language with identities.

0.3.1.1 Accented Cinema

Accent is defined by Naficy as “the cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation which identify where a person is from, regionally and socially” and “the emphasis which makes a particular word or syllable stand out in a stream of speech

(Naficy, 2001, p. 22-23; Crystal, 2009, p.3). Differences in accent often correlate with other factors such as social and class origin, religious affiliation, educational level, and political grouping (Naficy, 2001; Asher, 1994).

Naficy (2001) divides the filmmakers of accented cinema into three categories: exilic filmmaker, diasporic filmmaker and the postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmaker. Hee (2019a) suggests that Malaysian Chinese filmmakers' experience will fall into the diaspora and postcolonial categories as they are neither accepted as full citizens nor enjoy complete equality under the biased policy within the state.

Naficy's proposition of accented cinema primarily covers a new transnational cinema that is at once global and local. Its foregrounding of the multiple-accent and multilingual nature of the films, as well as the deterritorialization process of specific individuals, ethnicities, nationalities, and identities reveals how accented cinema shares much in common with Sinophone studies. Naficy believes that because these accented films engage in many deterritorializing and reterritorializing journeys (of home-seeking, homelessness, or homecoming) and identity searching, the films are thus in a multilateral dialogue between home, the host societies, and their respective national cinemas, and audiences (Naficy, 2012, p.113).

The idea of accented cinema is criticized as Euro-centric for Naficy's tendency to focus on diasporic filmmakers who emigrated from the global South to the North, situating accented cinema at the periphery, in dialectical relationship to the West as the universal norm (Suner, 2006; Lim, 2012; Hee, 2019) so Lim argues that accented cinema must also take the intra-Asian journeys into account.

The "accent" is not simply to be understood as a linguistic feature but is primarily contingent upon the auteur's conditions of displacement and the "accented mode" of production, circulation, and exhibition (Ma, 2019, p. 40). The accent particularly manifests itself in prominent visual styles, which suggest the narrative structure, character development, subject matter, theme and plot should be emphasized when examining an accented film, not to mention the structures of feeling of the filmmaker, the biographical and sociocultural location of the filmmaker, as well as the films's mode of production, distribution, exhibition and reception (Naficy, 2001, p. 21). All these

elements will be useful in studying the Malaysian Chinese language filmmaking at the textual level and extra-textual level, as well as the aesthetics of its cinematography.

Hee (2019b) contends that, the accented style of twenty-first-century Sinophone Malaysian culture is a product of the capital flows and cultural mosaic generated by globalized international capitalism, but is also rooted in the struggles and negotiations between local Sinophone culture and nationalism, so accented cinema would be useful in examining the multi-vocal and multilingual in the Sinophone Malaysian films as well as studying the filmmakers' background which are in the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of self identity, nationalism, ethnicism and so on.

0.3.1.2 Minor Literature/ Minoritarian

Shih (2007, p.31) borrowed Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature" to develop the concept of Sinophone studies when she highlights the significance of individual Sinophone cultures and their lived experience in local sites through the plurality of Sinitic languages of the diverse Sinophone groups. Shih refers to "minor literature" as a form of "minor articulation", that is, an articulation of the major language by the minor or minoritized who uses it.

A minor literature has the potential to destabilize signification and representation. Language enters a process in which words form new meanings and representations that are non-designatory. Meanings produced through the structure of a minor literature are, hence, both linguistic and cultural. The Sinophone echoes the structure of a minor literature in its shattering of linguistic boundaries to reinvent cultures (Tan, 2013).

Deleuze and Guattari (1986) define "minor" as a movement that "takes a major voice and speaks it in a way that expresses one's preferred identity" (p. 52). The primary assumption is that the minor is not dialectically related to a major movement but it is the result of a process of becoming minor within the major. "Minor" signifies the appropriation of hegemonic narratives to create new spaces of meaning and resistant polyphony. A "minor" work often emerges from a minority, but not all works produced by minorities are "minor" works.

The second feature of a minor film is there is no fixed boundary between the private and the public (political) and focus on the marginal characters (geographically speaking,

even). According to Deleuze, everything in a minor work is political because an individual story is “necessarily linked to a larger social framework, or directly suffers the effects of social contradictions and problems”. This can mean that the individual character’s action can be transposed on the whole community and conversely. A minor film does not represent a people per se but creates a space where a people can affirm their collective becoming and regain their subjectivity in a “collective enunciation/utterances” (Deleuze, 1989).

The third characteristic of minor cinema is its ability to deterritorialize without reterritorializing, and to resist the urge to recreate a fixed identity and to reify the people in becoming. Kafka wrote “not as a being with an identity, but as a voice of what is not given, a ‘people to come’” and the identity of this “people to come” is “always provisional, in the process of creation” (Colebrook, 2001, p.118).

Deleuze and Guattari’s idea has been criticized for its Euro-centrism and essentializing subject of oppression without taking into account the postcolonial context however I argue that “minor cinema” is useful in studying the interrelation between language and identity as it offers a critique of the politics at work in their construction and creation in the films. I establish my arguments based on this concept in Chapter 2 to deal with the case studies of a Malay filmmaker who makes Sinitic language film and Malaysian Chinese filmmakers who make Malay language films.

0.3.2 Identity Politics

Shih (2007) argues that the visual has become the primary means of mediating identities under global capitalism and the identity is a question of representation that occurs in and through representation. As such, the representation of the identity of the Malaysian Chinese as well as other ethnic groups in the films will become the focus of my research.

Chan (2017) contends that the Sinophone is the process of meaning making in places with permeable boundaries due to colonization, globalization, minority cultures, and the imposition of geopolitical boundaries. It opens up the intersectional possibilities between the local, the migrant, the settler, the colonizer, and the colonized, in connection to the center periphery dynamic so that identity within the Sinophone context is under perpetual

negotiation (Chan, 2017). This explains how Sinophone studies will be useful in tackling the “in between” and ambiguity of the Malaysian Chinese which are neither signified within the state boundary nor included in that category of the ethnically essentialist overseas Chinese (Pang, 2018, p. 117).

As Shih (2007) argues, the dispersal of the Chinese people across the world needs to be reconceptualized in terms of vibrant or vanishing communities of Sinitic language cultures rather than of ethnicity and nationality. Here, I scrutinize the complexities of the Malaysian Chinese identities by taking the socio-historical and political contexts of the Sinophone communities in Malaysia into consideration, not to mention the postcolonialism and globalization contexts as well.

0.3.2.1 From Overseas Chinese to Malaysian Chinese

It is believed that the Chinese first came to the Malay Peninsula during the 19th century under the British colonization to work in the tin mining sector (Ngo, 2011). This early generation of Chinese migrants identified themselves as overseas Chinese and maintained strong connections with their homeland China (Qing dynasty). Most of the Chinese migrant workers in Malaya wished to go back to China (the concept of *luo ye gui gen* according to Tan, 2013, p.7).

In the Bandung Conference⁴ 1955, P. R. China signed the “Treaty of Double Nationality” which stated overseas Chinese should make a choice between Chinese nationality and the nationality in the new settlement nation as people who hold double nationalities would no longer be accepted Chinese citizens. The treaty had also affected the Chinese migrants in Malaysia, forcing them to choose whether to stay in Malaysia or to go back to China (Ngo, 2011; Chua, 2006). When Malaysia became independent in 1957, under certain requirements, the federal constitution of Malaysia stipulated the rights for the Chinese migrants to apply for Malaysian citizenship. Those who chose to stay were given the Malaysian nationality. Since then, the Chinese migrants identify strongly with Malaysia and see Malaysia as their new homeland (Hee, 2018, p. 63).

⁴ A meeting of newly independent Asian and African nations with the aims to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation as well as to oppose colonialism or neocolonialism by any nations (Ngo, 2011; Chua, 2006).

Today, the Chinese descendants in Malaysia have reached the fourth or fifth generation. Different generations of the Malaysian Chinese have different sentiments towards China and Malaysia. The first and second generations tend to bond more with China than Malaysia because many of them were not granted the Malaysian citizenship. However, as the right to live in Malaysia was given to later generations, they tend to see themselves as Malaysian rather than as Chinese who are closely related to China. To some extent, they rejected being called “*huaqiao*” (overseas Chinese), as this may rationalize the Malay political accusations that Chinese are “outsiders” or “foreigners” (Hee, 2018). The Malaysian Chinese identify themselves as “*huaren*”, emphasizing their status of “Chinese living in Malaysia”, which is equivalent to being a “cultural” Chinese rather than a “nationalist” Chinese (Chan, 2006). The identification of “*huaren*” is also meant to differentiate the “Chinese” from the other ethnic groups.

0.3.2.2 The Malaysian Chinese minority vs. The Malay majority

Malaysia today is a multiethnic country, with 70% of people—the largest ethnic group—identifying as Malay and 23% who identify as Chinese, the second largest ethnic group (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2020). In this case, the Malaysian Chinese can be considered as the minority ethnic group dialectically to the Malay, who are the dominant group.

Unlike Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong where Chinese are the region’s biggest ethnic community, the Malaysia Chinese community is a minority group within the Malay-majority state. This point has complicated the studies of the Malaysian Chinese community.

Malaysian Chinese have always been treated as “outsiders” under the pro-Malay policies that categorize citizens into “*Bumiputera*” (son of soil) and “*non-Bumiputera*”. This has led to the debate of who can be considered a true “son of soil” and the issue has been exploited by the local politicians to manipulate the ethnic sentiments. The Malay claim that they are the native people in Malaya but some studies argue that, Malay are not native to Malaysia, but rather arrived in Malaya from Indonesia before the Chinese (Hwang, 2003). The true natives are those such as the Iban, Kadazan and Bidayuh yet the rights of these native groups have also been marginalized under the *Bumiputera* policy

which is Malay-centrism (Zawawi, 2013).

Although ethnic identity is contested by Sinophone studies, but within the socio-political and economic context of multiethnic Malaysia, ethnic identity is unavoidably significant in examining the struggle and power relations among each ethnic group, especially between the Malaysian Chinese as the minority and the Malay as the dominant group.

Another point I would like to highlight here is the use of the term “race” and “ethnic”. As the “race” issue has long been criticized as an essentialized anthropological or biological category that is used to categorize based on one’s appearance (Chen, 1998), in this research I use the term “ethnic” instead of “race” to refer to the grouping of people based on their ancestry, language, culture and so on. However, the term “race” is mentioned in Chapter 3 because the term is used in the film to describe the situation that happened in the past, a time when the term “race” was commonly used. Although the term “race” might have negative connotation related to discrimination, it is still commonly used in many contexts within Malaysia, for instance, there will always be a “race” column to be filled in on official forms and documents, including the application form for the Malaysian identity card. The “race” issue is also often manipulated by the politicians to incite sentiment among different ethnicities to achieve political purpose.

0.3.2.3 Malaysian Chinese in the Post-colonial Era and Malay Nationalism

The unchallenged *Bumiputera* policy is in fact an extension of the pro-Malay policies which have been implemented since the British colonial period. It was during British colonial rule when job separation policies were executed to assign the Malay, Chinese and Indian immigrants to work in different industries. The Chinese immigrants were pioneers in developing commercial agriculture and tin mines mainly along the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Jackson, 1968). Tamil laborers were brought in by British colonists from Southern India to develop the rubber industry (Leong, 2003). Over time, the Chinese population was connected largely in towns, the Indians in rubber estates, while the Malays in the rural areas engaged in fishing and farming (Abdul Khalid, 2014). The British colonial government actually implemented several measures to prevent the Malay farmers from working in the rubber industry which guaranteed more profits

(Snodgrass, 1980). Moreover, realizing that the Chinese might topple the British colonial government as they had done in China during the Cultural Revolution, the British colonial government constructed the image that Chinese had taken the resources of the Malay while assuring the Malays that their rights would be protected in order to maintain good relationship with the Malay and consolidate their colonial power (Hee, 2018).

Today, the pro-Malay government has extended the British colonial model by constructing the image of Chinese as the “invasive outsider”, with the potential threats of taking over the political and economic resources owned by the Malay after independence (Kuan, 2018). For instance, in August 2006, Malay politician Ahmad Ismail, remarked that “the Chinese, as the parasite in Malaysia” should be thankful that the Malays allow them to sojourn in this country and shouldn’t ask for the same benefits and rights as the Malay. This remark sparked tension between the two ethnic groups although Ahmad Ismail eventually apologized for what he said (Sin Chew Daily, 2008). The imaginary built by the Malay nationalists to encapsulate the core ethnic identifiers of “Malayness” language, religion and royalty enforce the idea of Malay “indigeneness” and thus provides them with the essence to imagine political community that exclude other ethnicities (Loo, 2007; Smith, 1991). The Malays might agree with Shih Shu-Mei’s statement that Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia were the best assistant to the Euro-colonialism in the mode of “permanent living colonialism as a middleman” (Shih, 2010, p. 478) although this might not be true under the *Bumiputera* policy which acts as an ideological national apparatus that keeps the Malaysian Chinese at the periphery position politically and economically.

0.3.2.4 The Diaspora Identity: Chinese diaspora? Malaysian diaspora?

The pro-Malay nationalist policy has created uncertainty and a feeling of “unbelonging” in the minds of many Malaysian Chinese. As a result, there has been a trend of outward migration of the Chinese from Malaysia since the 1980’s (Barker, 2018).

In this case, is reasonable to conclude that the “diaspora” status of the Malaysian Chinese has come to the end as Sinophone studies suggest? If so, Tan (2013) asks how exactly is the “end” or expiration of such diaspora determined? Diaspora is a long term

phenomenon, even if a diasporic Chinese has integrated into the cultures of their new settlement, it doesn't mean they have necessarily left the diaspora. No matter what cultures he/she experiences or practices, their identity as a "Chinese" shouldn't be totally forgotten. As Ng (2011, p.20-21) contends, the descendants of "diaspora Chinese", even though not diaspora, are still a "Chinese diaspora".

Although diaspora studies has been used to collectively examine the diasporic subjects, it is criticized as an expression of political marginalization in the postcolonial nation-state. Despite this, the potential of diaspora studies should not be overlooked for its possibilities in redefining the boundaries and re-articulating identities in the globalized and transnational discourse (Kuah-Pearce & Hu-Dehart, 2006, p.2). As Chow (1993, p. 25) contends, diaspora studies can be reconstructed by unfastening the submission of diasporic identity to one's homogeneous ethnicity, such as "Chineseness" as the ultimate signified which is essentialist, and practicing one's ethnicity within the context of the specific experience in the host land. Kuah-Pearce (2011) also remarks how the diaspora subjects practice multiple layers of identities in order to accommodate their multiple identities at different times and in different spaces. As such, diaspora studies would be useful for studying the Malaysian Chinese who have multi-layered identities between "Malaysian", "Chinese", "Chinese Hokkien", diaspora and so on. I argue that the mobility of Malaysian Chinese, in this case, the Malaysian Chinese filmmakers in the process of re-migration to other places beyond the state boundary can be seen as a "deterritorialized diaspora" which refers to a new form of dislocation, and the construction of new identity and subjectivity (Cohen, 2008, p.124).

Although Chinese diaspora frequently conjures affective logics of longing and nostalgia for a "Chinese motherland", the affective attachments to China as a place of origin tend to be China-centrism (Wong, 2018). However, Wang Yiman (2012) when re-examining Sinophone diasporic filmmaking, advocates for diasporic filmmakers to constantly redefine and rearticulate the sense of belonging through what Wang termed as "homing" imaginaries and tactics. The "homing" strategy helps to negotiate the diasporic person's relations with a homeland that is "never a static 'past' to be related to vertically", but rather "the ever-present" and "constantly changing" and thus to

continuously question its meaning.

From here, I argue that diaspora studies (not necessarily Chinese diaspora, but even Malaysian diaspora) is not stagnant and still have the potential to expound the experience of localization and political struggles of the Malaysian Chinese community in respective local realities as well as in the globalized and transnationalized context. The mobility of these Malaysian Chinese filmmakers who continue leaving their homeland to embark on the transnational circuit to produce and distribute their works can also be studied in a comprehensive way. As Hee (2019) contends,

“Malaysian Chinese diaspora discourse is not completely a narrative of anti-localization; Malaysian Chinese against diaspora discourse is not necessarily nationalism (patriotism) filled with admiration and hope for the state. It is this long-term tension intervention between diaspora and against-diaspora discourses which gives Sinophone Malaysian literature and culture its unique accented style.” (p. 276-277)

0.3.2.5 Reconfiguring “Chineseness”

“Chineseness” has been criticized as an essentialist concept produced within the modern discourse of Han-centric Chinese nationalism. Defined by the hegemony of an ethnic pureness and language superiority, Chineseness is criticized for marginalizing the others, and reproducing an internal hierarchy within the Chinese communities (Ang, 2001). As Shih (2007, p. 24) contends, the western political regime “generalized Chineseness as the symbol of the race border”, with the purpose to rationalize colonialism and also legalize the Chinese to work as a minority group in multiethnic countries.

However, Chineseness is a category whose meanings are not fixed and pre-given but is subjected to constant deconstruction and reconstruction. It is a precarious of identity as well as a political act when “Chineseness” is used to identify oneself (Ang, 2001, p. 25). As Ong and Nonini (1997, p. 16) suggest, Chinese identity is “a site of difference” in which “different identities—gender, ethnicity, nationality, subculture, dominant culture—intersect,” and constitute that individual. His or her identity is flexible and situational depending on “particular circumstances and the configuration of social relations that

constitute our everyday world”. Chineseness can be seen as a form of “strategic essentialism” (Ang, 1993; Spivak, 2015), “strategic” in the sense of using the signifier “Chinese” for the purpose of contesting the hegemonic majoritarian. The Malaysian Chinese today prioritize a Malaysian rather than a “Chinese” identity whenever they travel to different places but within Malaysia, they tend to emphasize “Chineseness” in order to differentiate themselves from the Malay who are seen as conservative and less competitive compared to the Malaysian Chinese. This phenomenon conforms to the “strategic essentialism” as suggested by Ang.

Tan (2013) proposes that Chineseness can be reconceptualized as a discursive sphere with an emphasis on the local situatedness rather than as a reified category in opposition to the structures and meanings of the Chinese nationalism. He adds that “Sinophone theory—while focusing on the local contexts of its global communities—cannot imagine a network of relations without including a certain rethinking of China as a part of its relations”, and that the Sinophone’s “dialogue with the national, be it China or the settler societies, cannot be overlooked, even in a postnational, de-essentialized, non-China-centric discourse”. The Sinophone can thus be taken as “a succeeding stage to reinvent Chinese culture with respect to the time and space of distinct Sinophone communities and their network of relations” (Tan, 2013, p. 36-37).

Ng Kim Chew argues that “Chinese” can be approached as a discursive terrain as well as a set of everyday practices that intersects aspects such as culture, language, identity, and so forth. “Chinese” should not be narrowly understood as being only related to “China” (*Zhongguo*) in the first place (Ma, 2019; Ng, 2018).

As such, “Chineseness” can be reconfigured for meaning-production in terms of a dynamic negotiation that reconsider new subjectivities within what Shih (2007, p. 31) describes as “the multi-angulated and multi-axiological contexts of the local, the global, the national, the transnational, and above all, the place of settlement and everyday practice”. The Malaysian Chinese identity could then, be approached as an opened-up, fluid assemblage of multiple Sinophone articulations.

0.3.3 Sinophonic Spaces

0.3.3.1 Transnational Filmmaking

Sinophone studies allows for the bypassing of a geopolitical impasse and looks beyond national boundaries to examine Malaysian Chinese language films that textually foreground the act of border-crossing and on an extratextual level act as correlative in the flow of talent and creative personnel moving from country to country.

According to Lionnet and Shih (2005, p. 7), transnationalism is different from globalization which “assumes a universal core or norm” but can be understood as “a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center.”

0.3.3.2 Translocalism

When studying Wong Kar Wai’s films, Yue (2016) analyses Wong’s films under three Sinophone clusters of translocality, minor transnationalism, and peripheral China.

Localization is understood in anthropology to mean “the process of becoming local, which involves cultural adjustment to a local geographical and social environment, and identifying with the locality” (Hee, 2019b, p. 276; Tan, 2004, p. 23). Localness is no longer fixed to the earth and to traditional cultural feelings, but rather maintains an openness to the other, alongside a certain portability (Hee, 2019b, p. 278). “Translocalism”, originally brought up by Appadurai, (1995) is the process by which the local is continuously altered as a result of its imbrication in international and global forces.

Translocality provokes a rethinking of the politics of place that critically engages the territorialized notions of transnationalism, in emphasizing the “interconnectedness between places, institutions and actors” in the age of globalization (Ma, 2019; Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, p. 375). Brickell and Datta proposed a “multiscalar approach to translocality”, which views the latter as “a situated mode of human agency and mobility through variegated spaces and places across nations, regions, cities, neighbourhoods, buildings and bodies” (Ma, 2019; Brickell & Datta, 2011, p. 7). Both authors suggest the local-to-local connections open up “the local” to movement and linkages across a variety

of scales (body, home, urban, regional or national). As a result, diverse modes of mobilities—including all forms of migration (e.g. internal migration) as well as “immobile”, “parochial” agents—can be taken into consideration (p. 10). The emphasis on a “place-based imagination” also echoes what Hjort has espoused as the “more valuable forms of cinematic transnationalism”, here understood as “a resistance to globalization as cultural homogenization” and “a commitment to ensuring the pursuit of aesthetic, artistic, social, and political values” (Ma, 2019; Hjort, 2009, p. 15).

When discussing the transnationalism of Chinese cinema, Zhang (2010) points to how translocality is not only a site of place-based imagination that responds to the traffic of capital and people across the global/local, but also of ideas, images, and technologies across these places. For Zhang, the translocal is always polyvocal, echoing the suggestions of Sinophone studies (Yue, 2016, p. 238).

0.3.3.3 Minor Transnationalism

Minor transnationalism refers to how minority cultures such as diasporic and postcolonial cultures are formed through flows outside of the dominant forces of globalization (Ma, 2019, p. 42 ; Lionnet & Shih 2005, p. 4-11). Minor transnationalism foregrounds a transversal and horizontal perspective in not only turning to “the minor cultural articulations in productive relationship with the major (in all its possible shapes, forms, and kinds)” but also the “minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether” (Ma, 2019 p.42; Lionnet & Shih 2005, p. 4-11). However, viewing the minor and minor articulations as something already creolized, hybrid, and therefore transnational, Lionnet and Shih propose that positionality of the minor(ity)/ major(ity) should never be essentialized and fixed in dichotomous terms (Ma, 2019, p.42). Arguing for how minor transnational subjects “are inevitably invested in their respective geopolitical spaces”, Lionnet and Shih stress the importance of contextualizing and historicizing the “minority issues” and their “expressive discourses” (such as cinema) (p. 11). This concept can be developed to examine the films made outside Malaysia by diasporic Malaysian filmmakers, in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, where the films are usually about Malaysian Chinese who live in Malaysia who are inherently minor. Higbee (2007) echoes the conceptualization of minor transnationalism, when he

intersects Novak's discussion on "transvergence" with Guattari and Deleuze's concept of the rhizome in constructing the "cinema of transvergence" as a critical framing to survey the postcolonial, diasporic cinema in terms of a transcultural phenomenon that would "operate on both a transnational level – the relationship between the global and the local – and within the context of specific national cinemas and film cultures" (Ma, 2019, p. 42). For Malaysian Chinese filmmakers who make films outside Malaysia, their filmmaking practice can be characterized as "transvergent" in the sense that they alternate "at different times and in different contexts" between different local/national film cultures and industries; the identity of the transvergent auteurs, therefore, is constantly evolving through "a process of 'becoming'", as suggested by Higbee (2007, p. 88).

0.4 Research Questions and Chapters Introduction

My research adopts the theoretical concept of Sinophone studies as a departure to study Malaysian Chinese language films through historicizing the distinctiveness and heterogeneities of the Sinophone culture and experience in relation to the sociohistorical, political and economic contexts of Malaysia.

I argue there is no other better framework than Sinophone studies to study the Malaysian Chinese language films because of their multilingual nature that involves creolized languages that are closely related to localization, and also due to the production of Sinitic language films being constituted by a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multilingual production team. Sinophone studies which is situated at the intersection of postcolonial studies, transnational studies, global studies, and Chinese studies, covers the studies of the Malaysian Chinese language films comprehensively in terms of film's ideology as well as aesthetic tendencies.

Shih (2010) does not completely deny the contributions of diaspora studies in problematizing the essentialist understanding of Chineseness or Chinese identity when she contends that, "Sinophone can be a site of both a longing for and a rejection of various constructions of Chineseness". There are numerous benefits from employing ideas in diaspora studies in tandem with accented cinema theory to deal with the experience of Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers, who are always in the process of border-crossing and, experiencing "in place" and "displaced", "deterritorialization and

reterritorialization” in the process of filmmaking. These filmmakers are also engaged in the dynamic process of negotiation in positioning herself/himself within the multi-layered network of the transnational, national, regional ethnicities and local identities/subjectivities and their films in turn usually revolve around the same theme. The accented style which is a multidirectional critical agent involving discussions on transnational, diasporic, postcolonial, displacement and politics is useful to correlate the diasporic idea in tandem with Sinophone studies in approaching the issues of identities and mobilities in the context of globalization and transnationalism.

Sinophone studies is a multidirectional critique that involves rejection of China-centrism, but engages at the same with a critique of Euro-centrism and other centrisms, including Malay-centrism in the context of Malaysia. My use of Sinophone Malaysian is premised upon a broadened understanding of the Sinophone in taking into consideration of “Chineseness” and I assert that the use of either “Sinophone” or “Chinese” should always be contextualized given the different emphasis embedded in each term. Ethnicity and Chinese identity (Chineseness) should be redefined as a discursive sphere for meaning production based on the local situatedness (Tan, 2013) rather than the essentialized identity when examining the Sinophone Malaysian community and the Sinophone Malaysian filmmaking.

In this research, I will focus on studying the films which are made by Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers, within and outside Malaysia. These films feature Sinitic and creolized languages, including local languages such as Malay, English and Tamil while the stories revolve around the Sinophone community of Malaysia in relation to the other ethnic groups. I address the Malaysian Chinese language films as the Sinophone Malaysian films given Sinophone studies de-emphasize nationality and ethnicity in favour of a concentration on the localized sites of production that are bound to their own historical and social contexts.

Moreover, I will reconfigure the idea of Chineseness within the discursive interrogations in relation to the national and postcolonial context to argue that the Malaysian Chinese are caught in between various modes of identification prescribed less by the Malaysia or China dichotomy (Tan, 2013) but as an open, critical identity that is

always in the state of becoming, echoing the “minoritarian” concept by Guattari and Deleuze. By engaging with Chineseness, I problematized the essentialized idea of “Malayness” and “Malaysian-ness” and seek to renegotiate the boundaries of national cinema, placing my research in the context of an overarching postcolonial project.

Shih (2007, p. 16) has stated that identity is intimately linked with representation: it occurs “in and throughout representation”. Thus, at the textual level, this research will study the representation of identities through characters of different ethnicities by situating these identities between local experiences and an imaginary homeland. With the complementary use of accented styles, I also examine each film’s use of image, sound, visuals, along with the emphasis on the extra-textual level that include the sites and spaces of film production, circulation, and exhibition.

In short, by using the theoretical framework of Sinophone studies in dialogue with diaspora studies, accented cinema, “minoritarian”, nationalism, and transnationalism, this research focuses on how Sinitic language films are being marginalized and “minoritized” in a state which emphasizes on “Malay” nationalism, and how Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers have been embarking on a trajectory which is beyond the national boundaries, to articulate the issue of identities through their works. Tantalizing to these discussions is the displaced experience of the filmmakers who in constant movement within Southeast Asia and East Asia locales and how they negotiate with their own multi-layered identities. I argue that the study of Sinophone Malaysian filmmaking within the framework of Sinophone studies is itself political for its enabling of these films to be thought of beyond ethnic and national borders. Further, they interconnect with other Sinitic-speaking regions to envision a Sinophone cinema circle and thus contribute to a new way of understanding Sinophone Malaysian Cinema. To be more concrete, this research aims to investigate the following questions:

- How do the Sinophone Malaysian films portray the place-based culture and experience of the Malaysian Chinese communities and the other ethnic groups in Malaysia in terms of narrative and aesthetic?

- How does the process of production and distribution of Sinophone Malaysian films transcend various Sinophone communities within and beyond Malaysia in the discourse of transnationalism and globalization?
- How do the Malaysian Chinese filmmakers articulate the issue of identities, and how do they address this issue through the films within the post-colonial, national and transnational context?
- How do diaspora studies, minoritarian, and accented cinema work together with Sinophone studies in studying the Sinophone Malaysian cinema and how, in turn, is it interconnected with other Sinophone communities and places?

This research will focus on contemporary Sinophone Malaysian films after the year 2000, an important year that signaled the arrival of globalization and policies that welcome technology's entrance to the market. As a result, there have been more Sinitic language films produced after the year 2000, which is where I begin my research. Chapter 1 focuses on Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan whose films mark the revival of the commercial Sinitic language filmmaking in Malaysia. First, I review the commercial Sinophone filmmaking development within the historical and political context of Malaysia to allow for a discursive discussion of the case studies. Next, I explore the filmmaker's filming experience within the national sphere and engaging in the process of anti-Chinese diaspora. Through textual analysis of his two films *The Journey* (2014) and *Ola Bola* (2016), this chapter examines how the Sinophone Malaysian film narratives and languages portray the place-based culture and experience of the Sinophone communities and the other ethnic groups in Malaysia, and how "Chineseness" is employed by Chiu as a strategy to attract the local Sinophone audience to watch Sinitic language films made locally. I also explore how the films debunk the myth of multiculturalism and the harmony of ethnic relationship as an "imagined nation". The concluding section of this chapter examines the process of production and distribution of Sinophone Malaysian films, namely how they transcend various Sinophone communities beyond Malaysia in the transnational and global discourses.

Chapter 2 investigates the phenomena of Malaysian Chinese filmmakers who make Malay language films and Malay filmmakers who make Sinitic language film through

three case studies: *Fly By Night* (2018) by Zahir Omar, *Lelaki Harapan Dunia* (Men Who Save the World, 2014) by Liew Seng Tat and *PASKAL* (2018) by Adrian Teh. By using the idea of minor cinema proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1986), this chapter looks at how Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers depict the roles of Malaysia Chinese, Malays as well as other ethnicities in a non-Sinitic-language film and vice versa. Further, I also discuss how the creolized languages and diffusion of multiple centres of power function in both Sinophone and non-Sinophone films and how Sinophone and non-Sinophone films relate to each other under the socio-political context in Malaysia.

Chapter 3 focuses on Taiwan-based Malaysian filmmaker Lau Kek Huat with reference to his film trilogy, *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) and *Buoluomi* (2019) in which he explores issues concerning the banned Malayan Communist Party (MCP), ethnic riot, ethnic minority and the special rights given to the Malay. My discussion centres on three aspects. The first suggests Lau Kek Huat, who is currently living and working in Taiwan, as a springboard to further explore the multi-layered identities and collective experiences of Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers working in the international arena. Next, I conduct a textual analysis of the narratives of his films and then move to observations on his particular filmic language, which is used to address political issues that oscillate between incidents of personal memory and national history.

Chapter 4 focuses on the works of female filmmaker Tan Chui Mui, who is one of the pioneers in the independent filmmaking industry in Malaysia. Rather than categorize Tan as a feminist filmmaker or interrogate the issue of women in her films—which would only serve as a rigid ideological filter of her work—I instead examine how the female perspective is developed in the film, particularly the feminine aesthetic and cinematography in relation to the sociopolitical, historical, economic and the global context through analysis of two of her works: *Love Conquers All* (2006) and *Letters from the South* (2013).

Chapter 5 juxtaposes two Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers Edmund Yeo and Namewee through the framework of cosmopolitanism. Both Yeo and Namewee have been embarking on the transnational trajectory by receiving education and training in

filmmaking and later developing their filmmaking career across the globe. Yeo includes multiple locales in his films and addresses issues of globalization while simultaneously connecting these wider issues to the situation in his (imagined) homeland. The first part of this chapter studies the border-crossing experience of Yeo from the periphery to the center of Asia by observing the political allegories in ten of his short films and two feature films *River of Exploding Durians* (2014) and *Aqerat* (2017) with relation to both localized and globalized contexts as well as film distribution and reception. Namewee, however, began his career as a Youtuber before making feature films. He makes use of the freedom of the internet to distribute his works worldwide and accumulate viewers around the world. In comparison with Yeo, who departs from “home” and ventures to other cosmopolitan cities to develop his career, Namewee takes the route home to produce films in Malaysia where he succumbs to the many restrictions from the government due to his films’ dealing with sensitive sociopolitical issues. The second part of this chapter will focus on how Namewee contests nationalism, that constantly prioritizes the Malay, and concomitantly deconstructs China-centric ideas through analyzing the representation of the local/translocal in addition to multiculturalism and cultural hybridization in his films *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) and *Banglasia* (2013).

0.5 Research Significance

Malaysia is one of the largest producers of Sinitic language films each year in Southeast Asia yet there is little research available to meet the creative output of filmmakers. These films are especially useful to think of in the framework of Sinophone studies, where Sinophone Malaysian films contribute to expanding the Sinophone studies network by representing its connection to the Southeast Asia region, an area that is seldom researched. Likewise, this research is significant for drawing on and clarifying interconnections between the Sinophone Malaysian communities, Sinophone cinema and the other Sinophone regions.

Sinophone Malaysian cinema has been featured prominently on the world stage in recent years and is earning acclaim in many international film festivals. This research seeks to understand the content of the Sinophone Malaysian films in relation to their historical, political and social context to provide a better understanding of those localized

elements and denotative meaning embedded in the films, while also emphasizing the voice of the marginalized.

0.6 Research Methods

This research is qualitative, combining contextual analysis, case studies, textual analysis, secondary sources and interviews in order to achieve the research purpose. After clarifying the historical, political and social context of Sinophone Malaysian cinema, I also review secondary sources such as archive data from databases, local libraries and FINAS to further contextualize the films. Second, I have conducted interviews with filmmakers which are conducive to investigating the motives and politics behind their filmmaking. A literature review of Sinophone studies, diaspora studies, minoritarian, accented cinema, and other relevant theories and concepts frames Sinophone Malaysian cinema and establishes new arguments and criticisms for current discussions. Finally, the case studies included provide concrete examples for explaining the theories and concepts from a critical approach. Lastly, textual analysis provides a way to analyze the film content and particular film language in conceptualizing the identities of the Malaysian Chinese and other ethnicities in Malaysia.

Chapter 1 Debating “Chineseness” and “National Identity” in Sinophone Malaysian films “*The Journey*” (2014) and “*Ola Bola*” (2016)

1.1 Introduction

By using Sinophone studies as theoretical framework, this chapter aims to study the contemporary Sinophone Malaysian films, “*The Journey*” (2014) and “*Ola Bola*” (2016), both directed by filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan in relation to the socio-historical, and political contexts of Malaysia. Both *The Journey* and *Ola Bola* are among the highest grossing films in Malaysia's films box office history and have marked the revival of the commercial Sinitic language filmmaking in Malaysia (Phooi, 2016). Through textual analysis of these two films, this chapter examines how “Chineseness” is employed by Chiu as a strategy to highlight the cultural distinctiveness of the Malaysian Chinese community and to attract the local Chinese audiences to watch locally made Sinitic language films. This chapter focuses on four dimensions. First, the development of the commercial Sinophone filmmaking within the historical and political context of Malaysia; second, the filmmaker's identities as well as how the filmmaker addresses the issue of Chinese identity (Chineseness) through the films; third, textual analysis is used to examine how the Sinophone Malaysian films' narrative and languages portray the place-based culture and experiences of the Sinophone communities and the other ethnic groups in Malaysia; fourth, how the process of production and distribution of Sinophone Malaysian films transcend various Sinophone communities beyond Malaysia in the discourse of transnationalism and globalization are studied.

1.2 The Historical Development of Commercial Sinophone Malaysian Filmmaking

Before I move on to my case studies, I believe it is essential to review the historical development of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema, in order to situate my discussions of the two selected films in their appropriate sociohistorical and political contexts. The historical development of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema can be divided into three stages: first, the early studio era when the Chinese owned film production companies produced Malay language films more than Sinitic language films, a period that is also noteworthy for the beginning of the transnational filmmaking; second, the Malay-centric era when the Malay language and culture are prioritized under the national policies while

the other languages and cultures are marginalized; third, the resurrection of the Sinitic language films in Malaysia after 2000 due to the flow of digital video cameras into the market, a phenomenon that encouraged local filmmakers to take their first step into filmmaking. I argue that all these stages in the development of the industry have had a profound impact on the development of Sinophone Malaysian cinema today.

1.2.1 The Early Studio Era (1920--1957): Shaw Brothers and Malay Films Production (MFP)

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. Runme Shaw brought in films produced by Tianyi to have them screened in the local cinemas in Malaya. The screenings were well-received by the Chinese immigrants who were imported by the British colonial government to work in the mining industry that flourished at that time. Later on, Runme incorporated Hai Seng Co. (which later became the Shaw Brothers Pte. Ltd.) to distribute films made by Tianyi and other studios from China (Wong, 2018). The films being distributed by Shaw Brothers which featured standard Sinophone Mandarin language as well as Cantonese dialect, addressed issues happening in the Chinese immigrants' homeland, can be seen as a representation of re-constructing "China as home" outside China (Wong, 2018). For the Chinese immigrants, leaving their homeland might have been sorrowful, yet they hoped to make a fortune and eventually return to China (Ngo, 2011; Means, 1970). The cinema offered a source of comfort (Zhou, 2003) and a cultural identity to homesick workers (Ngo, 2011), connecting these Chinese migrants to their cultural roots.

In 1937, the Shaw brothers established the Malay Films Production (MFP) studio in Malaya. Instead of making Sinitic language films, the Shaw brothers imported filming technology from China and talented directors from India to produce Malay language films that would cater to the local Malay audience (Nor Afidah, 2016; Kuan, 2015; Barnard, 2008, p. 156; Khoo, 2006, p. 90; Van der Heide, 2002, p. 135). Featuring a surfeit of musical and dancing scenes adapted from the Indian films, these Malay films were popular among the Malay audience. After World War II, The Shaw Brothers continued producing Malay language films because they brought higher profit compared

to Sinitic language films. Before its closure in 1967, MFP were to produce 162 films and ushered in the golden age of Malay films in Malaysia (Zheng, 2005).

1.2.2 Cathay-Keris Studio

Following the footsteps of the Shaw Brothers, in 1953, Cathay organization and cinema chairman Loke Wan Tho, a local Chinese, collaborated with Keris Film Productions' managing director Ho Ah Loke to establish the film production company named Cathay-Keris Studio. It soon emerged as the rival of Shaw Brothers' MFP in the Malay film industry. Among the Cathay-Keris productions was the 1957 box office hit "*Pontianak*" featuring a female vampire ghost. The film was then dubbed in Cantonese for the Hong Kong market, and even sold to an American television station, marking the first export of a locally made film overseas (Chia, 2018).

In 1959, Chinese director Yi Shui from China, made a Sinitic language film titled "*The Lion City*" under Cathay-Keris Film Production company. The film features a Chinese male protagonist who speaks fluent Malay language when he talks to the other Malay characters in the film. *The Lion City* showed how an early Sinophone film in Malaya, even with its typical portrayal of Chinese immigrants striving to adapt and gain recognition in their new settlement, attempted to include local elements as much as possible (Hee, 2013).

Cathay-Keris created another history by co-producing films with overseas filmmakers in 1962. Among these co-produced works were *Your Shadow is Mine*, a collaboration with a French filmmaker, and *A Star of Hong Kong*, a collaboration with Cathay's Hong Kong studio. *A Star of Hong Kong*, starring Hong Kong artist Yu Ming and Japanese leading actor Akira Takarada, was dubbed in English, Mandarin and Japanese. In 1963, Cathay-Keris Cathay produced its first overseas film, "*Malam di Tokyo*" (Night in Tokyo) that was shot in Japan. However, these co-produced works met with little success (Chia, 2018).

Cathay-Keris ceased its film production operation in the early 1970s, due to difficulties met with the advent of television and the loss of the Indonesian market, a

result of the Indonesian Confrontation⁵, as well as the implementation of Malay as the national language (Chia, 2018).

Although the early Sinophone films focused on narrating the stories of Chinese immigrants, they also infused the narratives with Malay culture and the other local elements, especially the use of Malay language in the film's dialogue. Both the Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris produced Malay language films that guaranteed better returns than Sinitic language films. However, their operations eventually folded as the government adopted pro-Malay policies which aimed to break down the film industry being monopolized by Chinese capital (Kuan, 2015).

By reviewing the early development of the Sinophone films in Malaya, it is clear that co-production and circulation of Sinitic language films between Malaya (Singapore), China (Shanghai), Hong Kong have existed since the introduction of cinema to the region. The Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris had been involved in co-production and shooting overseas, showing how the early Sinitic language films in Malaya had engaged in transnational trajectories. Today, commercial filmmaker Adrian Teh who manages Asia Tropical Film Production Company is using the same method as Cathay-Keris, making Malay films that involve co-production with Hong Kong, China and Singapore film companies. I will elaborate more on this point in Chapter 2.

1.2.3 The Malay-centric “*Bumiputera*” Independence Era (1957-2000)

After the independence of Malaya in 1957, the formation of Malaysia and the separation of Singapore followed in quick succession in 1963 and 1965 respectively. A violent racial riot involving mainly the Malay and Chinese communities occurred after the Malaysian General Election on 13th May 1969 (commonly known as 13 May Incident). As the state controlled by Malay nationalist imputed the causes of riot to the economic gap between the Malay and Chinese, one of the lasting consequences of official reaction to the incident was the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970. A core provision in the NEP was to accord preferential treatment to the Malays

⁵ Indonesian Confrontation refers to the violent conflict which stemmed from Indonesia's opposition to the creation of Malaysia which consists of Western Peninsula, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak between 1963 and 1966.

and other natives to protect their interests. To facilitate the implementation of policies, the population was divided into “*Bumiputera*” (sons of the soil) and non-*Bumiputera* to differentiate those who qualify for preferential treatment and those who do not. Malays and other natives were given preferential treatment such as special quotas in public service positions and scholarships. Under the National Culture Policy which was implemented a year after the NEP, Malay culture was treated as the core of state culture, and together with Malay language 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. One of the first steps FINAS took was to limit the business activities of Chinese film companies and focus on either production or exhibition part of the business. Such forced decrease of Chinese domination in film production and exhibition businesses encouraged Malays to come into the film business in Malaysia (Raju, 2008). For many postcolonial countries, cinema is a foreign import that was quickly indigenized into the form of “national arts” (Loo, 2007; Dissanayake, 1994). Cinematic representations reflect the style in which a community is being imagined (Loo, 2007; Anderson, 1991). In order to enrich the Malaysian national identity and develop a national collection of moving images, FINAS adopted a policy to develop “Malaysian cinema” with an emphasis on films shot in the Malay language but not in other languages (N. Balaraman, 2005). To encourage filmmaking, FINAS provided subsidies or rebates to the amount of RM150,000 (an equivalent to USD 35,000) upon application. To qualify 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. Since then, the Malay-centric themes were securely entrenched in the Malaysian film industry in which the films mainly represent Malay life and culture whereas the Chinese language films exited from the scene for almost 20 years.

In the 80s’, due to Malay-centrism policies, many Malaysian Chinese left Malaysia,

and migrated to other countries, such as Singapore, United States, Canada and Australia. Among the Sinitic language speaking regions, Taiwan became the most common region that most Malaysian Chinese sought to reconnect to the Sinophone world because Taiwan was considered more democratic than the “Communist” labelled China, and the main languages spoken in Taiwan, the Sinitic Mandarin and “*Taiyu*” are very similar to the Sinitic Mandarin and Sinitic Hokkien spoken in Malaysia (Bernard, 2015). Malaysian indie filmmaker Tan Chui Mui notes, “The Sinophone Malaysian community is closer to Taiwan than to China. Many Malaysians who were educated in the Sinitic language, especially those in their 40s or 50s now, studied in Taiwan. Cultural exchanges between China and Malaysia began as late as the 1990s (Segay, 2007). The prominent filmmaker Tsai Ming Liang who was born in Sarawak Malaysia, is among the best examples who studied in Taiwan and subsequently remained there to pursue a successful filmmaking career.

1.2.4 The Resurrection of Sinitic Language Cinema in Malaysia (2000-)

In 1991, Malaysia Prime Minister Tun Mahathir introduced the idea of Vision 2020 with the intention to transform the country into a developed economy akin to that of the First World (Mahathir, 1993). The adoption of high technology policies accelerated integration with globalization (Khoo, 2007). Starting around the year 2000, 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 Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, Ho Yu Hang and Liew Seng Tat. They attempted to release and screen their works by participating in various regional film festivals. Most of these independent filmmakers are intellectuals who are conscious of social issues and unfair situations within the country and this has led them to focus on the subjects which are deemed as problematic and sensitive, as well as politically taboo in their films. For instance, Amir Muhammad’s “*Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*” (The Last Communist, 2006) was banned from public exhibition in Malaysia or taking communists as its subject. 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) (Baumgartel, 2011). Most of the Malaysian independent films have garnered awards in the international film festivals, but were not released in Malaysian cinemas because of censorship barriers and the non-commercial film style that had little appeal to the mass audiences.

Independent filmmaking marks the resurrection of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema in the film industry after an absence of nearly 40 years. This trend since 2000 is likened to the French New Wave Movement⁶ and is aptly known as the "Malaysia New Wave Movement" by film critics. The movement was, unfortunately, short-lived, as the films were considered too artistic to appeal to a general audience accustomed to action-packed commercial films (Mayer, 2010).

The trend of indie filmmaking was followed by the growth of local commercial Sinitic language filmmaking. Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers such as Chiu Keng Guan, Adrian Teh and Ryon Lee make commercial films within Malaysia and collaborate with film production companies from Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, and China, to make co-produced films. For instance, Adrian Teh adapted the film script *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, originally from China and made it a localized version (Kychia, 2016). He also features Singapore and Hong Kong artists in his films and uses filming technology from Hong Kong. Teh established Asia Tropical Film (ATF) in 2008 and his company also hosted foreign film shoots and crews using its locations and facilities for various types of films. ATF markets itself as a production company "providing one stop professional film production services" with "vast joint venture experiences with filmmakers from around the region" (Barker, 2018). Among the film productions supported by ATF are *Operation Mekong* (2016) and *The Viral Factor* (2012). On the other hand, Chiu Keng Guan has sent most of his films to Taiwan and Thailand for post-production which includes editing and sound-dubbing. Most of these co-produced films have successfully achieved box

⁶ 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).

office in the local market and were screened abroad in countries of collaboration. Both independent and commercial Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers have moved beyond national boundaries by taking the transnational route in terms of production, and distribution, and actively engaging in the Sinitic language film industry circuits more than before.

In the year 2010, the film *“Ice Kacang Puppy Love”* (2010) created history by hitting the box-office of RM4 million (an equivalent to USD 368,000), however it was not approved for the entertainment tax rebate because less than 60% of the film script was in Malay language (Abdul, Khairul & Lee, 2010). The director Tan Kheng Seong (Ah Niu) expressed his disappointment over the Malaysia government policies when he appeared on the Taiwanese entertainment show *SS Xiao Yan Night* (Hee, 2019). Taiwan media made coverage of Tan’s statement and soon the local media covered the news as well. Under pressure, FINAS reviewed the regulations over Sinophone Malaysian films and stipulated that as long as more than 50% of the films was shot in Malaysia, and all the stakeholders of the film production company are Malaysians, the language of the dialogue became irrelevant as long as Malay subtitles were attached, the film will be categorized as a Malaysian film, and the entertainment tax can be waived. For the first time, Sinitic language films in Malaysia are given almost the same status of the Malay language films (Hee, 2019).

FINAS implemented another Compulsory Screening Scheme⁷ to ensure all local films are screened in local cinemas for at least two weeks. However, the scheme also entitles the exhibitor (cinema) to make certain changes when deemed valid, for example, the exhibitor could move the screening of a local film to a smaller hall if the number of viewers falls below 15% of the capacity of the biggest hall after the first three days of screening. Also, the exhibitors can stop the film run if capacity issues arise (Lee & Lim, 2019; Begum, 2016). As local films do not appeal to local audiences compared to foreign

⁷ Recent changes to this initiative includes a move to a smaller hall if the number of viewers fall below 15% of the capacity of the biggest hall after the first four days as opposed to three in the earlier version while a five-times screening a day replaces the original four-times a day (Lee & Lim, 2019; Begum, 2016).

films, this policy has been criticized for not safeguarding local-made films but for prioritizing profit.

Today, the development of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema is rather slow with an average of 10 Sinitic language films being produced in a year. For example, in 2018, there are 14 Mandarin and Cantonese films being produced⁸. Out of the 14 films, only two films “*Lee Chong Wei: Rise of the Legend*” by director Teng Bee and “*Guang*” by director Quek Shio Chuan have successfully attracted the local Chinese audience to watch the films in the cinema (FINAS, 2018). As Malaysia's film market is still divided ethnically and linguistically into four segments—English, Malay, Indian (Tamil) and Chinese (primarily Mandarin and Cantonese), so the options open for Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers are very limited. They may accept the reality of the limited domestic Sinitic language film market by making Sinitic language films or engage in the Malay film production, or to seek opportunities overseas. As a consequence, there are Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers who have opted for prospects to develop their filmmaking careers especially in Taiwan and Hong Kong. When China began to liberalize its media industries with privatization of state-owned media companies in the 2000s (Kokas, 2017), there was a trend of seeking employment in China. One may cite Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Tan Chui Mui in her work in China to cooperate with prominent Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhang Ke. Others who are based in Taiwan to advance their filmmaking careers include Ho Wi Ding and Lau Kek Huat. Despite relocating to places outside Malaysia, these filmmakers make films about Malaysia, and also the foreigners/diaspora living in Taiwan and China. The stories in their films are reflective of their personal situations and experience as Malaysian Chinese living abroad. Their films become part of the transnational circulation of Sinitic language films, circulating between the Sinophone regions and non-Sinophone regions and finally their works are re-imported back to Malaysia, but most of the films do not appeal to the audiences and some of the films are even ended up banned from screening due to touching on sensitive issues.

⁸ This figure is only limited to the Sinophone Malaysian films screened in the local cinema, but excluded Sinophone films made by Malaysians based in other places and were not screened in the Malaysia cinema.

In 2018, the Malaysian General Election 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. For instance, the Freedom Film Festival was 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. However, the new government suddenly collapsed in March 2020 and was replaced by one dominated by Malay-based political parties once again. Whether this will usher in any change in film censorship for better or for worse is still too early to say.

The review of the development of Sinophone Malaysian cinema in relation to its historical and socio-political background reflects how the Sinophone Malaysian cinema has been marginalized since the early period, and the situation has worsened when policies were implemented to help national films which are shot in Malay-language but not other languages. Globalization and digitalization which led to the influx of the affordable shooting equipment into the market in the beginning of year 2000 has caused a resurgence in Sinitic language films in Malaysia that also have the capacity to engage in the transnational film circuit in terms of production and distribution. Due to budget restrictions, Sinophone Malaysian films usually revolve around the stories of the local Sinophone community; family, comedy, romance, and horror are among the popular genres. Nevertheless, the creolized Sinitic language and dialects used in the films are what makes Sinophone Malaysian cinema discernable from Sinophone films of other regions such as China, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

1.3 The Commercial Sinophone Malaysian Films: *The Journey* (2016) & *Ola Bola* (2018)

The Journey (2014), directed by Malaysian Chinese filmmaker, released in the year 2014, is one of the most successful Sinophone films in Malaysia. It became the highest grossing Sinophone film in Malaysia with RM17 million box office, ranking 3rd in Malaysia's films box office history (FINAS, 2018). The Malaysian Chinese population in Malaysia consists of about 6.5 million people (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2020), which suggests that this kind of box office success is attributed to film being viewed by

audiences of other ethnicities, or that the Malaysian Chinese audience viewed the film multiple times.

The Journey was screened in the cinema during Chinese New Year period, so it can be categorized within the “*hesuipian*” (賀歲片, *films screened during Chinese New Year period*) genre. Before *The Journey*, the filmmaker has made another two films, titled “*WooHoo!*” (2010) and “*Great Day*” (2011). *The Journey* can be considered the third installment in this trilogy of family-oriented Chinese New Year films by Chiu. All the three films revolve around the stories of the Sinophone Malaysian community, incorporating themes of Chinese family values, such as filial piety. There is a custom for the Chinese community in Malaysia to watch the *hesuipian* from Hong Kong in the cinema during the Chinese New Year period (Phooi, 2016). *The Journey*, however, had led the box office among all the *hesuipian* screened at the same time (Phooi, 2016). According to Gayatri Pillai, the Executive Producer of local film production company Infinitus, despite the film language being Sinitic languages, the Malay audience watched *The Journey* due to its touching story which resonates with all Malaysians (Liu, 2019). Apart from being categorized as *hesuipian*, *The Journey* can also be categorized to the genre of comedy and family drama. Malaysian commercial film director Adrian Teh points out how family, comedy, romance, and horror are among the most popular genres that appeal to the Malaysian audiences. Despite being a commercial, *The Journey* highlights the local indigenous cultures of the Sinophone community.

As locally made Sinophone films have a very limited market in Malaysia, Chiu Keng Guan has taken the path of making Malay language films like, *Ola Bola* (2016) in order to cater to the Malay audience which consists of almost 70% of the total population in Malaysia. However, the film *Ola Bola* (2016) was not a success as it only achieved RM16.67 million box office (FINAS, 2016), far less than *The Journey*. About 50% of the film is in the Malay language and *Ola Bola* was categorized as a Malay language film during its screening in the local cinemas. This situation is very similar to the early studio era of the Malaysian Film industry, when the Shaw Brothers and Chinese-owned Cathay-Keris made Malay language films in order to gain more profit. The Malaysian Chinese community showed no interest in watching the film due to the film’s language and

criticized the film for flattering the Malay community in order to make money. Nevertheless, the film was well celebrated among the Malay audience. The Malay community praised the film for portraying patriotism, national unity and other elements such as team spirit, dedication and sacrifice to the country (Nurul & Fariza, 2018), suggesting that such kinds of films should be promoted in order to improve national unity among different ethnicities.

Yet the film is difficult to categorize as purely a Malay language film, because *Ola Bola* actually features roles of different ethnics speaking their own native languages, including Malay, English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka and Tamil. The film title is Malay mix Spanish, wherein “*Ola*” means “Hello” or “Wave” in Spanish; whereas “*Bola*” means “ball” in Malay. Previous research on the film have related the style of using multi-language in a film to the late Malaysian filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad’s works, which have been widely recognized as a model of what a “true” Malaysian film should be.

Nevertheless, the film sparked controversy when it did not qualify for a nomination in the “Best Film” category in the 28th Malaysia Film Festival due to it is not meeting the quote of 70% Malay language dialogue. Ironically, the theme song of the film, “*Arena Cahaya*” (The Light Arena), with lyrics in Malay and English, won the Best Original Theme Song in Taipei Golden Horse Festival, a major Sinophone film awards held in Taiwan yearly, and contested by Sinitic language submissions (Phooi, 2016). This suggests the film is recognized within the sphere of the Sinophone rather than within a national category.

1.4 The Filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan

Filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan was born and raised in Batu Pahat, Johor. Johor is the southernmost state of West Malaysia Peninsula and is connected to Singapore through the Johor-Singapore causeway whereas Batu Pahat is a city in Johor which is occupied by a high population of Hokkien and Teochew descendants. After graduation from high school, Chiu studied Graphic Design and Fine Arts at a college in Kuala Lumpur before he joined a film production company a film production company in the Quality Assurance department (Nanyang Siang Pau, 2015).

During the 1990s, Asian cinema started to gain attention on the world stage. Chinese

filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou's *Raise The Red Lantern* (1991), Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), Ang Li's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and Tsai Ming-Liang's work *Vive L'Amour* (1994) were all nominated for awards in the world's most prestigious film awards such as the Academy Awards, Cannes Film Festival and Venice Film Festival. This had inspired Chiu to further his studies in Beijing Film Academy, where the alumni include Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige (Phooi, 2016).

Upon completion of his studies in film directing and returning to Malaysia, Chiu wanted to make films. However, the Sinitic language film industry in Malaysia had become stagnant during that time due to the Malay-dominant policies. Chiu had no choice but to join a newly established television station, 8TV⁹, whose target audience is the Malaysian Chinese demographic. It is believed that Chiu was part of the pioneering group that helped set up 8TV. Under 8TV, Chiu made local television shows such as "*Step Forward*" and "*Go Travel!*", both were travel programs that aimed at discovering the beauty of Malaysia. Besides these projects, Chiu also worked as videographer and assistant producer for TV dramas, commercials and corporate videos (Sin Chew Daily, 2009).

In 2008 or earlier, Chiu joined another media conglomerate, ASTRO¹⁰ that mainly broadcast programs from other countries. Every year, ASTRO practices the custom of live broadcasting the Chinese New Year countdown programs from Hong Kong and China, and these programs usually accumulate an unexpectedly high number of views from the Malaysian Chinese audience. Realizing this, Chiu proposed to make a local Chinese New Year countdown show by gathering all the local artists from ASTRO. As a result, for the first time, the number of views of the local Chinese New Year countdown show exceeded the number of views of the shows from Hong Kong and China. Since then, on every Chinese New Year's eve, ASTRO organizes countdown shows in different states in Malaysia, such as Penang, Johor, Melaka and Kuala Lumpur where these states are occupied by a large Malaysian Chinese populations, and each show is live streamed and broadcasted through the ASTRO 301 channel for the viewing by audiences who stay

⁹ 8TV is a television channel owned by Media Prima Berhad which is pro-government.

¹⁰ A satellite pay-TV station which is also pro-government.

at home for their reunion dinner (Sin Chew Daily, 2009).

The success of the Chinese New Year countdown program encouraged Chiu to think of making a film for Chinese New Year. At the same period, Taiwan filmmaker Wei Te-Sheng's film, "*Cape No. 7*" (2008) which tells authentically Taiwanese story and features not-so-popular artists and amateurs became extremely popular in Taiwan and created a trend of watching Taiwan-made films. So, Chiu was determined to make his first film which would tell the story of the Malaysian Chinese community (Phooi, 2016). The timing was perfect as the policies implemented on Sinitic language films had become slightly more flexible after the case of the film *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* (2010) (as mentioned earlier) which pushed the government to make changes over the biased regulations.

So, in 2010, Chiu released his first film, "*WooHoo!*" in which he insisted on employing an "all-local" crew and artists to tell a distinctively local story. Although *WooHoo!* didn't achieve high gross at the box office, it was well accepted by the Malaysian Chinese community especially the subscribers of ASTRO who are familiar with the ASTRO artists. In the coming year, Chiu made another film titled "*Great Day*" which has the almost same narrative content as *WooHoo!*.

After *Great Day*, Chiu took a gap of 3 years before he released *The Journey* in 2014, which can be considered as the last episode of the Chiu's Chinese New Year film trilogy. For the period of 3 years, while pitching ideas for *The Journey*, Chiu made a television program for ASTRO titled "*XiaoYuanBaoBaoKan*". This was part of a social project of ASTRO Mandarin Channel, used to engage with secondary students from the Mandarin school in Malaysia to make news reporting regarding the activities happening in their schools. Chiu and the newscasters from ASTRO Mandarin channel visited the target schools in different states in Malaysia, and teach the students how to use the camera for video recording. The videos made by the students were aired on ASTRO channel before the prime time news (ASTRO, 2020). The project aims to contribute to the Malaysian Chinese community and at the same time to attract more audiences by getting them involved in the filmmaking process. It is also through this project that Chiu got the idea of getting others involved in the filmmaking process of *The Journey*.

Filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan has shown interest in making films about the local Sinophone community since he was involved in the Sinophone media industry while waiting for the opportunity to make films. When the National Cultural Policy was imposed in 1970 which stipulated that the Malay culture and language as the national culture of Malaysia, the Malaysian Chinese community saw the policy as the government assimilation project to implement the “Malayanization” (Ngo, 2011). In the 1970s, Amid the perceived threat to eliminate the Chinese culture, Malaysian Chinese community had stepped up to protect their heritage in numerous fronts, such as fighting for Mandarin schools to remain in the education system. In the film industry, filmmaker Yi Shui (Mak, 2009) launched the “Malaysian Chinese Language Cinema Campaign” which called on the Sinophone communities in Malaysia to support the local-made Sinitic language films. Sinitic language and dialects, local languages as well as localized intonations are used in these films to foreground the “local” distinction and with the hope to construct a “national identity” for the “Malaysian Chinese”. Today, Sinophone Malaysian films have continued playing the role of representing the Malaysian Chinese community. With the embedded “Chinese” elements, the films serve as a tool to build the collective memory of the Sinophone community and to connect them with their cultural roots (Phooi, 2016), which can be clearly seen in the films by Chiu. In the following sections, I will develop my arguments further through textual analysis

1.5 The Creolized Languages and Essentialized “Chineseness” in *The Journey* (2014)

The Journey is about a conservative Malaysian Chinese father whose daughter is going to marry a British man. Many cultures, customs, festivals and values of the Malaysian Chinese community make an appearance in the film. For instance, distributing wedding invitation cards to friends and relatives becomes one of the film’s key plot elements. In the eyes of the British man, a cultural outsider, the custom is deemed redundant and troublesome until he understands the meaning and value behind it at the end of the film.

1.5.1 The Creolization and Intermixture of Multi-languages

At the beginning of the film, we first hear the theme song of the film in English, then the film shows the scene of a wedding ceremony in the Malaysian Chinese community.

The attendants speak Mandarin, and the film's main protagonist Uncle Quan who speaks Cantonese appears. In the following scene, the film shows Uncle Quan's daughter Bee speaking English with her fiancé Benji, and when the scene moves back to the wedding ceremony, a matchmaker is seen saying good words to the wedding couple in Hokkien.

The complexity of the language creolization can be seen in the later parts of the film when two characters are shown speaking different languages and dialects to each other. For instance, Uncle Quan speaks Cantonese to his sister-in-law who speaks Hokkien. One can also notice, when Uncle Quan's sister-in-law and other characters speak Hokkien, they tend to mix in Malay words, such as the word “*sayang*” which means “love” in Malay and “*tapi*” which means “but”. This implies the influence of the Malay language on the Sinitic Hokkien. Today, Hokkien has the biggest number of users in Malaysia (Hong, 2007). Compared to other dialects, Hokkien has absorbed a large amount of words from Malay. At the same time, Malay has also integrated a lot of words from Mandarin and other Sinitic dialects. Based on research conducted in 2002, there are 224 words of Mandarin and Sinitic dialects found in three of the authoritative Malay dictionaries. Hokkien words occupy 75% of the 224 words (Hong, 2009; Hee, 2018). There are also scenes in the film where Malay and English, are mixed with Sinitic languages in the dialogues. For example, when Uncle Quan and Benji check in a motel during the journey to distribute the wedding invitation cards, the hotel receptionist tells Benji: “*Tuala* and *sabun yi*(已) *jing* (經) in the room”, which “*tuala*” and “*sabun*” mean “towel” and “soap” in Malay respectively; “*yi jing*” means “already” in Mandarin; translating in full “Towel and soap are in the room already”. The hotel receptionist then adds on, “*Ni* (你) *overtime wo* (我) *charge ni* (你) *yi* (一) *ge* (個) *xiao* (小) *shi* (時) *shi* (十) *kuai* (塊), *bu* (不) *yao* (要) *main-main* (“play” in Malay) ” with the whole sentence translating to “If you check out late, I will charge you ten dollar per hour, be serious”. The filmmaker also makes an effort in introducing the indigenous Sinophone Malaysian “*huayu*” in the ending song sung by Benji. In the music video, Benji asks local Chinese how to speak *huayu*, and people teach him several words

such as “*xie xie ni liao*” (謝謝你了) which means “thank you” in Mandarin. In standard Mandarin, the particle “了” should be pronounced as “*le*”, instead of “*liao*” which is one of the typical word inflection used by the Malaysian Chinese which is linked to the pronunciation in the Hokkien dialect. The other characteristics of *huayu* include the use of modal particles at the end of the sentence to show different emotional expressions. The use of modal particles deviates from the standard Mandarin but follows the Cantonese language system. For example, Malaysian Chinese use “咩”(mie) at the end of the sentence to express doubt or disagree, which follows the logic of Cantonese, whereas in standard Mandarin, “嗎”(ma) is more commonly used. Other words Benji is taught are such as “*eng dao*” which means “handsome” in Hokkien; “*ngo oi nei*” which means “I love you” in Cantonese; “*pondan xu*” which is a mixture of Malay and Cantonese which “*pondan*” means “transgender” in Malay and “*xu*” means “tree” in Cantonese. Benji inserts all these words in the song and makes the song a deterritorialized and distinctive localized version with the mixture of multi-languages. There is also a moment when misunderstanding happens. When Benji asks Uncle Quan “What?”, Uncle Quan who doesn’t speak English mistaken “What?” as “*曲*”(Cantonese pronunciation of this Chinese word is similar to “what”), which means “bend”, this shows the commonality in pronunciation of different languages. The film sees a marriage of multiple Sinitic languages, as well as other local languages, and accents have created the creolized linguistic environment that contributes to the construction of the localized identity of the Sinophone Malaysian community.

In the film, there are several shots taken in a Mandarin language elementary school (where teaching is conducted in Sinitic Mandarin). One of the scenes is a flashback of Uncle Quan and his classmates when they were studying in the elementary school, speaking Mandarin while in class. After a fast cut, the scene moves back to the present showing Uncle Quan and his classmates are speaking in Cantonese. From here, one may notice Mandarin becomes the main teaching medium in the school but other Sinitic languages and dialects are preferred in daily conversation. In other scenes, the students who are mainly Malaysian Chinese are spotted learning Mandarin in class and a

Malaysian Chinese teacher is spotted teaching Malay language to the students. In Malaysia where the Malay-centric policies are implemented, there are still interstices within the Mandarin language education. The Mandarin language education system in Malaysia is the result of the effort made by the Sinophone community since the British colonization period and this explains why most of the Malaysian Chinese today can converse fluently in Mandarin. According to Ngeow & Ling & Fan (2014), Malaysia boasts the most complete Mandarin education system outside of China today and the Sinophone cultures and languages are well preserved by the Sinophone community in Malaysia¹¹. The Malaysian Chinese are able to pursue education in the public elementary schools where all the subjects including Mathematics, Science, and History are taught in Mandarin¹². However, Hee (2017) points out that, the Malaysian Chinese community's defense of Mandarin education was a collective expression of inner fears: if the Mandarin language was suppressed, then the cultural basis of their existence as a community would be destroyed.

¹¹ Unlike Indonesia which banned Chinese language in 1966, forcing the local Chinese to assimilate to the majority national culture as well as Singapore where English language is intensified through education and official discourse (Barker, 2018), Malaysia is the only country in Southeast Asia region which preserves the Mandarin language education system after independence.

¹² Although Malaysian Chinese are able to study in public Mandarin elementary schools for free, there are no government-sponsored Mandarin secondary schools. If a Malaysian Chinese would like to continue studying in a Mandarin secondary school, he or she has to attend the private independent school which tuition fee is required. The student who graduates from a Mandarin independent secondary school with Unified Education Certificate (UEC) is unable to enroll in the state public university because the UEC certificate which is recognized by most of the countries such as the UK, America, and Australia is not recognized by the Malaysia government. As a consequence, the UEC graduates who are mainly Malaysian Chinese have only one way to further study which is to study overseas, just like most of the Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers who choose to pursue education in Taiwan as mentioned in the introduction part earlier.



Figure 1.0 & 1.1: Different languages and dialects are spoken in Cameron Highland (left), Penang (right) and other locations in the film.

There is a scene when Uncle Quan scolds his daughter Bee for not speaking “pure” Mandarin when she mixes it with English. Nonetheless Uncle Quan does not notice he himself is also speaking Cantonese, not the standard Mandarin. Both Uncle Quan and his daughter are removed from the ideas of a Chineseness associated with discourses of authenticity or purity. This echoes the anti-Chinese diaspora idea proposed by Shih Shu-Mei (2007) because the Malaysian Chinese roles in the film identify themselves as Malaysian rather than “Chinese”. However, this does not necessarily imply that Malaysian Chinese agree with the Malay-centric national policies. As Lee (2011) suggests, the diasporic imagination and the local cultural memory that belong to the Sinophone Malaysian communities are constructed through the cultural scenes reproduced in the film. The cultural symbols, such as history, context, organization, social culture discourse and so on, are transformed into joint elements that join to form an articulation with the subject Sinophone Malaysian establishing a recognizable identity (Chen, 2002; Hall, 1990) that in turn constructs and reproduces Sinophone Malaysian cultural memory.

In the film, throughout the journey to distribute wedding cards, Uncle Quan and Benji cover three states in West Peninsula Malaysia: Pahang (Cameron Highland), Penang and Johor. Although Uncle Quan speaks Cantonese throughout the journey, but people he meets in Cameron Highland mainly speak Cantonese but Hokkien is spoken in Penang and Mandarin is spoken by Uncle Quan’s old classmate in Johor. This is exemplary of how the identities of the Sinophone subjects is reconstructed where the focus is on how the distribution of the Sinophone subjects in Malaysia are divided into several dialect clans across the region, such as the Cantonese in Central region, Hokkien

in the Northern region, and Mandarin in Southern district. The Chinese migrants who came to Malaya in the nineteenth century were not a homogeneous group. Rather they came from various parts of China, and brought their different dialects and occupational skills (the Hokkiens merchants; the Teochew farmers; the Cantonese and Hakka artisans and the Hainanese domestic servants) (Clammer, 2002, p.142). Clammer locates dialects as the binding force among the Chinese of diverse origins in Malaya (Raju, 2008).

The scenes set in Penang are mostly taken at Chew Jetty, a clan village which is built on stilts by the pioneer Chinese immigrants who shared common historical, geographical and clan origins more than a century ago. It is believed the “Chews” originated from the south-eastern coast of China—from the Tung Aun District, Xin Lin She Village, Quan Zhou Prefecture of Fujian Province. They were maritime clan communities in China so when they emigrated, they built homes for themselves at the waterfront (MyChewJetty, 2020). A total of eight clan jetties remain in Penang today, including “Chew”, “Lim”, “Tan”, “Lee”, “Yeoh”, “Koay”, “Peng Aun” and Mixed Clans (MyChewJetty, 2020). Among these jetties, Chew Jetty is famous for its clan-related activities which include the worship of “*Tee Kong*” (God of Heaven or Sky-God) as shown in the film. We can see in the film, the residents place the worship food on the long altar table for praying and the event attracts throngs of people to Chew Jetty to enjoy lion and dragon dances. The jetty implies the Sinophone community in Malaysia was once connected to China as it signifies port of landing for the immigrants from China but the connection has weakened after many years when the Sinophone community started to adapt to local life and develop their own cultures.

1.5.2 The Essentialized “Chineseness” in the Film

A Sinophone film like *The Journey* is embedded with many instances of essentialized “Chineseness”. I argue that the “Chinese” elements are inserted into the film strategically in order to construct a collective identity and memory for the Sinophone community in Malaysia and to appeal to the Sinophone Malaysian audience for watching the film.



Figure 1.2 Spring couplets and red cloth hanging on the door symbolize the Malaysian Chinese cultures and traditions.



Figure 1.3 Uncle Quan prepares *misua* with two boiled eggs for Bee on her birthday, with the meaning of longevity.

In the film, the Malaysian Chinese characters are represented as remarkably resilient in preserving their culture. The Spring Couplets are spotted at Uncle Quan's house as the film is set during Chinese New Year period. The film shows Uncle Quan as a traditional and reserved father who follows all the Chinese traditions, customs and cultures. He has a reunion dinner with his daughter Bee and his son-in-law Benji and gives red packets (*angpow*) to both of them during Chinese New Year. Besides, Uncle Quan also insists on distributing the wedding invitation cards to his friends by hand. The card in red is printed with dragon and phoenix on the cover as the symbol of a blissful marriage. In order to celebrate Bee and his own birthday, Uncle Quan prepares "*misua*" (a kind of thin noodle) and two boiled eggs that symbolize longevity and good luck. In addition, the *misua* is served in the "Rooster Bowl" which is commonly seen in Sinophone (Hong Kong) films, especially in Stephen Chow's films, such as *Fight Back to School* (1991), *God of Cookery* (1996), and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) (Phooi, 2016). As the pronunciation of "rooster" in Sinitic dialect Hokkien is similar to the pronunciation of "home" (also in

Hokkien), so the Rooster Bowl contains the meaning of “the ability of making one’s own family”, in other words, it means one will have the ability to work for money and lead a good life. As Bee is going to get married soon, so the bowl implies a hope for his daughter to have a wonderful marriage life. The Rooster Bowl also implies the influence of Hong Kong Sinophone films and dramas in the Sinophone community in Malaysia as the Sinophone Malaysian communities watch Hong Kong films and TVB dramas more than Sinophone works of other regions since the 19th century (Mak, 2009). Hong Kong culture can be seen not only in Sinophone Malaysian films today but also the Cantonese spoken by Malaysians today are learned by watching Hong Kong TVB dramas and films since there is no formal education in Cantonese dialects taught in school (Phooi, 2016).

Besides the role of Uncle Quan, the film also depicts a matchmaker who says good words to the wedding couple during a wedding ceremony, and the 12 Chinese zodiacs is also incorporated into the narrative through Uncle Quan and his classmates’ roles. The essentialized representation of the Malaysian Chinese nonetheless resonates with the collective cultural experience of the Sinophone community in the new settlement which has no direct relation to China, but challenges the idea of a monolithic Chinese culture.



Figure 1.4 & 1.5 The celebration of the birthday of “Sky-God” by the Hokkien people in Penang (left) and the Chingay procession in Johor (right).

Moreover, the film portrays events dedicated to the worship of two major deities that serve to highlight the unique quality of the Sinophone Malaysian community. The first one is the celebration of the birthday of the “Sky-God” which is grandly celebrated by the Hokkien people on the 9th day of Chinese New Year. In the film, this event takes place around Chew Jetty in Penang as mentioned earlier, the state which has the highest Hokkien population among the 13 states in Malaysia. Another scene of the deities’ procession takes place in Johor. The festival is called Chingay procession and involves

the deities of 5 dialects (Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Hainan and Cantonese). This event has more than 140 years of history and is a symbol of the unity of the Sinophone Malaysian community which originated from different dialect clans of China (JB Ting Hua, 2018). Although the Chingay procession originated from China, today it has become its own unique culture which could only be seen in Malaysia and Singapore. The representation of these events of worship echo the suggestions of Sinophone studies (Shih, 2007) that a place-based culture is heterogeneous from another and does not necessarily relate to China-centrism. A scene in which the son of Uncle Quan's classmate who works as a "*tong ji*" (spirit medium) tells Benji that he is working for God, because God gives "big power" to Its believers, showcases the beliefs and religions of the Sinophone Malaysian community. The red tabernacle, named "*shen kan*" in Mandarin which is used to pay respect to the deities can be seen at the compound of the houses of the Malaysian Chinese in the film. Also, usually in the house of the Malaysian Chinese who is either Taoist or Buddhist¹³, there will usually be an altar for worshipping the deities as well as the ancestors who had passed away. The scenes which portray the local beliefs decentralize "China" as China had officially espoused state atheism as the result of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

The Malay word "*pantang*" which means taboo is repeated several times by Uncle Quan when he refuses to attend the funeral of one of his classmates due to the reason that his daughter Bee is going to get married soon. For the Sinophone Malaysian community, it is a taboo (folk culture) for someone who has just attended a funeral to attend a wedding ceremony as it is believed that they will bring bad luck to the newlyweds. At the end of the film, however, Uncle Quan has let go of the "*pantang*" when he welcomes the family members of his classmate who had passed away to his daughter's wedding. This shows the Sinophone culture and customs practiced by the Malaysian Chinese are not fixed but always changing. Also, one is encouraged to bathe with pomelo leaves in order

¹³ According to statistics, 83.6% of Malaysian Chinese identify themselves as Buddhist, with significant numbers of adherents following Taoism (3.4%) and Christianity (11.1%). However, the percentage of practitioners of the Chinese folk religions may be higher, as many practice both Buddhism and folk religions (Malaysia Statistic Bureau, 2020).

to wash away bad luck and this is suggested by Uncle Quan when he is brought into the police station, he tells Benji that he is going to bathe using the pomelo leaves after going home. It is hard to trace back the origin of these folk cultures, whether it is from China or whether they are from China or the result of assimilation of the Sinophone culture into the local cultures that might need further research.

As a Malaysian Chinese filmmaker, Chiu focuses on the sentiments of Bee towards her home and family in Malaysia, eschewing her hard life in England and the predicament of the Sinophone Malaysians living in Malaysia. Bee plays the role of the “dominant” and “active” agent. Despite being an ethnic minority in Malaysia, “Malaysian Chinese” becomes “dominant” and “central” in the film whereas the Malay becomes a minority. The only Malay role in the film is Fatimah, one of Uncle Quan’s ex-classmates who wants to avoid becoming a “snake”, in reference to the Chinese zodiac, but would rather become the cat that is not included in the Chinese zodiac. She is the only Malay who studies in the Mandarin elementary school, and in reality, Malays usually study at Malay schools where the teaching is conducted in Malay. The insertion of this Malay role can be thought of as a way of diverting the film from being entirely “Chinese” and also to avoid the problem of not using any Malay language in the film.

In one scene, Uncle Quan tells his classmates, “I am a Chinese, she (Fatimah) is a Malay, we are not possible”. This line reflects the fact that in Malaysia, different ethnics are separated into their own communities. This segregation has a long history and was a result of policies from the period of British colonization when different ethnic groups were assigned to work in different sectors of the country and live in their own communities. The custom has extended until today.



Figure 1.6 Uncle Quan is represented as an outsider when Benji talks to Fatimah like they have known each other for a long time.

When Benji meets Fatimah for the first time, they talk to each other like they have known each other for a long time whereas Uncle Quan seems to be an outsider and does not understand their conversation. Metaphorically, this scene insinuates the collusion of the Malay and British colonial which led to the British colonization (Shamsul, 1997).

Uncle Quan makes it clear that he does not like Benji and, along with the other Malaysian Chinese characters, they address him as “*Ang Mo Gui*” (紅毛鬼; literally, “Red Fur Ghost” in Hokkien) and “*Guai Lou*” (鬼佬; literally, “Ghost Guy” in Cantonese) racist remarks that stem from anti-colonial sentiment. Nevertheless, sarcastically, Uncle Quan asks Benji for help to realize his classmate’s last unfulfilled wish of making a hot air balloon. Benji takes charge of setting up the hot air balloon but in the end, it deflates and Uncle Quan is saved by a tree that breaks his fall.

Another point I would like to make is that in most of the Malaysian films, the role of police is always taken by Malay, as in reality this is almost always the case. It also reflects the fact that the monopolization of the political and government sector by the Malays. In *The Journey*, however, during the police raid at the motel where Uncle Quan and Benji stay, a Malaysian Chinese female police is seen talking to Uncle Quan in Malay. The exchange is unusual: Malaysian Chinese will usually communicate with each other in a Sinitic language or dialect. In this case, despite her identity as a Malaysian Chinese, the police officer is in a position representing the state and it is imperative she forego communicating in a language or dialect she is comfortable with in favor of the national and official language of the state.

The essentialized Chineseness is employed by the filmmaker Chiu through the film as a strategy to underscore the local situatedness and to contest the hegemonic majorities of both China-centrism and Malay-nationalism. Through an informed reading that considers Sinophone studies, “Chineseness” is reconsidered for meaning-production within the local as well as the global context, but, above all, the place of settlement and everyday practices (Shih, 2007). This gives new meaning to Chineseness and presents it as an identity that is both precarious and fluid, and one that is constantly undergoing transformation.

1.6 The “Malaysian-ness” and “Imagined Nation” in *Ola Bola* (2016)

Ola Bola is a film about the true event of the Malaysia national football team which successfully entered the 1980 Summer Olympics.

The film plot begins with Marianne, a young female Malaysian Chinese television program producer, who is baffled by the task of having to research the 1980 national football team. She makes a trip to Sabah in east Malaysia to interview Eric who was one of the team members. The plot then flashes back to the 1980’s with Eric acting as narrator to relay the stories of his past to Marianne. The whole plot is narrated through the perspective/subjectivity of the Malaysian Chinese characters in the film and their stories are linked to the larger Sinophone Malaysian community collectively.

Marianne is obviously English educated and the way she speaks Sinitic languages is with a strong English accent. At the beginning of the film, she plans to receive a job from BBC and migrate to England but after interviewing Eric and getting to know the story of the national football team, she decides to stay. In the last scene, after the ending credits roll, she is shown waving a Malaysian flag from a train. This scene of Marianne waving the flag suggests her acceptance of Malaysia as her home—she, of course, rejects it at first—but the more important question is if the nation will accept her. Given the biased policies towards different ethnicities in Malaysia, we may also ask whether Malaysia is just an “imagined nation” or the real “homeland” for the Malaysian Chinese. “Imagined nation” is a concept brought up by Anderson (2016), which he contends,

“a nation is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”. While members of the community probably will never know each of the other members face to face, they may have similar interests or identify as part of the same nation. Members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity: for example, the nationhood felt with other members of your nation when your ‘imagined community’ participates in a larger event such as the Olympic Games.” (p. 6)

Different ethnicities may have different thoughts about what constitutes the “imagined

nation”, for instance, the Malaysian Chinese may imagine Malaysia as a multiethnic and multicultural nation but the Malay nationalists may think of Malaysia as a nation dominated by Malay culture and language. Malaysian historian Cheah Boon Kheng (2002, p. 27) describes this kind of national consciousness as “Exclusionary Malay Nationalism”.

In fact, Malaysia is often essentialized as a “multi-ethnic” and “multicultural” country where Malay, Chinese, Indian, and native groups such as Kadazan, Iban and others live together on the same land. “Malaysian-ness” is commonly understood as a mixture or hybridity of cultures that consists of Malay, Chinese, Indian and the other ethnic groups. *Ola Bola* is a film which emphasizes the idea of “Malaysian-ness” as there are three main roles of each ethnic group and others appear in the film. The football team consists of players of Malay, Malaysian Chinese, and Malaysian Indian as well as some who look Eurasian as representing the “other ethnicities”. However, in spite of this essentialist idea of ethnic harmony and national unity, the representations of each ethnic group in the film have their own connotative meanings.



Figure 1.7 *Ola Bola* features the characters of each Malaysia’s main ethnic groups: the Malay, the Malaysian Chinese and the Malaysian Indian.

The main Malaysian Chinese role in the football team, Tauke (which means “Boss” in Hokkien) is the team leader. Tauke comes from a poor family and they live in a wooden house reminiscent of the “New Village”¹⁴. Tauke has a sister who scores well in

¹⁴ A cluster of wooden houses built near the jungle bushes by the British colonial in 1948 in order to control the Chinese from funding the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) members who hid in the jungle for guerilla war. Today, there are about 480 New Villages remaining in Malaysia (Ng, 2012).

the high school national examination but must give up this opportunity to further her studies to support her brother, who is on the national football team, by working as a rubber tapper and tailor. The plot reveals the patriarchal influence in the traditional Malaysian Chinese family that prioritizes males over female. In addition, Malaysian Chinese are depicted as “not rich” to subvert the preconceived stereotype that all the Malaysian Chinese are rich.

Eric, who is from Sabah, East Malaysia is shown to be discordant with the other players, and even quarrels with Ali, the Malay player. During the quarrel, Ali isn't satisfied with Eric as he is assigned Number 10, the most important position in the team. Ali confronts Eric by saying, “All of us in this room want to get No. 10, why is that you who got No. 10?” Eric replies, saying: “So it is because of Number 10 that you treat me like an outsider?” (*Original Malay script: Semua orang dalam bilik ini nak nombor 10, kenapa kau yang dapat? Sebab nombor 10, you layan aku sama orang luar?*) The dialogue reflects that Ali (Malay) is not satisfied that Eric (Chinese) is given a “prioritized” position that he does not deserve and Eric is dissatisfied over being treated like an outsider, which, metaphorically, is the voice of all the Malaysian Chinese living in Malaysia who have their rights and benefits marginalized in comparison with the Malay. Moreover, conflict between Eric from East Malaysia and his teammates from West Malaysia also epitomize East Malaysia's dissatisfaction over West Malaysia, which has taken natural resources from the East despite the East being far less developed than the West.

The other Malaysian Chinese player, Ah Cai, had always been a substitute in the team until the final match when he plays an important role. Ah Cai passes the ball to Ali who then makes the winning score for the Malaysian team, echoing what Ah Cai says in an earlier scene about wanting be useful despite being a “small screw”. This also symbolizes the idea of Malaysian Chinese contributions to the country which are overlooked when they are not given equal treatment as the Malay.

Ali the Malay player is later given the No.10 position by the British coach, an action could be interpreted as a metaphor for the British colonial government handing the political power to the Malay people before Malaya became independent. When passing

No. 10 to Ali, the coach says: “Always is yours”. The exchange highlights the way native Malays are prioritized and given special treatment compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Muthu, the Indian player is depicted as coming from an impoverished family. He has three brothers who are still young but nevertheless help their father in the business of plucking coconuts. This depiction of a poor Indian family is common in Malaysia films, and reflects their marginalized situation, which is worse than the Malaysian Chinese. Although there are exemptions to this stereotype of the poor Indian family—there are certainly many Indians in Malaysia in well-off positions—many are still living in the outskirts and work in the rubber-tapping industry just as they had been since the British colonization period.

Through the background setting of the characters of each ethnic group, one can also see how the Malaysian Chinese, Malays and Malaysian Indians practice different cultures and lifestyles. For instance, although both Malaysian Chinese and Malay are represented as living in the wooden house in the film but the Malay wooden house is built on the stilts; the Malays wear traditional Malay costumes and eat “*Nasi Lemak*”, a local Malay food, and the broadcast of the Islamic Quran can be heard in the background when the Malay characters appear on the screen. Malaysian Chinese culture is much different than the native Malay culture, as we can observe from the roles of Tauke, Ah Cai and Eric.

The British coach of the football team, whose task is to lead the team to qualify for the Olympic Games, is an obvious allusion to the colonial period government, serving as a warning to that the state may fall back into the hands of foreign powers if Malaysia lacks unity. When Tauke speaks about the British coach with Rahman, the Malay sports announcer in the film, Rahman is optimistic about the presence of the British coach, saying, “*He came all the way from England to help you*”. The statement implies the collusion of the Malay and the British colonial government, an agreement which led to the British colonization of Malaya in the past. Tauke does not agree with Rahman and replies, “*I dun know whether he is here to help or is he trouble maker*”. This relates to the historical scenario of the Chinese who were involved in the Malayan Communist

Party to fight against the British colonial government but have since been labeled as “terrorists”.



Figure 1.8 People regardless of ethnicity are shown cheering together during a football match.

The film *Ola Bola* also shows people of different ethnicities dancing together at a funfair and cheering during the football match. The festive atmosphere suggests harmony and unity among ethnicities in Malaysia but these scenes were created especially by the filmmaker to promote a kind of “national allegory” and present an imagined place of peace and equality through the film. The stereotypical representation of Malaysia as a multiethnic cultural country has unwittingly contributed to the idea of a “cosmetic multiculturalism”, which according to Morris-Suzuki (2002, p. 171), is a disguised form of nationalism that overlooks the oppressive reality underneath the discourse of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism involves giving up the requirements for complete assimilation of minority groups into the dominant host culture, and aims to provide equal status to minorities and preserve their cultural heritage. As such, cultures of minority groups are confined in a fixed and never changing form. These scenes of the crowd are no doubt efforts made by the filmmaker to echo the campaign of “1 Malaysia” proposed by the ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak, and serve to emphasize the ethnic harmony and national unity. However, filmmaker Amir Muhammad criticizes “1 Malaysia”¹⁵ as merely

¹⁵ The basic idea of 1 Malaysia is to protect the destiny of all ethnic groups, no one will be marginalized. (Pejabat Perdana Menteri, 2009) However, on the homepage of 1 Malaysia, it stated that social justice should be taken the different progress levels of different ethnics into consideration. Thus, the government policies and the needs of specific groups guaranteed by the national constitution will be continually implemented, which is to say the *Bumiputra* privileges will remain (Hee, 2019).

a slogan to reel in Chinese votes as Najib's government has never implemented concrete efforts to change the biased and problematic system already in place (Hee, 2014).

Food is another important aspect of the film. Gunkel (2016, p. 246) defines food as “a system of communication, a type of language through which we express identities and relationships, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, festivity, and sacrality”. Food can also evoke feelings and create emotional attachments. Mannur (2010, p. 5), elaborates on the role of food in creating “nostalgia, performing cultural identity, and establishing alternative networks of intimacy not circumscribed by lines of blood and filiation”. Through food, a person can access his or her culture, past and nationality (Barthes, 2008). In the film, when Marianne tells her superior that she intends to accept the offer from BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) in England but her superior tells her that he prefers ABC than BBC. The ABC he refers to is an acronym for *Air Batu Capur*, or “mixed ice” in Malay, a local shaved ice dessert which contains palm seed, red beans, sweet corn, grass jelly, roasted peanuts and cubes of agar-agar as common ingredients. Malaysia is a hot country so ABC has become a common food/drink among all the ethnicities. In this sense, the food ABC blurs the boundaries of ethnicities (Marianne is a Chinese and her boss is a Malay) and emphasizes how “We are the same”, as Marianne and her boss both know about and eat ABC. The other food mentioned in the film is “*Nasi Lemak*”, a Malay dish consisting of coconut milk rice, topped with anchovies, chilli paste, cucumber, boiled egg, peanuts, meat and served on banana leaf, one of the most significant Malaysian food. In one of the scenes, Tauke expresses his dissatisfaction over the British coach to Rahman, a Malay sports announcer by saying that Rahman and him both eat *Nasi Lemak*, making them “brothers” but the coach, with brown hair and blue eyes, who eats steak is not like either of them. Again, food is used to discern between “us” and “them” but this time, food also serves as an agent to blur the boundaries between “Malay” and “Chinese”. It goes further by commenting on what it means to be “Malaysian” in way that is reminiscent of the concept of “hybridity”. Cultural hybridity looks at the process of mixing together different cultural elements and the creation of new cultures, meanings and identities which are the product of fusion, or creolization, of the local and global (Cohen, 1994). Cultural hybridity challenges the

notion of essentialism and pureness, and it has the potential to subvert the process of domination as well as function as a political strategy providing a position from which they can resist, or negotiate with, their host culture, and by doing so, effect political change (Bhabha, 1994). As Shih (2005) suggests, the new hybrid culture is not simply a sum of what is being mixed, but emerges from the process to become what Bhabha (1990) calls a ‘third space’ that is always open for changes. In this case, I argue not only the Malaysian food is showing the hybridized characteristic that is always in changes as the result of the influence of other ethnic or other countries food cultures, but the identity of the Malaysian Chinese, which is neither the authentic Chinese nor the Malay is also in the fluid form as the language they speak and culture they practice are always in the transformation. Nonetheless, Cheah (2006) criticizes the concept of “hybridity” for neglecting the unevenness of political and economic globalization. The fact that Chiu works with the television station ASTRO, which is pro-government (Phooi, 2016), is an important point to consider when thinking of why Chiu would make a film that highlights “Malaysian-ness” while not being entirely pro-Malay nor pro-Chinese.

One of the biggest controversies of the film is the way it altered the historic events that it was based on, in particular how Khalid Ali (portrayed as Ali) is shown scoring the final winning goal in the film final when it was actually scored by James Wong (portrayed as Eric in the film) instead. Viewers were perplexed, and the Malaysian Chinese audience was especially unsatisfied with the alteration as they imputed the film’s plot discrepancy as a strategy by the director to flatter the Malay community. Moreover, the scene exaggerated the score line of the original (Ravi, 2016). However, the filmmaker explains that the film was merely “inspired” by historical events: it is a fiction film, he contends, rather than a documentary. This leads me to propose that the alteration is meant to remind audiences that the film itself is a work of fiction, as so too is its portrayal of ethnic harmony and national unity. The film is, after all, a representation, a creative way for the filmmaker to re-examine the “imagined nation” and the “Malaysian-ness” that is not fixed but rather becoming. Foucault (1989) contends that the film can create and construct the imagination of the audience towards “the others” and work as a method to

manipulate memories of the audience in order to hide political issues through comedy and harmony in the narrative.

Despite their victory over Korea, the Malaysian national football team did not qualify for the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow because Malaysia was part of the block of countries led by the United States that boycotted the Games as a protest against the late 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Goh, 2016). The formation of the Federation of Malaya in 1948 was, in fact, also a result of the Cold War between America and the Soviet Union. The British colonial government formed the federation in order to consolidate its power that had weakened as the result of the Cold War while at the same time it served to curb the strengthening of Communist power in Malaya (Hee, 2018).

1.7 The (Trans)national Production and the Reception

The original title of *The Journey*, “*quan min dian ying*” (全民電影), literally translates to “a film that involves all the Malaysian people.” The film supposedly adopted this title from a scene that features a flying hot-air-balloon that was made by the public and volunteers (Hua, 2014). The same scene also shows the celebration of the Sky-God’s birthday in Penang and the Chingay parade (Parade of the deities) in Johor, which were recorded live on location and involves the public in the filming.

The film could also be considered a road film, as the protagonist Uncle Quan moves from place to place in the process of distributing the wedding invitation cards. The road film genre makes the narrative content approachable for an audience who would not understand the context of the Sinophone Malaysian community. The shooting locations in *The Journey* covers the entirety of Peninsula Malaysia, the northern part of Kedah and Penang, the central part of Cameron Highland and Kuala Lumpur all the way to the Southern part of Johor. The filmmaker inserts the beautiful landscapes of Malaysia in the film, including hidden gems that most Malaysians are not even aware of. The local audience was amazed at the beauty of their country and foreign viewers perceived the film as a promo film from the tourism industry of Malaysia. In Chiu’s previous film *WooHoo!* (2010), he also included location shooting at a beautiful fishing village in Kuantan, in the East Coast of Malaysia, and most of the scenes of his film *Great Day* (2011) were taken in the state of Perlis, the northernmost state in Peninsula Malaysia

which has always been neglected as being the smallest of the country's states. As a producer for several travel programs before his start in filmmaking, Chiu is perhaps aware of how setting his shooting locations in different states can provide a sense of familiarity to a wider audience from all over Malaysia. Selecting hidden villages in suburban areas as filming locations also implies Chiu's efforts to highlight the "localized" communities and cultures rather than a focus on city life in order to create a collective local identity among the audience.

ASTRO SHAW, which is the film production company under ASTRO Malaysia Holding Sdn. Bhd. is where Chiu received the funds for to make his films, so it comes as no surprise that artists, DJs, VJs and even newscasters involved in ASTRO take up roles in the film. For example, the female protagonist Bee is led by Joanne Yew, who is the winner of the 2007 Miss Astro Chinese International Pageant competition. Other minor roles such as the boss of the motorbike shop who fixes Benji's motorbike is taken by popular DJ Jack Lim, who is the host of the morning prime time session of My FM, a Mandarin based radio station under ASTRO. The woman who sells checkered shirts to Benji in the market is the most senior newscaster at the Mandarin channel of ASTRO. Moreover, the film has also received sponsorship from some other commercial brands such "*Eu Yan Sang*" (a Chinese natural medicines and herbs company founded in Singapore) and *Ogawa* (massage chair maker). It could be said that the film is funded by all the ASTRO TV subscribers as well, given that subscribers pay monthly for different packages prepared by the network. During the screening of *The Journey* in cinemas, the ASTRO Mandarin channel publicized the film by airing a promo clip every 15 minutes during the commercial breaks of each television program, which helped contribute to the success of the film when it hit the box office.

In an interview, Chiu Keng Guan says, "I want to make 100% local film, by featuring local languages, crews, talents and shooting locations." (Phooi, 2016). Indeed, he tries to feature local talent, artists, and even amateurs, in order to make the film as "local" as possible. *The Journey*, however, takes a slightly different turn. First is the role of a foreigner, the British man Benji, from whose viewpoint we see Malaysian Chinese culture. This gives the film something not purely "local". With the trend of globalization,

film production is unavoidably transnational, especially considering Sinitic language films that are excluded from the Malaysia national film category. Sinophone studies is useful here to make sense of the film by not only taking power and ownership factors into consideration but also to think about distribution and cinematography beyond the national boundary.

In fact, Sinophone Malaysian films have always been argued as existing as either “national” or “transnational”. Due to the film language being mainly in Sinitic languages and dialects—and because Sinophone Malaysian culture is not recognized as the national culture—Sinophone Malaysian films have always been treated as the “other”. In the 27th Malaysian Film Festival, *The Journey* was not nominated in the “Best Film” category due to the controversial language issue. However, *The Journey* did cross the national border by taking part in the 16th Far East Festival in Udine, Italy, the 4th Beijing International Film Festival, in Beijing, China, 51st Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival in Taipei, Taiwan, and screened in the cinemas in Singapore (Astro Awani, 2014). Raju (2008) points out, Sinophone Malaysian films become “national” only when they receive award or take part in the international film festivals representing the country of “Malaysia”. However, he contends that Sinophone Malaysian films are “transnational” because they are more similar to the films of other Sinophone regions in their content and cinematography.

The Journey is considered a commercial film based on its genre, content and production. However, the cinematography, especially the shot composition and editing, have given *The Journey* a sense of artistic affinity with Sinophone Taiwanese films. This is perhaps attributed to Chiu’s background studying Arts and Graphic Design but also perhaps because the film was actually sent to Taiwan for post-production.

Lastly, Chiu employs the love between a father and the daughter to express filial piety, a value which is not limited to the Sinophone sphere but is also an Asian, perhaps even universal, value that appeals to a large general audience. Uncle Quan loves his daughter, Bee, but he hides his feelings. Bee, despite living in England since her childhood, has never forgotten her true “home”. She brings Benji back to her hometown and tries to get him to “compromise” and “tolerate” her stubborn father—but this is

because she cares deeply about her father. Benji was not ready to become a father when he got to know Bee was pregnant but the son of Uncle Quan's classmate tells Benji that parenthood is a blessing simply because "People feed me, I feed people", words that inspire Benji to accept the fact that he will soon be a father himself.

Conclusion

In sum, the foregrounding of Chineseness through the representations of the values, cultures, festivals, and customs of the Sinophone Malaysian community is used as a strategy by the filmmaker to challenge both Malay-centric and China-centric dominance while also emphasizing the distinctions of the Sinophone Malaysian community. Chineseness is rearticulated as an open identity under the "imagined nation (homeland)" that is always in a state of becoming.

No single official language is dominant in the film, reflecting the efforts of the filmmaker to contest the fixed definition of either a Malay or a Sinophone film while opening up a space for reconsideration of what makes a Malaysian film. The "Malaysian-ness" represented in the film could be seen as essentialized but with each major role representing each ethnicity, the film still carries plenty of political and social significance that asks questions about the "imagined nation" and an essentialized "Malaysian-ness".

Chapter 2 Towards the Minor: Realigning Sinophone and non-Sinophone Cinema

2.1 Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sinophone cinema market in Malaysia is very limited, as there is only about 27% of the Chinese population in Malaysia. According to a research on Malaysian's preference on local films or Hollywood films, 90% of the respondents said that they like to watch Hollywood films, followed by films made in Hong Kong, India and Thailand. The locally produced Malaysian film is their last choice (Sriganeshvarun Nagaraj & Abdul Aziz, 2019).

For Sinophone filmmakers who remain in Malaysia, some make Malay language films to cater to the Malay market in order to make bigger profit. This trend is very similar to the Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris Production era, in which both of these Chinese-monopolized film production companies had mainly produced Malay language films in the 1950s and 1960s. The reasons for making Malay language films in the environment in which Malay is prioritized can be easily understood but there is another phenomenon whereby Malay filmmakers who make Sinitic language films too. Before I elaborate this part further, I will frame this phenomenon of making films in non-native language within the theoretical framework.

According to Shih (2007, p. 30), Sinophone studies emphasize language, “foregrounds not the ethnicity or race of the person but the languages he or she speaks in either vibrant or vanishing communities of those languages”. In the previous chapter, I focused on two Malaysian films made by Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan, in which the filmmakers use Sinitic languages, including dialects such as Cantonese and Hokkien as main languages and framed them as Sinophone films. However, in these so-called Sinophone films, some dialogues which involve Malay, English and even Tamil words can be heard. This shows that in Malaysia where multi-languages are spoken, Sinitic languages have been creolized and it is impossible to draw a clear line between Sinitic language and non-Sinitic language. In fact, the “*huayu*” spoken in Malaysia involves a lot of words from Malay, English and other localized languages.

This led to the question of how to consider the relation between the “dominant” and “minor” languages used in the films. In order to approach this question, I will look into Malay language films shot by Malaysian Chinese filmmakers and Sinitic films shot by Malay filmmakers. I argue this is very much alike the Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *minor literature* which Shih (2007) has borrowed to develop the concept of Sinophone studies when she highlights the significance of individual Sinophone cultures and their lived experience in local sites through the plurality of Sinitic languages of the diverse Sinophone groups.

2.2 Minor Cinema

By referring to the “minor” characteristics defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p. 52) that I have reviewed in the Introduction chapter (refer to pg. 12), such as “minor” as a movement that “takes a major voice and speaks it in a way that expresses one’s preferred identity”; also the minor cinema is able to deterritorialize without reterritorialize, and to resist the urge to recreate a fixed identity, I argue a Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker who makes Sinophone films may not be considered as minor cinema but when Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker makes films in Malay language which is non-native but the “major” language used in a nation that is Malay-dominant, the initiative to express one’s identity as Malaysian is political and this makes the film a “minor” one. As Deleuze suggests, “minor” work is political in the way it is necessarily linked to a larger social framework, the individual is linked to the larger community so I argue when the Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker features sensitive issues and taboo topics in the film, the filmmaker is representing the Sinophone community in Malaysia collectively to contest the hegemony. Not to mention when the film narrative and cinematography are scrutinized within the sociohistorical and political contexts. As the Malaysian Chinese is not a pre-given identity and neither within the construction of the subject of Malaysia nationalism nor Chinese nationalist, so I argue the identity of the Malaysian Chinese is always in the becoming, and this identity issue has always been deterritorialized and reconstructed in the way of the imagination of the filmmaker through the utility of language.

Deleuze and Guattari (1986) use the case Kafka as example when they develop the idea of minor literature, in which Kafka does not have a language or culture that he could

consider his own, so Kafka wrote not as a being with an identity, but as voice of what is not given, a “people to come” and “people to come” is always in the process of creation. That is to say, language is open to mutation, and the vehicle for the creation of identity and in the production of subjectivity. As such, it leads us to rethink the language issue, as for Deleuze and Guattari (1986), the shift in the functions of different languages (the local, minor language prevailing over national languages) allows for the diffusion of “multiple centres of power”. Thus, the connection of language and identity politics is what will be the focus of this chapter.

Malaysian Chinese writer Ng Kim Chew (2016) has referred to Deleuze’s *minor literature* when studying Malaysian Chinese literature. He suggests the Malaysian Chinese literature is relevant and somehow beyond the meaning of *minor literature*. The Sinitic language *huayu* used in the Malaysia Chinese literature is “deterritorialized” from the Sinitic language used in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong as the *huayu* spoken in Malaysia has undergone the process of creolization, which is a reflection of long-term localization, intercultural appropriation, and multilingual code switching. It has a massive number of words and sentence structures which are influenced by local languages, including Malay, English and Tamil. It also connects various ethnic minorities and has a deep reflection and criticism on the imperial, colonial, and dominant ideas. Most importantly, the literature usually deals with the minority Malaysia Chinese in dynamic tension with the Muslim Malay majority, as well as other issues such as dislocation, exile, oppression, which are highly related to the culture in Malaysia (Ng, 2016).

If we look at the Sinophone film industry in Malaysia, when a Malaysian Chinese filmmaker, due to the state policy chooses to use the dominant language which is not his own native language to make films, and is involved in the process of “deterritorializing” Malay language (the alternative way of speaking Malay language by Malaysian Chinese) isn’t it can be considered as “minor cinema” as suggested by Deleuze?

As both Sinophone studies and minor cinema contest the idea of a fixed ethnic identity, I do not mean to see Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers as the ethnic minority group and so the films they make are categorized as minor films. Rather I am more interested to see how Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers who situate at the marginalized

position are making the “minor” cinema (Malaysian Chinese made Malay films) within the Malay major film industry that has created a new space for the “polyphony” and a sustainable identity/ subjectivity.

Apart from Deleuze and Guattari’s theories on “minor cinema”, Wang Der-Wei (2018) also criticizes Shih Shu-Mei’s idea of Sinophone studies which focus on the Sinitic language is limited to study the localized cultural experience of a specific Sinophone community, especially in Malaysia. Thus if we are going to examine the complexity of the Sinitic languages used in the Sinophone Malaysian community, the “others” (non-Sinophone), which Wang refers as “xenophone” should also be taken into account.

Based on the suggestion of Wang, as well as the idea of “minor cinema”, I will look into the phenomena of Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers who make Malay language films and Malay filmmakers who make Sinitic language films in order to study the relation between Sinophone and non-Sinophone films. This chapter will answer the following questions:

- How does Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker depict the roles of Malaysian Chinese, Malay as well as other ethnics in a non-Sinophone film and vice versa.
- The creolized languages and diffusion of multiple centres of power in both Sinophone and non-Sinophone films.
- How are Sinophone and non-Sinophone films interrelated in Malaysia’s socio-political context.

I will focus on three case studies: *Fly By Night* (2018) by Zahir Omar, *Lelaki Harapan Dunia* (Men Who Save the World, 2014) by Liew Seng Tat and *PASKAL: The Movie* (2018) by Adrian Teh.

2.3 *Fly By Night* (2018): From the “Major” to the “Minor”

2.3.1 De-essentializing the Dominant Representation of “Malay” and “Chinese”

Fly By Night (2018) is a Sinophone film directed by a Malay filmmaker Zahir Omar. The film contains 75% of Sinitic languages and has been categorized as Sinophone film when it received recognition in the New Competitive Section for Chinese language Films in the 3rd International Film Festival & Awards Macao (Pass the Popcorn, 2019). In fact,

the filmmaker, Zahir Omar doesn't speak "huayu" at all but how can he make film in a language that he doesn't understand? When being asked this question during an interview, Zahir answers that he directs based on feeling, and the help from the production crews which consists not only of Malay but also Malaysian Chinese.

In fact, the script was initially written by Malaysian Chinese scriptwriter Ivan Yeo, but unfortunately Yeo passed away before completing the script, so Zahir continued writing it in English. Zahir has never thought of the language issue until the film has to be categorized into either "Malay" or "Chinese" for the screening purpose in local cinema (Heng, 2019). "A lot of people focus too much on what makes a Malaysian film. I think that was a problem for a long time. Why don't we just make a good film that so happens to be made by Malaysians?" Zahir demands (Ng, 2019).

The film, despite receiving fund and grant from Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) and had its world premiere at the same festival as well as taking part in several other world film festivals, did not translate to commercial film in the domestic market as the screening in the Malaysian cinema only lasts for a short run of 7 days (Aina, 2018). One of the main reasons is the Malaysian Chinese audience thought it was a Malay film and the Malay audience thought it was a Sinophone film. This implies the film market in Malaysia is still highly segregated by language. Five months after the short run of the local screening, rather than distributing DVD, the production companies SKOP (which mainly produces Malay films) and Jazzy Picture (which mainly distribute Sinophone films) decided to release the film on Netflix in conjunction with Malaysia National Day celebrations (Melanie, 2019).

I argue that the Malay identity has allowed Zahir to make a heist film which highly contains violent and brutal scenes to get passed without much barrier from the censorship board. Zahir says he doesn't face any problems as there are only a few scenes which are required to be reviewed but it doesn't affect the narrative of the film (Ashraf, 2019). This situation is totally different from what happened to a Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker as there are always reports about Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers whose films are required to cut off sensitive scenes until affecting the storyline of the film. For example, there are in total 31 scenes in the film *Banglasia* (2013) by Namewee which required to be cut by

the Malaysia Film Censorship Board. As a result, Namewee had decided to withdraw the film from screening (The Hive Asia, 2019).

Fly By Night is a crime action thriller about a group of taxi drivers who extort wealthy passengers from the airport and the extortion is intervened by a cop with a dark past. The film involves complex family ties, explosive shootout, and car chase scenes that often present in Hollywood action movies and Hong Kong cop films but the landscape is replaced with the bustling capital city Kuala Lumpur.



Figure 2.0 Malaysian Chinese taxi drivers as criminals; one of them calls himself “Chinaman”.

In the film, the criminal roles are taken by the Malaysian Chinese. Although one of the extortion targets (victim) is a rich Malaysian Chinese female, she is having affairs with a married man, which goes against the norm and morality.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the role of the police is always taken by the Malay in the Malaysian films, be it a Malay language film or a Sinophone film. In *Fly By Night*, the Malay cop is an unorthodox one, due to his dark past he resorts to violence during interrogation of the criminals. Surprisingly the violent scene which shows the negative image of the police tortures the criminal is allowed to pass without needing a “cut” at the censorship board. However, the cop is given other positive sides as he seems to know the plan of the criminals well and become one the final survivors in the film.

The other Malay role is the first extortion target that is portrayed as a rich modern Malay who holds the title of “*Datuk*”. “*Datuk*” is a prefix of a title given to a person who has made contribution to the country but it is understood in the community that the title

can actually be “bought” with money. Due to having the “*Datuk*” title, he has the “power” to exert the police to investigate the extortion case.

The point that I wish to highlight here is that the film plot has totally disavowed the “*essentialized*” image of the Sinophone Malaysian community as wealthier than the Malay. In fact, the National Economic Policy (NEP) has safeguarded and prioritized the Malay status since the 70s. After Malaysia became independent for more than half a decade, the economic sector is highly controlled by the Malay community now. The economic gap within the Malay community itself is still huge, while politicians still put the blame on the Malaysian Chinese for monopolizing the economy. In the film, the Malaysian Chinese characters are portrayed as living a hard life and having to resort to crime. Aside from epitomising the Malaysian Chinese frustration over the economic and social marginalisation, they also deconstruct the myth of a pre-existing Malaysian Chinese, opening a new way of understanding the Sinophone Malaysian community.

The mastermind behind the extortion, in order to hide his real identity, tells the police his name is “Chinaman”, and the police calls him as “Chinaman” throughout the film. In fact, the Malaysian Chinese are sometimes called “Chinaman” by the Malay. “Chinaman” is used to stereotype people who are dishonest and cheat. It’s satire for oneself to self-address as “Chinaman” rather than “Chinese man”, so it’s like telling the Malay cop “I know how you see me” and the police’s response is like “Yes, you are the cheater indeed”. This is to say, the Malaysian Chinese role is trying to “de-essentialize” by “essentializing” himself.

Similar to other Sinophone films of Malaysia, the characters in *Fly By Night* speak multi-languages. The Malaysian Chinese roles speak mainly Cantonese and little Mandarin, but most of the vulgar words are in Hokkien. There’s an image that Hokkien is ruder than the other Sinitic dialects, especially Cantonese, partly because Cantonese is widely spoken in the capital city Kuala Lumpur, while Hokkien is more commonly spoken in other states other than Kuala Lumpur. In other words, Cantonese is given higher status as it is akin to the language spoken in the modernized and highly developed district Hong Kong. The Malaysian Chinese roles in the film speak Sinitic-accented Malay to the Malay roles in the films, and the Malay roles speak only a few Sinitic words

and short sentences, which sound deliberate. For instance, the Malay cop tells the Malaysian Chinese female staff who is also part of the extortion criminals at the taxi booth in Sinitic Mandarin “*Wo hui ji de ni*” (I will remember you) with strong Malay accent to insinuate that he knows the staff is involved in the criminal. The use of Mandarin and Sinitic dialects as the main language of the film allows the “minor” language to become the centre of power, but as roles of different ethnics are speaking each others’ languages, the idea of ethnic thus shifted, suggesting a fluid identity for Malaysian that is not fixed and in the becoming. Also, this echoes Sinophone studies which deconstruct the hegemony of nationality and ethnic identities.



Figure 2.1 The Malay cop is shown visiting a Malaysian Chinese cemetery park.

The Sinophone Malaysian cultures and values are also skillfully represented through the “subjectivity” of the filmmaker as the “non-Chinese”. For example, the film shows an altar for praying to the ancestor and God in the criminal’s house which is very common among the Sinophone Malaysian community; the scene in which the family members with and without blood ties sit together eat at a round table for having a meal shows the Malaysian Chinese “reunion” culture; not to forget the scene of burning joss paper to worship the deceased family member as a religious ritual that is common among the Sinophone community in Malaysia. The Malay filmmaker even makes a cross-cultural scene by showing the Malay cop when paying tribute to his deceased Malaysian Chinese superior at a cemetery park, he actually burns the joss paper which is definitely not the Malay’s culture and belief. Again, the filmmaker is questioning the “norm” of identity and seeks to subvert the dominant representation of the Malay in this case.

The Malay filmmaker, in the process of making a Sinitic language film, has allowed the people (roles) to speak in the “minority” language (Sinitic language and dialects) in a state where Malay is the major language. It also allows the story of the Sinophone community in Malaysia to be seen and heard. As the Sinitic languages become the film’s main language, the minor language has become the centre of power, and so the Malaysian Chinese roles also become dominant in the film. By representing the Malaysian Chinese roles as poor taxi drivers who resort to crimes whereas the Malay becomes the extortion target, the filmmaker is destabilizing the preconception of the Malay and Chinese economic status. As the roles of different ethnics are speaking each others’ languages, involving Sinitic language and non-Sinitic language, the boundary between ethnics, Malay and Chinese is blurred, and the identity of Malaysian which is also fluid is emphasized.

2.4 *Lelaki Harapan Dunia* (2014): From the “Minority” to “Minor”

“*Lelaki Harapan Dunia*” (*Men Who Saved the World*, 2014) on the other hand, is a Malay language film directed by Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Liew Seng Tat. The film contains 99% Malay language with a mixture of some English words, but no Sinitic languages are used in the film. Malay becomes the main subject of the film, as the film tells a story set in a remote Malay village. Emerging from the margin and filming using the major language, the filmmaker Liew Seng Tat is making a film about the dominant Malay community, which may actualize dormant potentialities in order to make way for heterogenization (Eng, 2003). That is to say, it enables the filmmaker to “express another ‘possible community’ and to forge the means of another sensibility through the subjectivity of the “minor” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 154).

The film is set in a rural Malay village “*kampung*” (in Malay) where the villagers unite to help one of the villagers, named Pak Awang, to physically move an abandoned house from the jungle into the village as a wedding gift to his daughter, who is soon to get married. An illegal African immigrant who seeks refuge in the house is mistaken as an “*Orang Minyak*” (Oily-Man, a mythical ghost that rapes virgin girls in the Malay folklore). The rumor causes panic among the villagers, while a series of wild mishaps

ensue, leading to false accusations and wild situations that metaphorically refer to the socio-political situation in Malaysia.

Men Who Save The World is funded by organizations from seven countries and is a co-production between Malaysia, Netherlands, Germany and France. After its world premiere at the Locarno International Film Festival in August 2014, it was screened at numerous international film festivals around the world, including Taipei, Busan, Rotterdam, Gothenburg and Hong Kong (Rahimy, 2015).

The film was in the limelight after taking part in a number of international film festivals, nonetheless the local screening was marred with controversies after being criticized as offending religious sensitivities by several influential film directors and critics in the Malay community. There are also criticisms regarding the sponsor and support given by the first world organizations being a neo-colonialist agenda (Weissberg, 2014). Following the allegations, there were calls for boycotting the film, and the Film Censorship Board re-evaluated the film for the second time. Amid the fear of a possible ban on the film, Liew had asked the audience to watch it as soon as possible before further action was taken (Malay Mail, 2014).

However, the public eventually came to accept the film. With its engaging story, great performance and beautiful visual, the comedy drama has gone on to become one of the highly acclaimed local films and been selected to represent Malaysia in the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film after winning 5 awards, including the Best Film and Best Director in the 27th Malaysia Film Festival. (*The Journey* by Chiu Keng Guan wins the Best Non-Malay Language Film in the same year.) (Malay Mail, 2015)

This is the first time in history that a Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker's film is selected to represent the country in taking part in the Academy Award, yet one thing we shouldn't forget is the film is made in Malay language, the dominant language in Malaysia. I suggest this film works as an example to show the "minor" in the system has the ability to change it from within.

2.4.1 Liew Seng Tat: Sinophone Malaysian Filmmaker Who Makes Malay Language Film (Non-commercial)

The filmmaker Liew Seng Tat, is a Malaysian Chinese but he went to elementary

school¹⁶ where teaching medium is Malay language. In an interview, Liew explains that he mixes with people of all ethnicities since he was small. This experience has inspired him to represent the ancient Malay tradition of “*Angkat Rumah*”--the act of literally carrying a house from one place to another and hopes the audience will learn about the special tradition after watching the film (Teh, 2014). It is how Liew’s in-between position, between the Malay and the Malaysian-Chinese culture, between Sinophone and non-Sinophone, allows Liew to make a film that rearticulate the subjectivity of the Malay, and gives the audience a rare insight into the Malay community.

However, he understands it is not easy for a Malaysian Chinese to make a Malay film. In order to avoid touching on the sensitive issues, Liew actually does a lot of research and asks for advice from his Malay friends before making the film (Syanty, 2014).

To add a little bit more regarding the background of Liew, he is one of the filmmakers who are involved in the independent filmmaking trend at the beginning of 2000 along with Tan Chui Mui, Amir Muhammad, Jamse Lee and others who contribute to the revival of the Sinophone films industry in Malaysia in the 2000 as well as the formation of the so-called “Malaysian New Wave”¹⁷. Liew makes his debut on the world stage with his first feature film “*Flower in the Pocket*” at one of the most important films festivals, Rotterdam International Film Festival. Liew is also one of the co-founder of Da Huang Pictures which has produced award winning films that have toured international film festivals (Torino Film Festival, 2014).

2.4.2 Representing Malay Community from the Subjectivity of the Malaysian Chinese

The Men Who Save The World contains a lot of scenes which satirize the ethnic, political, cultural and religious situation in Malaysia.

¹⁶ In Malaysia, the public elementary schools can be categorized into three types based on its teaching medium, including Malay language, Chinese Mandarin language and Tamil language.

¹⁷ Refer to Chapter 1, pg. 36.

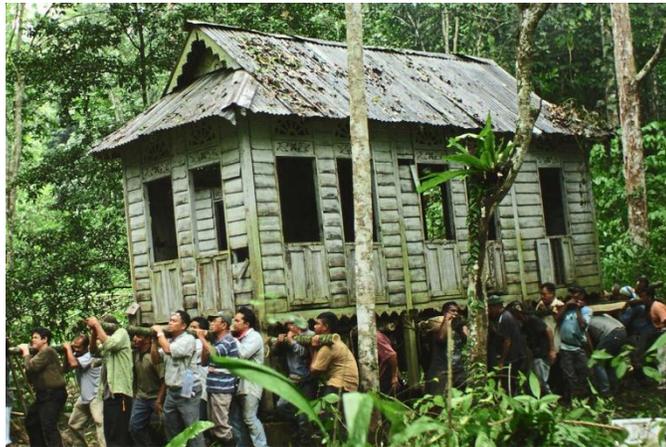


Figure 2.2 The “White House”

Firstly, the abandoned house of Pak Awang despite being shabby is claimed as “White House” and “American House” because it is painted like America’s “White House”, it shows the villagers are longing to live in a big house like westerners, a metaphor of the post-colonial effect on those colonized.



Figure 2.3 An illegal African immigrant is mistaken as “Oily Man” who abducts young ladies at night in the Malay ghost belief.

The African immigrant who hawks fake goods (belts and watches) in Kuala Lumpur is mistaken as “Oily man” because of his “shiny black” skin tone. The scene which shows the blind witch doctor touching the African’s hair and asking if his hair is made of “metal wires” is highly stereotyped. The illegal African immigrants in Malaysia has been an issue since the early 2000, where many of them come on the pretext of pursuing studies but instead are involved in drug trafficking, fraud and sexual crimes, among others (Lai, 2011). Due to this reason, some apartment buildings in Kuala Lumpur openly refuse to

rent to African tenants. In *Black Skin White Masks* (2016), Fanon psychoanalyzes the oppressed “Black persons” perceive they are inferior to the “White”, particularly focuses on how the “Black person’s” use of the colonizer’s language for the sake of recognition as “White” reflects a dependency that subordinates the Black’s humanity. If the issue of “African in Malaysia” is examined within the colonialism and decolonization context as suggested by Fanon (2008), don’t the Malaysian, in this case the Malay feels inferior to the Western people but superior to the African? The Malay uses “*Awang Hitam*”, a derogatory way of addressing blacks, meanwhile “Awang” is also the name of the main role in the film, who has made up himself as the “Oily Man” as a revenge against the villagers who refuse to help him moving the house in the end of the film.

The other migrant group which exists in the film is Indonesian. Pak Awang is dealing with the price of refurbishing his “White House” with an Indonesian worker in one of the scenes. In real situation, there is almost 2.2 million of Indonesian workers (documented and undocumented) working in the construction industry, restaurant, cleaning and as domestic helper in Malaysia (Chew, 2020). Cases of abused Indonesian domestic workers are reported almost every single day and this has become a thorny issue that tenses up the diplomatic relation between Malaysia and Indonesia (Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020).

Nevertheless, the film is criticized for not having strong roles for women. As the title does suggest the focus is on the men, and the world of Islam tends to be patriarchal, the Muslim women are inculcated to fulfill the role as a good wife and mother, and conform to the husband (Rose Ismail, 2014). Although the Muslim women who are living in the modern and developed cities such as Kuala Lumpur are given freedom to study and work, but the religious factor shouldn’t be overlooked when studying the uprising cases of domestic violence that continuously happened in Malaysia (Tashny, 2020).



Figure 2.4 There are no strong women roles in the film and the “transgender” issue is brought up.

In order to hunt for the “Oily Man”, the villagers dress up as women, and there is a drug addict role that also puts on makeup and fits into the women role perfectly. The plot has led to the “transgender” issue, which has touched the nerve of the Malay audience as “transgender” is totally unacceptable in the Islam doctrine. To put this into a more critical way, the missing of women in the film symbolizes the people in becoming. The modernized Islamic world which is undergoing its transformation, suggest the Muslim identity is unstable, especially the Muslim women are subjected to liberalization so I argue the identity of the Muslim women is always changing and becoming. By replacing the missing women with “transgender” roles in the film, I suggest the filmmaker is also seeking to deconstruct the dominant representation of the Muslim women who are inferior to the men, and advocates an ambiguous identity that challenges the gender essentialist.

Initially, the villagers unite to help Pak Wang in moving the house, however as the rumors about the house is haunted started to spread, the villagers blame Pak Awang and refuse to help him anymore. The plot shows the unity among the people can be easily divided due to rumors and false allegations. Racism has been manipulated by politicians to consolidate the ruling power given to them since the state became independent. Malaysian Chinese have always been blamed for monopolizing the resources that led to the huge economic gap between ethnics. On top of that, the power wrestling among the Malay political parties has also led to the state instability. Recently, internal conflict happened within the political parties under the Alliance of Hope (*Pakatan Harapan*) that

came into power after winning the 2018 General Election has led to the collapse of the government. This is just exactly what the film represents, due to own interest, people can be easily divided by the same thing that united them in the first place (Teh, 2014).

From the perspective of a Malaysian Chinese filmmaker, the Malays are portrayed as superstitious and easily influenced by traditional beliefs especially words by the shaman (Teh, 2014). In fact, there is still a huge gap between the urban and suburban areas of Malaysia in terms of education, economic and development. Due to the incomprehensive infrastructures and facilities in the rural areas, there are still people who can't access the internet and receive education. These areas might have been forgotten during the process of development but there is always criticism of the government for not developing the areas due to the reason "the less one knows the easier one get controlled" (Leerang, 2015). Moreover, in the film, the villagers are portrayed as resorting to religion in everything they do. It implies how strong Islam is in influencing the life of a Muslim, however the effort to create a heterogenous collective subjectivity, leading to the way for a new understanding of the Malay community, has led to negative result as the Malay community feels offended with the plot.

Liew adds a subtheme about a local politician who comes to the village to woo voters by giving a camel to the villagers as a donation gift. This plot is no doubt an allegory regarding patronage and corruption which commonly happened in Malaysia involving politicians especially the ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak (The Guardian, 2019). In the film, the politician is hailed by a group of "*Mak Rempit*"¹⁸. The issue of "*Mak Rempit*" has also brought the ethnic issue in Malaysia to the melting point, when eight "*Mak Rempit*" teens were killed in an accident involving a Malaysian Chinese lady as the driver (The Straits Times, 2019). The Malay community puts the blame on the 24 year-old Malaysian Chinese female whereas the Sinophone community condemns the "*Mak Rempit*" for disregarding the safety of others. There are some Ministers (Malay) even suggest a special track to be built for the "*Mak Rempit*" to show off their skills which has been seen as absurd and unacceptable by the Sinophone community (The Star, 2008).

¹⁸ A group of youngsters, usually Malay, who are involved in motorcycle racing which causes public disturbance.

The camel (usually cow in the Malaysia context) is meant to be a “sacrifice” for the “*Hari Raya Haji*” (Feast of the Sacrifice), a festival celebrated by Muslim worldwide, in which during the feast, the animal will be sacrificed ritually and given to the poor and needy (Ghouse, 2020). Nevertheless, the sacrifice was portrayed as cruelty to animals during the shot which shows the blood splash onto the umbrellas held by the witnesses on the slaughter ground. This shot is followed by another medium close up shot on two children who are crying and who then run away as they could not bear the killing. The children tried to let set the camel free days before the slaughtering but their efforts were in vain

After all, Liew insists the film, beyond its slapstick comedy, is about upholding community spirit and to appreciate the old tradition of carrying the house, it doesn’t mean to offend any parties (Info Kini, 2014). Quoting from the film introduction on Torino Film Festival’s homepage:

“The instinct that compels us to work together – the village, the tribe, the nation – it helps us do great things: sing in harmony, move houses, help those in need. It is also the root of terrible things: it makes us fear those who are not like us, hate which we cannot understand; it allows us to mistake our fellow man for beasts. The thing that unites us divides us...It all depends on which side you are standing, and how well you know yourself” (Torino Film Festival, 2014)

The film has indeed taught the audience to rethink about question of the nation, the connection between “ourselves” and the “others”, and the things that unite and divide the people.

Situating in-between the Sinophone and non-Sinophone, and experiencing both Malay and Malaysian Chinese culture, filming of the Malay culture from the subjectivity of a Malaysian Chinese has led to new insight and understanding of the Malay community as the representation of the Malay community from the perspective of a Malaysian Chinese is definitely heterogenous from those within the Malay films industry system. However, the creatively representation of the collective identity is rejected by the Malay community itself, yet as the “minor” has the potential to change from within, so despite controversies of touching the sensitivity of the dominant Malay community,

the film has been selected to represent the state in Oscar Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film (though not being nominated), marking a Malaysian Chinese filmmaker to gain such a high appreciation in a state where the Malaysian Chinese has always been marginalized, yet not to forget the film is made using the dominant Malay language.

2.5 PASKAL (2018): From the “Minority” to “Major”

Another Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Adrian Teh, has also made his first ever Malay language film titled PASKAL: The Movie in 2018 after making several commercial Sinophone films focused on the family, comedy and horror genres. As the Chief Executive Officer of Asia Tropical Films, Teh understands the film market well. He knows comedy, horror and family drama are among the film genres that will attract the local audience so he makes films revolving around these themes (Liu, 2019).

Before PASKAL, Teh made Sinophone films *The Wedding Diary*, featuring local as well as artists from Singapore and Hong Kong, such as Kara Hui and Elanne Kong, just to name a few. On top of that, Teh also made *King of Mahjong* (2015), a Malaysia and Singapore co-produced *hesuipian* and took up the role of Executive Producer in Hong Kong and Malaysian co-production such as *Hungry Ghost Ritual* (2014) directed by Hong Kong popular actor Nick Cheung. Teh also adapted the screenplay of *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, a sleeper hit film in China and made a Malaysian version before he released PASKAL (Asia Tropical Films, 2020).

According to Teh, he hasn't thought of making a Malay language film but was inspired to make the film about the Royal Malaysian Naval Special Warfare Force Unit (*Pasukan Khas Laut*, PASKAL) when he got to know about the contribution of the Special Force to the country. Teh is sensitive enough to notice generally the local audience including himself like to watch blockbuster action films of Hollywood and Hong Kong. However, most of the people have never heard or known about the military forces of the country as there is no compulsory military service in Malaysia. This has led Teh to decide on making a film which tells the stories of the Royal Malaysian Navy Force and one of the missions they have accomplished (Kam Raslan, 2019).

With such a theme, the film is highly supported by the Royal Malaysian Navy Force Unit as well as FINAS. Unlike Liew's *Men Who Save The World*, PASKAL was a big success by hitting RM30M million (USD7.2million) of box office and ranked 5th on the list of highest-grossing local films in Malaysia. The film received many positive reviews especially from Malay film critics who complimented the film for its delivery of patriotic values and its construction of a positive image of the Malaysian Navy Force which then resulted in the 40% spike in Navy recruitment after the film released (Kam Raslan, 2019). With a budget of RM 10 million (USD2.4million), PASKAL is one of the most expensive Malaysian films ever made compared to other local made films which usually cost around RM 1 million to RM 3 million. The big-budget allows Teh to send the cast for the training program undergone by actual PASKAL members, and to shoot in Turkey. The blasting, gunfight and fighting scenes are well-executed, the visual effect, camera work and cinematography are quite mature and the techniques surpass all the local made action films which definitely satisfy the audience that have been forced to accept poor quality technical filmmaking due to low budgets so far (Kam Raslan, 2019).

The film's action director Frank See was also the action director for Hong Kong action war film *Operation Red Sea* (2018) and had taken part in the making of the crime action film *Mekong Operation* (2016). So after Singapore's military comedian series *Ah Boys To Men*, China's *Operation Red Sea* (2018) which revolves around the story of the People's Liberation Army, Hollywood's *Navy SEAL* (1990) and *Act of Valor* (2012), and the major hit Korean drama series *Descendants of the Sun* in which the main protagonist is the captain of the South Korean Special Forces Unit, Malaysia finally has its first ever thrill action film which tells the story of the national navy force.

With the co-produced experience and relation built with collaborated film production companies of other countries, PASKAL was also screened in Singapore, Brunei, Turkey and China. In order to be marketed in China, the film even features Hollywood veteran Tiger Chen Hu as a special appearance in one of the United Nations missions represented in the film.

Teh admits the biggest challenge of making PASKAL is the language used in the film. As the film features roles mainly taken up by the Malays in order to reflect the real

situation in the Malaysian Navy Force Unit, as a Malaysian Chinese, Teh also considers about the Sinophone community and hopes to attract the Chinese audience to watch the film that seems irrelevant to the Sinophone community. So Teh incorporates a Malaysian Chinese role Joshua in the film, but Joshua scarifies in one of the missions shortly after the film started and not much details about his background was further elaborated. In fact, Teh disclosed in an interview that he received a lot of negative comments from investors at the beginning of the film making, one of the most common criticisms was him, as a Malaysian Chinese, was trying to make a Malay language film (Kam Raslan, 2019). As this is a film that represents the true event and related to the country's image, so Malay rather than other languages is used in such a "propaganda-like film". I suppose the filmmaker himself doesn't have the perception that he wants to be part of the "Malay" community but using Malay language to make film is more to a strategy to tackle the Malay audience for making profit as well as for the purpose of being able to be recognized within the national film category. By hitting box office, it proves that the strategy of making the film by using "Malay language" is somehow a success.

Conclusion

The phenomena of Malaysian Chinese filmmakers who make Malay language films and Malay filmmakers who make Sinitic language films have opened up new insight into each other's community and culture. By using language that is non-native to the filmmaker to make films, the language undergoes the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which then leads to the new imagination of the pre-given identities. The Malaysian Chinese filmmakers make Malay language films, predominantly for the aim to make profit as well as proving one's identity as Malaysian. In the case of the Malay filmmakers who make Sinitic language films, it allows the Sinitic language which is a minority language and the story of the Sinophone community in the Malay dominant state to be heard and seen. Of course, in the process of interpreting other cultures, it might also involve a lot of stereotyping, such as the Malay is portrayed as superstitious and highly relies on religion in *Men Who Save the World*, while in *Fly By Night*, the Malaysian Chinese are depicted as criminals and swindlers. Last but not least, I argue in both cases of the Malay filmmakers who make Sinitic language film and Malaysian

Chinese filmmakers who make Malay language films, as they are using the language which themselves are not familiar with, so they are in fact making “minor” films which are political, deterritorialized and becoming “minor” in the “major”.

Chapter 3 Breaking the taboos:

A Study on the National Identity and Minority Groups in Sinophone Independent filmmaker Lau Kek Huat's Trilogy: *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) & *Boluomi* (2019)

3.1 Introduction

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, from its inception, Malaysian cinema is Malay-centric and films made in non-Malay languages are, as I argue marginalized and considered outside the category of national films. Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers generally produce, distribute, and seek affinity with the style of films made in other Sinophone 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, while celebrated actress Michelle Yeoh began her modeling career in Hong Kong and subsequently established a successful career in Hong Kong movies. Her achievement 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 Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers have followed their footsteps in recent years including Ho Wi Ding in Taiwan, Edmund Yeo in Japan (now has back in Malaysia), and James Wan in Hollywood.

This chapter examines Taiwan-based Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker Lau Kek Huat with reference to the trilogy of his films *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) and *Boluomi* (2019) in which he explores issues concerning the banned Malayan Communist Party (MCP), ethnic riot, ethnic minority and the special rights given to the Malay. The discussion in this chapter will focus on four aspects. The first deals with Sinophone independent filmmaking in Malaysia, followed by the study of the "multi-layered" identities and collective experiences of Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers in the international arena, in this chapter focusing on Lau Kek Huat who is currently living and working in Taiwan. This is followed by a textual analysis of the narrative and the particular filmic language that is employed to address the political

issues oscillating between personal memory and national historical incidents.

3.2 The Development of Independent Filmmaking in Malaysia

The independent filmmaking trend started to burgeon in Malaysia from 2000 when the digital video cameras became available in the market. This trend may be attributed to the state policy, the so-called Vision 2020 proposed by the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 1990 which aimed to transform the country into a post-industrial economy with a standard of living akin to that of the First World (Baumgartel, 2011). According to Khoo (2007), the pro-high technology government policies and other neo-liberal development policies of the 1990s have encouraged Malaysians to become more integrated into globalization.

With the availability of affordable digital video cameras and editing equipment, a group of young Malaysian filmmakers started to make low-budget films independently. According to Lent (1990), independent cinema refers to filmmaking at a very low budget (below RM100,000 an equivalent to roughly USD 24,000). For these filmmakers, computers were not only used for editing films, but served as a useful tool for its access to the internet in order to promote and distribute these works, by uploading film trailers, updating film relevant activities on webpage, and promoting the film on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Da Huang Pictures¹⁹ which is founded by Malaysian independent filmmakers, Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, and Liew Seng Tat has a comprehensive webpage to showcase their works and also provides details of how one can co-operate with them. Redfilms²⁰, a film production company based in Malaysia which helps to distribute the works of local independent filmmakers has a column on its website that leads to routes for purchasing local films on VCD or DVD online. Another significant Malaysian independent filmmaker, the late Yasmin Ahmad, had also established a blog²¹ where she used to express her views and critics on films as well as exchange opinions with her audience and readers. As Baumgartel (2011) suggests, the need to establish a direct rapport with the audience might be crucial for

¹⁹ See Da Huang Pictures <http://www.dahuangpictures.com/>

²⁰ See Red Films <http://www.redfilms.com.my/company.htm/>

²¹ See Yasmin Ahmad's blog <http://yasminthefilmmaker.blogspot.com/>

filmmakers whose works have a relatively small audience that is dispersed around the world, and the weblog can therefore be seen as a kind of niche marketing for films to a highly specialized target group.

Malaysian independent filmmakers receive funds from various international film festivals in order to get their works released and screened on the world stage. The filmmakers often pursued and acquired co-production financing opportunities from neighboring countries, as well as from European “suppliers”, in hopes of circumventing the political, industrial, and artistic restrictions of their countries of origin (Khoo, 2007). Due to budget limitations, independent filmmakers work in a group and help each other in making films, by taking up the roles such as producer, assistant director, scriptwriter, editor or even actor and actress in each other’s films. Simple and easy-access shooting locations are chosen and most of the films feature amateurs as the main characters.

Baumgartel (2011) contends that Southeast Asia is a region where most countries have a troubled history of wars, and periods of dictatorship after the end of the colonial period, where democracy so far has not taken hold and civil society has only slightly developed. All of the nations of Southeast Asia face issues that include forging a stable national identity, gender issues, ecology, the rights of minorities and so forth. To talk about filmmaking, issues such as government regulation and censorship should not be overlooked. In the case of Malaysia, most of the independent filmmakers have a high level of education with some of them having graduated from foreign universities. These filmmakers are intellectuals who are conscious of social issues and unfair situations within the country and this has led them to focus on subjects in their films which are deemed as problematic, sensitive, as well as politically taboo. For instance, Amir Muhammad’s *The Last Communist (Lelaki Komunis terakhir, 2006)*, which focuses on the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) is banned from public exhibition in Malaysia. There are also films which address the anxieties of the newly emerging middle class, such as James Lee’s *My Beautiful Washing Machine (2004)*, and about everyday life, such as Liew Seng Tat’s *Flower in the Pocket (2007)* (Baumgartel, 2011). It is also worth mentioning that Liew has also made a Malay

language film which has opened up new understandings of the Malay community from the subjectivity of a Malaysian Chinese²².

Khoo (2006b) describes the protagonists in the independent films as characters with no clear goal. The mundane, everyday activities of the protagonists are repeatedly shown and emphasized in a bid to eschew the clear-cut characterization and storytelling conventions of mainstream cinemas (e.g. Hollywood, Hong Kong and Bollywood). In most cases, these films offer no happy ending or sometimes, end abruptly. In term of the aesthetics of cinematography, Khoo (2007, p. 234) specifies how the influences of Godard, Tsai Ming-Liang and Wong Kar-Wai can be seen in James Lee's films *Ah Beng Returns*(2001), *Room to Let* (2002) and *Teatime with John* (2003), respectively.

Most Malaysian independent films have garnered awards in international film festivals, but are hardly ever released or shown in local cinemas due to censorship and the non-commercial film style which has garnered little interest among a general audience. Khoo (2006a) contends the Malaysian independent filmmakers pay no attention to the multiple barriers for inclusion into the Malaysian cinemas, opting instead to be self-produced, self-funded, low-budget, and avant-garde, or artistic in nature, which in turn means they will not be screened in local cinemas and therefore need not undergo censorship from the national censorship board. In other words, the independent filmmakers do not regard their works as either ethnic film or national film. However, independent films have their own distribution channels, such as screening in universities and colleges or some private spaces or events, which lets them to direct the films to specific audiences. Scholar Baumgartel (2011) points out that the middle class youth especially those who major in film studies and communication are the main audiences who are enthusiasts of independent films.

Independent filmmaking in Malaysia is said to have pushed the boundaries of freedom of expression in recent years (Baumgartel, 2011). As the independent films usually feature sensitive issues and delineate unfair situations within the country, independent filmmaking is seen as contesting hegemony and dominant ideas. Some film critics see the trend of independent filmmaking in Malaysia as having the affinity to the

²² See Chapter 2, pg. 74-82.

French New Wave Movement, leading them to call this group the “Malaysia New Wave Movement”. However, this “wave” did not last long as the independent films were too artistic to be accepted by the audiences that are used to watching commercial films and the “movement” failed to receive the support of the general public (Mayer, 2010).

Recently, most Malaysian independent filmmakers have relocated to other places for co-production work, such as Tan Chui Mui who developed her career in China (currently has returned to Malaysia) and others who take up the opportunities to make commercial films, such as Ho Yu Hang²³. Due to the Malay-oriented policies which provide preferential treatment to the dominant Malay ethnic and other native communities, there are also groups of Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers who are based in Taiwan, such as Lau Kek Huat, who has been actively making documentary and fictional films recently.

3.3 Lau Kek Huat as Sinophone Independent Filmmaker

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 he moved 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 awards in international film festivals. To him, Taiwan provided the necessary opportunities and freedom in filmmaking to launch his career (Lau, 2015). A film produced in Malaysia 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 national boundaries has allowed him to release his spontaneous creativity in filmmaking. Through *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) and *Boluomi* (2019), in concerning the recent past of his home country, Lau makes inroads into taboo subjects, such as the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), and ethnic riot which happened in the past but until now such topics still can’t be discussed publicly within Malaysia due to the topics’ sensitivity. These films made the rounds in the international circuit before finally

²³ After making several independent films such as *Rain Dogs* (2006) and *At the End of Dawn* (2008), Ho makes *Mrs. K* (2016) which stars famous Hong Kong artists such as Kara Wai and Simon Yam.

overcoming many obstacles to reach the Malaysian audience for a brief period via online platforms.

Lau's move to Taiwan and his independent filmmaking experience beyond the national boundaries exposed him to cultural nuances and dissimilarities as well as the consciousness of multiple and flexible identities in different contexts and circumstances. In order to accommodate a discussion of the diverse experiences and situations Lau encountered, Sinophone studies, along with independent filmmaking, will serve as an apt framework to study the ambiguity of the multi-layered identities of Lau. Also, operating away from the 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 linked to his ethnicity, and where the "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" process can be studied with the help of Sinophone studies that de-essentializes nationality. As such, I consider Lau as a Sinophone independent filmmaker, and will scrutinize his filming experience and works in the conjunction of Sinophone studies and independent filmmaking.

3.4 Production and Distribution of the Trilogy: *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) and *Boluomi* (2019)

In this chapter, I will look at three films by filmmaker Lau Kek Huat, including *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) and *Boluomi* (2019), all of which concentrate on sensitive issues in Malaysia. Lau released his first feature film *Absent Without Leave* in 2016, using a rather low budget of around RM80,000 for the whole production (an equivalent to USD 19,000). Lau was self-funded when he started shooting the film. Neither had he received funds from Malaysia due to the taboo topic of the film, nor the Western countries who thought he was going to make a documentary about the tropical animals (Sun, 2016). As Lau continued shooting, he finally received funds from Taiwan and Korea. Due to its controversial theme, this film was also banned from distribution for public screening in Malaysia, suffering the same fate as other Malaysian films featuring the MCP issue as their main theme, such as Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist* (2006) and Wang Kew Lit's *The New Village* (2013). As a counter-censorship move, the filmmaker has made the film available online on

Youtube, specifically for the Malaysian audience from February 28th and up to March 5th, 2016 and has accumulated about 100,000 viewers (Deng, 2018). As a film which centers on a politically taboo topic, *Absent Without Leave*'s rejection by the censorship board was to be expected. This almost forced the film to move on at transnational trajectory by taking part in several international film festivals such as Busan International Film Festival, Singapore International Film Festival and International Taipei Film Festival.

The situation for Lau's second film *The Tree Remembers* (2019) was slightly better. The film was shown in Malaysia during the Freedom Film Festival 2019²⁴ and the audience included Malay, Malaysian Chinese, Indian as well as indigenous people. There were also police and officers from FINAS who were on location for inspection and remained in standby in case to control any chaos that could occur after the screening. Nevertheless, the screening turned out to be a success as the audiences of all ethnicities shared their thoughts and were involved in discussion with Lau in a peaceful way. The screening ended with nothing unpleasant happening (Lin, 2019).

Following the two films above, *Boluomi* (2019), Lau's first ever fictional film, also received funding from Korea and Taiwan despite its focus on the Malaysia Communist Party (MCP) and the lives of the migrants of Southeast Asia in Taiwan. So far, this film has screened at Busan International Film Festival, 2019 Kaohsiung Film Festival and 2019 Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival.

3.5 The First Episode: *Absent Without Leave* (2016)

Absent Without Leave is a narrative based on the experiences of former Malayan Communist Party (MCP) members who were engaged in the anti-Japanese resistance movement in Malaya from the 1930s. The MCP's contribution 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

²⁴ Freedom Film Festival is organized by Freedom Film Network, a non-profit-organization 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, 2019).

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. The MCP members fled and regrouped in the jungle as guerrilla militants and kept on with the fight. In order to prevent civilians from joining and aiding the guerrillas, the British government put the Chinese immigrants under surveillance in a compound which was surrounded by high barbed wire fences, called the “New Village”²⁵ at the outskirts of towns. The MCP was slowly eliminated, including the action of deporting the members back to China. The state of emergency was lifted in 1960. However, the emergency restriction still remained in the areas near the Thailand border where most of the MCP members lived in exile (Kua, 2018). When the former leader, Chin Peng²⁶, 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. As a move to consolidate the status quo, the MCP has been “constructed” by the state as a “terrorist” who threatens national security and harmony. In fact, this idea has been “injected” to the citizens via the historical text book used by the elementary Grade 5 students in the primary school as mentioned in the film.

3.5.1 The Floating Identities and the “Imagined Home”

Absent Without Leave recounts the life of former MCP members in Malaya prior to their deportation to China which took place after the declaration of emergency. They reminisce 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

²⁵ New Village has 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. Also refer to Chapter 1, pg. 56.

²⁶ Before his death, Chin was still living in exile in Thailand and was not allowed to return to Malaysia. Although Chin had voiced his wish to be buried in his hometown, Sitiawan, but the wish was not granted (Lee, 2013).

where they had once lived, identified with and defended against Japanese aggression. They present 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. The collective experience of lack, loss, and displacement, as well as the affective longing and nostalgia for a place which is not their homeland suggests their diasporic experience and situation. Despite the necessity to identify with their “homeland” in this case China, this identity has been colored by their past experiences of living in Malaya. The prevalent feeling is one of a “fluid” identity that is independent of the influence of territorial loyalties.



Figure 3.0 Former MCP members consist of different ethnics dance together during a gathering in southern Thailand.

Apart from the small Malay and Indian presence, the MCP has until today been perceived as a “Chinese external force” and the Communist insurrection has always been linked and conceived as the Chinese insurrection (Kuan, 2018). Until today, politicians are not shy of branding certain local Chinese organizations as “communist” if this suited their purpose (Kuan, 2018). Even the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has once labelled the political appeal of the local Chinese organizations as resembling acts of “communists” (Kuan, 2018). At the end of the film, there is a scene showing the former MCP members performing Malay traditional dance (can be *Joget* or *Inang*) during a gathering in south Thailand. This scene overthrows the typical stereotype of MCP as purely a Chinese organization and suggests the MCP members not only consisted of the Chinese, but also the Malay, native people and the other ethnic groups. Although they are from different ethnic groups, they appreciate the national culture (Malay traditional

dance), which is also a metaphor for the MCP members' longing for recognition of a national identity.



Figure 3.1 The rising *Kongming* Lantern signifies the floating identity of the former MCP members.

Absent Without Leave begins with a scene showing a *Kongming* lantern rising into the night sky. This scene has been interpreted to symbolize the “floating” identities and “homelessness” of former MCP members (Kuan, 2018). Along with the scene of the *Kongming* lantern, the film features the Malaysia national anthem as background sound, but the lyric is of an Indonesian folk song known as *Terang Boelan*²⁷ (*Bright Moon*). One explanation about the use of *Terang Boelan* is to deconstruct the nationalist sentiment of the national anthem, with the implication that the MCP members' love toward Malaya is about the locality and the life they've lived, which is not necessarily conducive to strong nationalistic sentiment towards a single nation (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 an effort by the filmmaker to de-emphasize the idea of “nationalism”, echoing the idea of the Sinophone which rejects nationality as a static factor or the filmmaker's insinuation of the lack of recognition for the sacrifices and contributions of the MCP's fight for state independence. In addition, the song *Terang Boelan* has also been inserted in *The Tree Remembers* and *Boluomi* which links all these films as a trilogy of Lau's representative

²⁷ 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).

works in dealing with the MCP and other historical issues of Malaysia. I will elaborate on the political significance of the use of *Terang Boelan* in the next section.

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 the MCP that is ignored for political reason, it may also be argued that the filmmaker himself is seeking answers to the unequal treatment accorded to the Sinophone community and others from that of the dominant ethnic community.

Another important issue revolves around the concept of recognition through the role of the “father”. Lau recounts his father’s absence in the family, a fact that he attributes to his father losing his own father who was one of the MCP members. He too confesses his absence from home for nine years without making any contact with his family. The role of the father or the patriarch is 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 MCP’s contribution to national history. Voicing his views in an interview (Lau, 2015), he asserts 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 justice²⁸ and equal treatment for all sections of the population. This is why Lau has focused on the minority groups and ethnic issues in his later film, *The Tree Remembers* (2019).

²⁸ Under the previous National Front (*Barisan Nasional*) 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 acquitted. The reasons behind the case are still unclear (SCMP, 2019).

3.5.2 The Entanglement of Personal Memory and National History

Through *Absent Without Leave*, the filmmaker also embarks on a journey in search of the memory of his grandfather who had joined the MCP to defend Malaya from Japanese aggression. It is a private, personal story that is inseparable from political controversy because of the MCP issue that is forbidden within the national public sphere. Lau's initial intention was to uncover the mysterious identity of his grandfather, who his family seldom spoke about. In an interview, Lau confides that he had wanted to film at subject that he was afraid to confront, which is why he included the interview footage of his parents and relatives talking about his grandfather in the film (Lee, 2017).



Figure 3.2 The burning paper money scene sets up a space of affective response to reconnect with the past history.

The film features a scene in which Lau's father and some comrades are burning paper money in a plantation. The plot sets up a space of affective response for the audience which enables the audience of the present to reconnect with the past history. It is also a depiction of an almost universal "Chinese" cultural practice of respect to the dead. The plantation serves a dual purpose, as it is believed to be where Lau's grandfather was killed during the guerrilla war, symbolically dying in defense of the land, and also where Lau's father used to play when he was young, a site in 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 footage of the war and the voices of former MCP members, and by recounting the stories of his grandfather and his fellow comrades, Lau had intended to rationalize 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 of public viewing in Malaysia (*The Sun Daily*, 2017).

Although Lau claimed that personally is against communist ideologies (Lau, 2015), he did not break down the wall that blocked the voice of the “terrorists” from being heard in the film. The film had in effect reconstructed an untold episode of historical memory and had aroused social consciousness on how this history had been distorted or silenced. But viewed as going against the official sentiment, the authorities banned the film from public screening and also attempted to stop the viewing of the film online through legal means. According to the Deputy Home Minister Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed (*The Sun Daily*, 2017), the Film Censorship Board banned the film in cinemas and from public viewing due to it having elements which may be “negative for national development”. However, in the end the film managed to get screened online specifically for a Malaysian audience within a short period.

3.6 The Second Episode: *The Tree Remembers* (2019)

Derived from the African proverb, “What the axe forgets, the tree remembers”²⁹, *The Tree Remembers* (2019) deals with an “race riot” that occurred on May 13, 1969 that marked the beginning of the ethnic discrimination policies in Malaysia and remains a taboo topic. The second narrative line revolves around the *Orang Asli*, the indigenous people whose rights have been marginalized despite being the “native” people of Malaysia.

²⁹ The African proverb means a person who harms another or borrows from someone will often forget, but the person who is harmed or borrowed from will always remember (Aprilmaynjune, 2015).

3.6.1 Breaking Taboos: Remembering the Silent Period



Figure 3.3 The envelope is stamped with a seal with “Don’t Spread Rumors” written in four languages, including English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil.

The Tree Remembers begins by showing an envelope stamped with a seal written “Don’t Spread Rumors” written in four languages, including English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. The voice over, obviously narrated by filmmaker Lau, explains that in 1969, the letters sent within Malaysia were stamped with the seal as a reminder and warning for those sending letters not to spread rumors. Lau adds that, the issue of “race” had been a fear and taboo during that period; in the name of “race”, inequality and violence couldn’t be discussed; in the name of “race”, even a victim couldn’t investigate the root cause of the incident. The “rumors” and “race” mentioned here are then linked to the ethnic riot on May 13, 1969 and Lau brings together the witnesses and survivors of the incident to give testimony regarding the incident in his film. As explained in Chapter one³⁰ earlier, the May 13 riot mainly involved the Malay and Malaysian Chinese after the ruling Alliance Party lost two third majority to the opposition party³¹ in the 3rd General Election (Kua, 2007). The riot marks the beginning of ethnic discrimination policies and practice in Malaysia whereas victims are forced to be silenced. There are different stances and statements regarding the incident, for instance, the book “*May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969*” (2007) written by Dr. Kua Kia Soong

³⁰ Refer to Chapter 1, pg. 33.

³¹ The opposition parties consist of the Democratic Action Party and Malaysian People's Movement Party, which members are mainly Malaysian Chinese.

challenged the Malaysian government's official position on the cause of the May 13 Incident which imputed the cause to the opposition parties' for creating tension after winning the election. Kua contends the "ascendant state capitalist class" in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the party in power, had intentionally started the riot, backed by the police and army, as a coup d'état to topple the Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in order to implement the new Malay Agenda (Kua, 2007). Obviously, the root cause of the incident is different based on the statements of different ethnic groups holding varied positions. In the film, besides inserting archived footages and images of the past, Lau also includes Malay and Malaysian Chinese interviewees reminiscing about the incident.

The statement given by the first Malay interviewee, Mohd. Zubir Ahmad, gives a controversial statement when he explains that Malay are given special rights while the Malaysian Chinese and the Indians are granted citizenship that should not be questioned for its fairness, but "it has to be that way", because it is based on the agreement signed between the Malay, Chinese and Indians together with the British colonial government. Mohd. Zubir Ahmad's words imply that he is conscious of the fact that the Malay is given special rights and he doesn't find any problems with this treatment given. The thought might be differ for the Malaysian Chinese and other ethnicities who find they are not treated equally. Mohd. Zubir Ahmad further explains how, after winning the election, the members of the opposition parties in the rally brought along the broom and shouted harsh words such as "Sweep away the Malay" and "Malays go back to the village". This worried the Malay that if the opposition parties were going to form the government, Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaya which safeguards the special positions of the Malays would be abolished, and the Malay would have to fight back which led to the widespread rioting, assault, arson and bloodshed. According to his statement, Malays are the victim and remained passive in the incident. Nevertheless, the turning point comes when he expresses that he sends her daughter to the school where there are a lot of Malaysian Chinese students because he wants her to learn the "Chinese" culture and customs as he doesn't hate the "Chinese". Another Malay interviewee, Panjang describes how during the riot, he saw the army shoot the Malaysian Chinese to death but not the

Malay. We are not clear of what criteria the filmmaker Lau followed in selecting the interviewees here, but one may notice how the Malay tend to see themselves as the victims of the riot but somehow they try to be neutral by saying they actually don't hate the Malaysian Chinese, suggesting their awareness of the camera placed in front of them.

A similar thread can be seen in Malaysian Chinese interviewees, the first Malaysian Chinese interviewee. The first Malaysian Chinese interviewee, Tay, who had eight family members sacrificed in the incident says he doesn't hate the Malay because his grandmother is a Malay and he is mixed blood of the Malay and Chinese.

Another Malaysian Chinese interviewee Tan, recounts the day when he saw the Malay using knives to hack at the Malaysian Chinese where the incident happened 50 years ago. The film doesn't cut to any depictions of violent scenes followed by what Tan says, rather the audience sees that the place where the killing happened in the past is now peaceful: pedestrians walk around the street and roads nearby are slightly busy with many cars passing by. As the scene was taken on the spot where the killings happened, "on-the-spot" realism³² has helped the audience to connect the present with the past. According to Tan, there have been a lot of changes at the location where the incident happened 50 years ago but the trees have remained and they (the trees) might be the best witness of the incident although they can't speak. Tan's words remind us of the film's title "The Tree Remembers". When Tan recounts the incident, the bird call sound can be heard from the background. Lau explains that, some of the indigenous people in Malaysia believe that unrest human souls not at rest are attached to the bird, so he includes the bird call as an ambient sound to present the horror of the riot. Also, the bird call is related to the later plot in which Lau depicts the deforestation that happened in the living place of the indigenous people, which not only leads to the destruction of the home of the indigenous people but the birds' habitat as well, resulting in the migration of the birds to the city where they live on old, big trees.

³² "On-the-spot/on-the-site" realism is characterized by elements such as handheld camera work, rough image, ambient sound from the spot etc. and has been used by scholars to study the Chinese independent documentary filmmaking, for instance Jia Zhang Ke's work (Robinson, 2013).

There is another Malaysian Chinese who narrates the process of burying the dead bodies of those killed in the the riots whose face is not shown. Archived images or footages of the dead bodies are excluded. What the audience sees instead are random shots showing rough and shaky camera work. The camera seems to be set inside a car with a view from the front window, where one can see the car moving into bushes in the wilderness. The shots show no clues of where the car is headed. An atmosphere of panic and anxiety are created as the audience can only imagine the situation based on the verbal descriptions from the anonymous interviewee.

Siew Sew Lian, who was once the division head of the Labor Party recounts in the film the situation before the riot happened. According to her account, during a march to call on the people to boycott the General Election, one of the party members named Lim Soon Seng was shot dead by the police for shouting the Communist slogan during the march. The party declined to claim Lim's body initially, nonetheless with the help of journalists, the body was released and the party went on the street for the funeral of Lim on May 9th which further escalated tension three days before the riot.

Besides these accounts, the film also features a Malaysian Chinese journalist, Soon who describes the situation during the riot. Soon recounts, how the journalists were asked not to disclose the cause of death of the victims in the riot by "gunshot" or else they would be charged under laws such as the Internal Security Act (1960)³³ which allowed

³³ ISA was also deployed later in the 1987 "Operation Lalang" (Weeding Operation) wherein the government launched a mass crackdown over one hundred Malaysians, including opposition politicians, intellectuals, activists and others (Lim, 2019). It was believed the Weeding Operation was designed to control the political opponents in order to consolidate the hegemony during the tenure of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohadmad (Hilley, 2001). The dissidents were arrested and detained without trial, with many held for periods that stretched from months to years (Harold A. Crouch, 1996). During the operation, the publishing licenses of four print media, including The Star and Sin Chew Daily, The Sunday Star and Watan were also revoked. Although the ISA was repealed in 2012 but was replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measure) Act 2012 which is deemed more severe than the ISA (Lim, 2019).

for detention of a suspect judged as “likely” to commit an act deemed dangerous to national security for an indefinite period (Reuters, 2007).

Apart from ISA, there are several other laws used by the government to maintain the status quo. Among them are such as the Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972, a statute prohibiting the dissemination of information classified as an official secret. OSA has been criticized for granting absolute power to the government to classify any information as “official secret” and jail those who release such information for up to seven years (The Straits Times, 2018). The law is considered a tool to enable the government to cover up its scandals. It was used by the previous The National Front (*Barisan Nasional*) administration in classifying the auditor-general's report on the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal as secret, and sentencing Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) vice-president Rafizi Ramli to 18 months' jail for releasing part of the report (The Straits Times, 2018) . Along with OSA, there is also the Sedition Act, the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984), and the Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission Act (1998) which are used to tackle cases where people have published, posted or said anything related to the government’s wrongdoing. These laws are apparently against the dissidents and oppressing the freedom of expression (Brenda, 2016).

While the May 13 ethnic riot has incited fear in the Malaysian Chinese who experienced it most of whom are afraid to talk about the incident until today whereas the Malay are construed as the biggest winner of the riot since the New Economy Policy (NEP) which further safeguarded the special rights of the Malay was implemented after the incident.

3.6.2 The Root Cause of the May 13 Incident: The Colonial Government’s Separation & Division Rule Policy

However, after showing interview footage with witnesses of different ethnicities expressing their thoughts over the riot, Lau does not come to an immediate conclusion about the incident. Instead, he inserts some black and white archival images in the film showing early Malaya, with voice over in a British accent reading: “*With the expansion of the British empire in Malaya, there was a clutter with over 40 different ethnicities and languages. It’s our (British) responsibility to build law and order on this land (Malaya).*”

Every local should be classified systematically and unambiguously into these racial groups (Malay, Chinese, Indian, Others). The British had a long term friendship with the local Malay monarchy, promising the Malay special rights and land, in order to sustain the British rule. Other races should stay in their place in the hierarchy. The Chinese immigrants, the Indian immigrants, should know their place. As a British estate manager could confirm, no matter whether they are Chinese, Indian or Malay...as long as we divide and rule them, they will always be useful and obedient subjects.”

From the voice-over script above, one may notice how the British legalized its colonization in the name of “responsibility”. Also, the colonial government did not treat the colonized people as human but rather as “useful and obedient subject” which degraded the colonized subjects as non-human (Lau cuts to a scene of monkeys when this line is read). In fact, the Malay special rights were also the result of the collusion of the Malay monarchy and the British colonial who welcomed the British to come into Malaya (Shamsul, 1997). By embedding the history of the British colonization over Malaya, we can guess that Lau intended to relate the root cause of the ethnic riots to a much deeper problem in history of colonization.

When Lau received an interview in Taiwan regarding the film, he cited the late Malaysian writer Syed Hussein Alatas (1928-2007) who wrote: “Malaysia has no intellectual because we are all living in the intellectual framework of the colonial legacy” (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1960), and explained most of the Malaysians are not aware that the socio political and economic policies today were implemented since the colonial period and Malaysians today are still “haunted” by the legacy of post-colonialism today (Luo, 2019).

Today, different ethnic groups live in different communities and are involved in different job sectors. The clear boundaries drawn between different ethnics are also the result of the British colonization period which had implemented the ethnic division rule policy³⁴. Amid the fear of the Chinese communist power, the British constructed the image that the Chinese might take over the resources of the Malay while assuring the

³⁴ Refer to Introduction Chapter, pg. 16.

Malays that their rights would be protected in order to consolidate their power as colonizers. On the other hand, the British colonial government constructed the “lazy” image of the Malay, stereotype that has continued until today (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1960). All these historical factors led to continual conflicts, distrusts, and misunderstandings between ethnic groups. Different ethnic groups coexist under a general state of stability but are subject to varying degrees of potential tension and discontent.

After the May 13 ethnic riot, Malaysia was peaceful until 1999, when Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was removed from his position by Prime Minister Mahathir and imprisoned under the accusation of corruption and sodomy³⁵. Many believed it was a political conspiracy and Anwar’s supporters from different ethnic groups initiated the “*Reformasi*” (reformation) movement and launched several demonstrations and rallies to protest against the government. For the first time after the May 13 incident, the Malaysians, including Malay and Malaysian Chinese walked on the street together to voice out their dissatisfaction over the government (Lopez, 2007). Hee (2018) terms the period of *Reformasi*, which is politically unstable and full of possibilities as the entrance into the post-Malaysia era.

During the regime of the Malaysia 6th Prime Minister Najib Razak, in order to ensure a clean and fair election in Malaysia, “*Bersih*” (meaning “clean” in Malay language), a coalition formed by opposition political parties and non-government organizations, had organized rallies from 1.0 to 5.0 in between the year 2007 and 2016. The *Bersih* rallies brought thousands of Malaysians onto the street to protest against Najib’s government for manipulating the elections through gerrymandering, phantom voters, and postal vote

³⁵ Tsai Ming-Liang’s film, *I don't want to sleep alone* (2006) has also included the incident in one of the plots, in which two foreign workers carry a mattress passing by the Pudu jail (an old jail in capital city Kuala Lumpur). The mattress in the film is believed to allude to the mattress which was one of the important evidence presented to court regarding Anwar sodomy trials. The mattress which supposedly stained Anwar's semen and appeared on the media was definitely a collective memory for all the Malaysians.

frauds. *Bersih* rally 5.0, which occurred in 2016 was slightly different from the previous rallies as one of the main goals was to ask for the resignation of Najib Razak who was allegedly involved in the 1MDB scandal. Since 2015 or even, allegations were made in several newspapers, including the Wall Street Journal, that 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) owned by the Minister of Finance of Malaysia, Najib Razak had been used to steal state funds of around RM42 billion (USD12billion) into his personal accounts. At least 7 countries, including Singapore, Switzerland are still investigating the flow of the money (Ezrow & Frantz, 2013). The *Bersih* rally and the 1MDB scandal played an integral role in uniting Malaysians to pull down Najib's government in the 2018 national election.

It is apparent that ethnicity is no longer the issue that has fuelled the uprisings in recent years. The Malay and the Malaysian Chinese can actually work together as "Malaysians" during critical moments but it is the political and economic policies that have used ethnicity to disturb this united relationship. Politicians have been manipulating ethnic issues to gain support and ensure their political survival. When Najib Razak won in the 13th General Elections, he came out with statements such as "What else do the Chinese want?" in order to thrash the Malaysian Chinese community that rejected the Malay-led National Front (BN) government (Lam, 2013). When the opposition coalition, Alliance of Hope (*Pakatan Harapan*) took over the government after winning the 14th General Election in 2018, it made no difference that the elected Minister of Education Dr. Maszlee came out with a controversial statement that the 239 Program³⁶ (a pre-university education system in Malaysia which has a 90% quota allocated to Malay students) quota is needed because other "races" are rich. He also compared the quota system to the need of Mandarin language proficiency when applying for certain jobs in the private sector.

³⁶ The syllabus of the Matriculation Programme is said to be easier compared to the pre-university examination Malaysian Higher School Certificate (STPM) taken by mainly Malaysian Chinese students in order to enter local universities. The Matriculation programme is thus being criticized for racial discrimination and marginalizing STPM candidates in getting into the local universities (Minderjeet Kaur, 2019).

His statements despite being criticized by the Malaysian Chinese community for being biased were strongly supported by the Malay (Malaysiakini, 2019).

To draw a conclusion on the root cause of the May 13 riot incident may not be Lau's goal in making this film. Rather more importantly, he intends to unveil a covered-up historical incident which is seldom discussed even after 52 years. Although the filmmaker is lauded for offering a neutral view of the May 13 incident by including interviewees of both Malay and Malaysian Chinese, the selection of the interviewees and archived footages to be showed in the film are intertwined in the subjectivity of the filmmaker, because what the audience sees has been decided and designed by the filmmaker.

3.6.3 *Orang Asli*, The Minority Group

The "*Orang Asli*" is another focus of the film. *Orang Asli*, literally the "original people" or "first people" in Malay, are the indigenous minority people of Malaysia (Nicholas, 2012). The *Orang Asli* population in Malaysia accounts for 0.6% of the total 28 million Malaysian population. It can be divided into three groups: Negrito (Semang), Senoi and Proto-Malay, and further divided into 18 subgroups under these three categories (Nicholas, 2012). Each group has its own language and culture and many of the *Orang Asli* communities live close to the forested areas, conducting hunting and, fishing for a living.

In the film, the *Orang Asli* are represented as living in poor conditions in the forest, walking barefoot with their costumes exposing the upper body. Facing the camera, the *Orang Asli* question the special rights given to the Malay and express how their rights have been marginalized, despite being the first people who live in the Malaya peninsula, before anyone has arrived. The Malays identify themselves as the indigenous people of Malaysia, but in fact they also migrated to Malaya from other places, such as Indochina (S. Husin, 1984). When the *Bumiputera* policy safeguarded Islam as the official religion and Malay language as the national language, the *Orang Asli* were still living in poverty and their living places were being destroyed for developments that did not benefit them (Zawawi, 2013, p. 296).

Mahat Akiya, one of the *Orang Asli* interviewees recalls the moment during the slave raids in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the *Orang Asli* were treated as slave, and killed by the Malay. The Malay occupied the land of the *Orang Asli*, killed men and elders, forced women to become prostitutes, and made the children foster children of Malay families. Mahat Akiya also notes how the ex-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad criticized the *Orang Asli* as uncivilized. Starting in 1961, the Malay-centered government even implemented policy to assimilate the *Orang Asli* into the Malay Muslims, with the assumption that the *Orang Asli* were backward and isolated from the rest of the communities, necessitating the move to “modernize” them in order to be regarded as part of the community (Nicholas, 2012). The Malayization policy made the *Orang Asli* feel inferior to the Malay, and they started to use Malay names and speak the Malay language. In the film, the *Orang Asli* do not speak their own language but speak only in Malay.

The Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (revised in 1974) enacted since the State of Emergency as the result of the May 13 riot incident was initially aimed to prevent the communist insurgents from getting help from the *Orang Asli*. However, the Act ended up granting the state the authority to order any *Orang Asli* community to leave and stay out of an area. If at such time the state wishes to re-acquire the land, it can revoke its status and the *Orang Asli* are left with no other legal recourse but to move elsewhere. Furthermore, in the event of such displacement, the state is not obliged to pay any compensation or allocate an alternative site. This insecurity over the tenure of their lands has resulted in many *Orang Asli* communities losing their lands to government private plantations, highway and dam projects, and various other development projects. *Orang Asli* are not anti-development, as often alleged by the government. On the contrary, they have frequently requested for various forms of assistance, especially for improvements in the quality of life – in the areas of health, education, and infrastructure (Nicholas, 2012).

Compared to the *Orang Asli*, the situation of the Malaysian Chinese who are also considered one of the minority ethnic groups in Malaysia is much better. The Malaysian Chinese fight for their rights, especially the right to preserve Mandarin education and they do not really care about the biased treatment given to the *Orang Asli*. Nevertheless, the *Orang Asli* were instrument in helping the Malayan Chinese Communist (MCP)

insurgents fight against the British colonial government by providing food and intelligence to the insurgents during the guerilla war. To prevent the *Orang Asli* from providing help to the insurgents, the British herded the *Orang Asli* into resettlement camps, where a few hundred *Orang Asli* died as the result of mental depression (Nicholas, 2012).

In the film, voice over explains that the British colonial government constructed the image that the *Orang Asli* had been exploited by the Malay and Chinese for centuries. The British colonial officials regarded *Orang Asli* as “uncivilized” and noted how Western civilization was the only salvation that could liberate them from slavery. From the perspective of the British colonizers the *Orang Asli* proved to be an excellent subject of anthropological studies, and they were eager to discover and experiment on more tribes of its kind.

The *Orang Asli* are closely tied to Mother Nature, for instance, the trees, the forest, the river, and the cave. At the end of the film, the filmmaker follows the *Orang Asli* going into a cave when, for the first time, the *Orang Asli* language is heard when one of the *Orang Asli* asks the “ancestor” to protect him and the outsider (filmmaker) he brings along because the outsider wants to know their history. The *Orang Asli* then explains that, the world used to be small, and humans all belonged to the same Mother Nature, but were later separated into different “racial” groups. The cave symbolizes the primitive world before modernization and civilization, before the slave raid, before colonization and the racial riots, a space where a complicated entanglement of ethnic identities and cultures can be tolerated.

By following the *Orang Asli* into their ancestor’s primitive place, the audience is brought to explore a space that is new and unfamiliar to them, thus the plot creates a sense of mystery and curiosity. Also, the audience is led by the filmmaker to become involved in the process of observation to study the *Orang Asli* culture.

Furthermore, this scene recalls the prominent Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), where the cave symbolizes the womb, the place where humans are born and nurtured. *Uncle Boonmee* was shot in a village in northeast Thailand, a place that was once the center of

violent clashes between the Thai government forces and the communist forces (Steve Rose, 2010), an obvious reference to the 1965 violent crackdown that happened in Thailand. Although the film also deals with other themes, nature is always a central thematic element in Apichatpong's films.

3.6.4 The Dream versus The Reality



Figure 3.4 & 3.5: By embedding footage showing Lau cueing a member of the *Orang Asli* to do some action accordingly, the documentary *Timeless Temiar* (1956) is debunked as fictional.

Documentary has always been in debate with reality. In the first half of the film, Lau inserts black and white footages of the 1956 documentary “Timeless Temiar”. The audience can see the life of the Temiar people (*Orang Asli*) in the forest, while hearing information about the Temiar people replayed by voice over which describes the Temiar people as “Dream People”. According to the voice over, the Temiar people learn to control emotion in their dreams and there is no boundary between dreams and reality. When a boy of this tribe wakes up from his dream, he should seek the advice from the tribe elders. The voice over adds that, if a Temiar boy dreams of receiving attention from a girl, the boy must send the girl a bunch of flowers in reality. This interesting segment of narration soon cuts to a color shot which shows a member of the *Orang Asli* walking towards the camera set in bushes, while Lau’s voice can be heard talking to him in Malay. Lau gives the *Orang Asli* a cue to do some action, saying “*Bagus, kamu jalan terus, jangan berhenti, jangan pandang kamera, lihat atas, lihat sekeliling... bagus, kamu sudah block oleh semak-semak, jalan terus, bagus, cut!*” (In English: “Well done, continue walking, don’t stop, don’t look at the camera, look up, look around...good, you are now blocked by the bushes, walk straight, good, cut!”). This shot provides a jarring effect to the audience who were immersed in the “Temiar Dream People” fictional narration a

moment ago. In order to debunk the “*Timeless Temiar*” as fictional, Lau also features Hassan A. Muthalib, a film critic and historian (also experienced the May 13 riot) by pointing out the Temiar people in the film were directed on how to walk and some of the shots took place at preconceived locations. According to Hassan, the footage showing the Temiar people riding on an elephant is not real as the elephant was originally used to carry shooting equipment into the jungle. The voice of the Temiar people is not heard in the documentary, which is instead covered by a narration track that describes them from a Western approach. All these inauthentic elements are used by the Western filmmakers to arouse curiosity in the audience and to make the documentary dramatic, with the aim to fulfill the curiosity of the Western audience.

Nevertheless, when the filmmaker cues the *Orang Asli* to do some actions accordingly, not only does the scene suggest a stereotyping of the *Orang Asli* as easily manipulated but also raises the question of the representation in Lau’s own film. In addition, there is a shot in the film in which the camera purposely changes direction from horizontal to vertical. It seems the camera has fallen down accidentally. This poor camera work, whether accidental or deliberate shows the filmmaker is being self-reflexive and draws to the act of representation. In other words, it reminds the audience there is someone who is behind the camera and decides what the audience is viewing.

The tension between reality and dream in *The Tree Remembers* also intertextualizes with the scene in *Absent Without Leave*, when the former MCP member who was deported back in China expresses how much she missed Malaya by saying “Even if I am in China, I dream of living in Malaya”. The filmmaker could be using the “dream” as an alternative method in the film to represent the nostalgia and traumatic experience of the past that might be taboo to be openly discussed.

Also, at the end of the film, by overlapping the shots depicting the busy roads in the city with many cars passing by with old images taken at the same spot in the past, the cars (of the present) are seemingly crashing into the still people (in the past) in the images. This editing technique connects the present to the past and suggests the traumatic experience of the riot in the past has extended to the present.

3.6.5 The Politics of Sound

The song “*Terang Boelan*” plays the role of linking Lau’s three films, *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) and *Boluomi* (2019) as a trilogy. In *Absent Without Leave* (2016), the song is inserted at the beginning of the film while in *Boluomi* (2019), the last episode of the trilogy, the song can be heard at the end credits.

In *The Tree Remembers* (2019), the version is slightly different from the one being used in the other two films. The song “*Terang Boelan*” is sung by one of the *Orang Asli* to express his dissatisfaction over the government that has occupied the *Orang Asli* settlement and land. The first half of the song’s lyrics is the same as the version used in the other two films but the fifth and sixth lines of lyrics are altered, reading, “Never trust the words of the ministers as the promise is never fulfilled”.

Table 3.0 The “*Terang Boelan*” Song Lyrics and Meaning

Film/ Lyrics	<i>Absent Without Leave</i> (2016) & <i>Boluomi</i> (2019)	<i>The Tree Remembers</i> (2019)
Line 1	<i>Terang bulan</i> The bright moon	<i>Terang bulan</i> The bright moon
Line 2	<i>Terang bulan di kali</i> Its reflection on the river	<i>Terang bulan di pinggir kali</i> Its reflection on the river
Line 3	<i>Buaya timbul</i> The crocodile floats	<i>Buaya hidup</i> The living crocodile
Line 4	<i>disangkalah mati</i> is thought to be dead	<i>dikatakan mati</i> is said to be dead
Line 5	<i>Jangan percaya orang lelaki</i> Don’t trust the men	<i>Jangan percaya janji Pak Menteri</i> Never trust the promise of the ministers
Line 6	<i>Berani sumpah dia takut mati</i>	<i>Lain yang dijanji, tak pernah ditepati.</i>

	dare to swear yet scare to die	all the promises never been fulfilled
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At the ending part of *The Tree Remembers*, the rhythm of “*Terang Boelan*” is once again heard but this time the sound of fire and glass smashing, are added in order to create the atmosphere related to riot.

At the very last part of the film, the sound of trees being cut and falling down to the ground can be heard. Through sound design, once again the filmmaker reminds the audience that, the homes of the *Orang Asli* are still being destroyed, and their voices are still unheard. The sound is also linked to the film title, which is derived from the African proverb “What the axe forgets, the tree remembers”.

3.6.6 Languages Used in the Film

In the film, Lau speaks Mandarin and his accent is closer to the “*zhongwen*” used in Taiwan but not the “*huayu*” used in the Malaysian Chinese community. It is understandable given Lau is making films in Taiwan and while he is delivering narration regarding the historical incidents and “facts”, he tends to speak “standard” Mandarin in order to sound serious and proper. On the contrary, the other Malaysian Chinese interviewees speak *huayu* which includes dialects, and other local creolized languages. When Lau interviews the Malay and the *Orang Asli*, Malay language is used, this suggesting the status of Malay language as the national language that must be mastered by all Malaysians, regardless of ethnicity. Although Lau criticizes the documentary *Timeless Temiar* for covering the voice of *Orang Asli* from being heard, when Lau films the lives of the *Orang Asli* and interviews them, the *Orang Asli* do not speak in their languages too because neither Lau nor the audience understand their languages.

During an interview, Lau explains that he used to dislike the Malay language. He described how when he was brought by his father to the government office for the application of the national identity card and passport, because his father couldn’t speak Malay fluently, both he and his father were discriminated and questioned as to why they could not speak Malay since they identify as “Malaysian”. Since then, Lau had the perception that Malay was never a friendly language and refused to learn the Malay

language, literature, or culture until he started to make films about this country, which changed his mind (Lin, 2019).

3.7 The Third Episode: *Boluomi* (2019)

Different from *Absent Without Leave* and *The Tree Remembers*, *Boluomi* is categorized as fictional film although the film is also deeply personal and semi-biographical in that the background setting is very similar to Lau's own experience. The film tells the story of a Malaysian youth Yifan and a Filipino Laila, who both live in Taiwan. Yifan has a bad relationship with his father, a gambler, so he leaves Malaysia to further study in Taiwan. This background setting is very similar to the filmmaker's own experience. On the other hand, Laila is a married woman with kids who left the Philippines to work illegally in Taiwan.



Figure 3.6 The abandoned baby whose father is a MCP member is wrapped in Jackfruit skin.

The film has two narrative lines. Besides the story of Yi Fan and Laila in Taiwan, the other storyline revolves around a mother whose husband was a member of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and had no choice but to abandon her newborn baby in order to protect the baby from being arrested by the government who was to eliminate the Communist. She used the tropical fruit, *Boluomi* (*Boluomi* is the Mandarin pronunciation of Jackfruit) to wrap the baby before abandoning him. He eventually discovered by a Malay family who then adopted him. It's unclear whether the baby was the father of

Yifan but when Yifan gives Laila a jackfruit tree sapling to grow, the jackfruit takes up the role of linking both storylines together.

Ho Wi Ding, a Malaysian filmmaker who is based in Taiwan had also made a film about the Filipino migrants in Taiwan in his first feature film *Pinoy Sunday* (2010). In both *Pinoy Sunday* and *Boluomi*, the migrants are depicted as troublemakers living in a poor condition in a foreign land. Although Taiwan has always been perceived as a free, highly civilized place, nonetheless the migrant workers in Taiwan have been working under poor working conditions and always been discriminated (Monitor Civica, 2020).

Interethnic relationship becomes a sub-theme in this film. Yi Fan seems to have a relationship with a Malay girl in high school but Yi Fan's mother doesn't like the Malay girl and sees the Malay girl as bringing bad influence to her son. The interethnic relationship used to be a common theme in the late Malaysian filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad's films but due to controversies sparked after the theme was brought up, there haven't been many Malaysian films which revolve around interethnic relationships until *Boluomi*. Yi Fan doesn't get the offer to enter the Matriculation program³⁷ and was laughed at by his Malay classmates who asked him to "go back to China". His Malay girlfriend tried to defend him by saying, "If he is Malay, he would have been accepted".

Although initially Lau wanted the role of Yi Fan to be taken by someone who can speak Malaysian Chinese *huayu*, in the end the role was taken by Taiwanese actor Wu Nien-hsuan. Although Wu tries to mimic the accent of the Malaysian *huayu*, at certain points, one may find the intonation of Wu a little awkward as his Taiwanese *zhongwen* accent can be heard at the end of every sentence he speaks. On the contrary, Lau who is a native speaker of Malaysian Chinese *huayu* tries to speak standard Mandarin when making the voice over in the film. Both of them show an example of how the "*zhongwen*" and "*huayu*" are being "deterritorialized" and "reterritorialized".

³⁷ Refer to same chapter, pg. 106.



Figure 3.7 In Arabic language, “chopping off the finger” means “the exiled people who have left the homeland forever and never return”.

In one of the dramatic plots, Yi Fan chops off his father's finger because he hates how he is a gambler, and later on Yi Fan's own finger is being cut off by the meat cutting knife machine accidentally at a steamboat restaurant where he works to earn a living. According to Lau, in Arabic language, “chopping off the finger” means “the exiled people who have left the homeland forever and never return” (Zhang, 2019). This also explains Lau's personal experience of leaving home after completing high school, and then settling down in Taiwan with a Taiwanese spouse. Although Lau does not return to his homeland, he maintains an ambivalent relationship with the current place as well as the homeland, and he has projected his desire towards the homeland in the film.

In one of the plots when Yi Fan meets Laila, he teaches Laila some Malay words, including *batu* (stone), *angin* (wind), *bulan* (moon), as well as the fruit *cempedak* (jackfruit) whose pronunciation in Malay is the same as in Tagalog. The tropical fruit becomes a common object that links Yi Fan and Laila who have different ethnic and cultural backgrounds together. On top of that, the words Yi Fan teaches Laila are all related to nature, also a common element that exists in all the three films of Lau, connecting them as a representative trilogy of Lau.

Conclusion

This chapter is as much a reflection of Lau's transnational independent 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 Sinophone Malaysian community to view themselves as “outsiders” and some opting to seek opportunities beyond the national boundary. In the case of Lau, although he is based in Taiwan and receiving filmmaking funds mainly from Taiwan and Korea, he is making films about his homeland Malaysia, where he had left for years. By “making his way home” through filmmaking, the concern, desire and affective feeling towards home situates him in the diasporic filmmaking mode.

Through the films, Lau deals with issues such national identity, ethnic identity, minority identity, which are all related to personal as well as national history collectively, and these issues are deemed sensitive and taboo topics in Malaysia where multiethnic people live together.

Absent Without Leave (2016) 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 and also lead to the discussion of national identity.

In *The Tree Remembers (2019)*, the ethnic relationships between the dominant Malay group and the Sinophone Malaysian community as well as the minority *Orang Asli* group is discussed by tracing back to an ethnic riot happened in 1969. The root cause of the riot is closely tied to the Separation and Division Policy implemented since the British colonization. The film suggests that, the Malay-prioritized policy is also the result of the collusion of the Malay monarchy with the British colonial and today the minority groups in Malaysia are still being marginalized, while living on with the traumatic experiences encountered in the past.

Boluomi (2019), despite being a fictional film, tells the story of a Sinophone Malaysian who left home to further his studies in Taiwan. The background setting of the main protagonist of the film obviously epitomizes the filmmaker Lau’s own experience.

Lau’s trilogy is transnational at the extra-textual level but at textual level the films distinctively focus on the history and political struggle of the local communities. The films are infused with politics of memory and forgotten history, which make them exemplary of the independent/non-commercial Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

Chapter 4 Exploring Aesthetics in the Films by Sinophone Female Filmmaker Tan Chui Mui

The previous chapters have focused predominantly on films made by male filmmakers and this chapter addresses the urgency of also considering female filmmakers in the Sinophone film industry in Malaysia, which is largely male-dominated. If one has to mention a female filmmaker, after the late Yasmin Ahmad whom I had written about in my master thesis, perhaps Tan Chui Mui will be the most prolific, having directed more films compared to the other Malaysian Chinese female filmmakers like Jess Teong³⁸ who has only released two films so far. By focusing on the works of a female filmmaker, I am interested in examining how the female perspective is developed through the films, as well as the feminine aesthetic and the intertwining of the gender identity and ethnic identity in the films.

4.0 Introducing Tan Chui Mui & Da Huang Pictures

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Tan Chui Mui was one of the pioneers in the independent filmmaking industry in Malaysia in the beginning of 2000. Together with Amir Muhammad, Liew Seng Tat and James Lee, Tan established Da Huang Pictures³⁹, a film production and distribution company which focuses on making independent films and supports multinational collaboration projects. The company has supported many young Malaysian filmmakers in making short and feature films and the films that have gone on to appear at many international film festivals.

Tan Chui Mui recounted the first time she met Amir and James Lee at a screening in Multimedia University where she was tutoring (Goh, 2007). Multimedia University is also where Tan studied film (computer) animation, and the university is part of the project of Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) program, which was proposed by the fourth Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in order to transform Malaysia into a post-

³⁸ Jess Teong made *The Kid from the Big Apple* in 2015 and a sequel with the same title *The Kid from the Big Apple 2* in 2017.

³⁹ See Da Huang Pictures <http://www.dahuangpictures.com/>

industrial state by 2020 with the adoption of a knowledge-based society framework (Jeong, Ibrahim & Nor Fadzlina Nawi, 2007). Tan was then invited by James to join a film production as videographer; nonetheless the footage taken by Tan was not used after all. From there, Tan started making her own short films such as *Hometown* (2004) and *A Tree in Tanjung Malim* (2003) by using the footage she had taken while assisting James in editing films (Goh, 2007). In 2004, Tan established Da Huang Pictures together with Amir, James Lee and Liew Seng Tat with the aim of applying for filming funds from the European film festivals, sharing information regarding Malaysian independent filmmaking, and distributing DVDs in a more organized and formal way. As mentioned earlier, through the establishment of Da Hung Pictures, Tan and the others helped each other in making films by taking up roles as videographer, producer, editor or even playing a role themselves. Hee (2018) suggests this artisanal production mode is exactly what Naficy (2001) attributes to “accented film”. Furthermore, Hee (2018) also scrutinizes the background of the four filmmakers of Da Huang and concludes that apart from Tan Chui Mui who is “Chinese Mandarin” educated, the rest including Lee, Liew and Amir all went to national schools where the medium of instruction was Malay. Although the members of Da Huang consist of three Malaysian Chinese, due to their education background, they tend to make films in English and Malay rather than Sinitic languages and send their works to the European and American film festivals. As such, Hee (2018) suggests the members of Da Huang are multiethnic and the multiple languages they use in their films are examples of deconstructing the idea of “Chinese diaspora”.

Tan made her feature debut *Love Conquers All* in 2006 which led her to win the New Currents Award and Fipresci Prize in 11th Busan International Film Festival and the Tiger Award in 2007 Rotterdam International Film Festival (Da Huang Pictures, 2020). Since then, Tan has been active in many other film festivals, sometimes as a jury member, which includes Rotterdam (IFFR, 2020).

Starting around 2010, Tan relocated to China and developed her career there by collaborating with Chinese filmmakers, including Jia Zhang Ke. In 2015, Tan returned to Malaysia and founded Next New Wave, a collaborative institution which organizes

filmmaking related workshops, with the aim to provide young and growing film talents in Malaysia a platform to learn directly from renowned filmmakers in the region. It also functions as a hub in Malaysia to invite established filmmakers from the Southeast Asian region to present their works and share their experiences (Next New Wave, 2020). In 2017, Tan started SeaShorts, a film festival focused on showing Southeast Asian short films (Seashorts, 2020).

4.1 The Postmodern Malaysia and Tan Chui Mui's Film Aesthetic

As mentioned earlier, Tan Chui Mui started to make films at the beginning of 2000, during when the government's neo-liberal development policies encouraged Malaysians to become more integrated into the advent of globalization. The project of MSC proposed by Mahathir Mohamad had indeed attracted multinational companies to Malaysia for investment. The MSC's northern end is the Kuala Lumpur City Center (KLCC) district, which is another mega project aimed at making the capital city a global, world-class city (Chang, 2017; Yeoh, 2001). The KLCC district includes Petronas Twin Towers, the tallest buildings in the world from 1998 to 2004 and was one of the landmarks that cemented Kuala Lumpur as a modernized city. Beside the towers, KLCC district also encompasses shopping malls, offices, residential buildings, hotels, parks, and metro hubs.

In the process of modernization, many old buildings were being demolished, including the heritage buildings which have more than 100 years of history at *Jalan Sultan* (Sultan Road) are in the constant crisis of being demolished for the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) project. The buildings at *Jalan Sultan*, exhibiting a combination of British and local architectural styles, are seen as emblems of cultural heritage among the Sinophone community (Lee, 2018). Yan Keng Benevolent Dramatic Association, Guan Di temple, the oldest Chinese temple in Kuala Lumpur, and the Chinese Assembly Hall are among the most famous buildings located at *Jalan Sultan* and on the nearby streets, and these buildings definitely harbour collective memories of the local Sinophone community. In order to protect the buildings from being demolished, several events had been organized, such as guided tours around *Jalan Sultan* offered in three languages, including Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. Although the MRT project was temporarily completed without destruction of the old building at *Jalan Sultan* activities to protect the

street have continued. The Pudu Prison, built in 1895 during the British colonial era, had also sparked controversy when it was demolished in 2012 in order to build Bukit Bintang City Centre (BBCC) which features office buildings and a retail shopping mall (Hemananthani, 2017).

As the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur has become the focal city for many of the government's modernization and globalization plans (Chang, 2017). However, it is often said that the residents in Kuala Lumpur cannot keep up with the constant and often drastic changes to their city (Baxstrom, 2009). Besides the demolition of the heritage buildings in order to give way to modernization, the office towers are also overloaded with only 80% in use (Oriental Daily, 2016). The lack of proper urban planning has also caused other problems such as traffic jams and flash floods. There are also several incidents at the construction sites of the high-rise buildings and MRT projects. Recently, the multibillion-dollar high-speed rail project connecting Singapore and Malaysia was terminated after Malaysia sought change due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that Singapore could not agree with. Malaysia had requested to suspend the project once before and now for the termination, Malaysia is to compensate Singapore for about 270 million dollars (CAN, 2021).

The economic policy of Malaysia is tightly interwoven with ethnic and political issues. In other words, the idea to change Malaysia into a modernized country has never left Islamification behind (Chang, 2017). In order to make Kuala Lumpur a model of Islamic modernity, the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (refer to Introduction) after the May 13 ethnic riot incident has encouraged the Malay to live in the developed cities such as Kuala Lumpur. Also, in the high-end business district mentioned above, such as KLCC and BBCC, the mosques are also built, and some of the buildings even designed with the Islamic motifs. This has made the Sinophone community feel alienated in the state's development. In addition, this focus entirely on the development of the center of Kuala Lumpur has resulted in uneven development that causes gaps between the urban and suburban areas as well as between the upper-class people who largely reap the rewards of the development and people from the lower-class who are left behind.

Tan Chui Mui who started to make films around the 2000 is said to have depicted the struggles of the Malaysian, especially the Malaysian Chinese, who do not benefit the country's development and remain at the margins of society. Rather than showing the postmodern Kuala Lumpur with skyscrapers, Tan's films portray the darker side instead. The Malaysian Chinese are depicted as alienated in the city, having gradually lost their individuality (Chang, 2017).

Chinese film critic Zhang (2007) compares Tan with Japanese female filmmaker Kawase Naomi, and argues Tan demonstrates an idiosyncratic style in her films, and is extremely good at depicting the Sinophone community in Malaysia through a personal perspective. Kawase has also contributed to building up the independent filmmaking scene in Japan by founding Nara International film festival (NIFF) and helping up and coming directors through workshops. IFFR describes how Tan's work as characterized by a poetic style that she uses to depict stories about personal growth. Filmmaker Edmund Yeo (2006), when reviewing Tan's *Love Conquers All*, concludes that the film is a slice-of-life film that focuses more on atmosphere and mood rather than narrative. In terms of aesthetic, Khoo (2008) contends that independent Sinophone Malaysian films have been associated with the works of Tsai Ming Liang, Hou Hsiao Hsien, Wong Kar Wai and others. She names filmmakers such as James Lee, Liew Seng Tat, including Tan Chui Mui, and proposes that they favor focusing on the everyday life of marginal or working class characters, using minimal dialogue and subtle storytelling. Their films may be also said to have more in common with the work of the 6th Generation mainland Chinese filmmakers who also shoot on digital.

As such, besides the feminine issue, this chapter is also interested in interrogating Tan's aesthetic in relation to the postmodern Malaysia context, especially through a focus on phenomena such as desolation and displacement in the flow of modernization through analysis of two of her works: *Love Conquers All* (2006) and *Letters from the South* (2013).

4.2 *Love Conquers All* (2006)

4.2.1 The Female Roles

Love Conquers All begins as its protagonist, Ah Ping, arrives in Kuala Lumpur from

her hometown in Penang to work at her aunt's food stall. Besides working at the food stall, Ah Ping is portrayed as wandering aimlessly in the city most of the time, suggesting her alienation in a city that is highly modernized, gradually losing her individuality and identity. Ah Ping calls her family and boyfriend through a public phone but neither her family members nor boyfriend make an appearance in the film. This suggests the urban context has diluted Ping's connections to her biological roots as well as people around her, revealing how this kind of alienation and lack of belonging has become a common problem in modern society (Chang, 2017).

Although the plot is set in the capital city, none of the skyscrapers, including the landmark Petronas Twin Tower, are projected in the film, suggesting Ah Ping is not one of those who benefit from the constant urban and technological developments. The public phone booth where Ah Ping makes calls to her family and boyfriend is where she meets John, a gangster, who Ah Ping falls in love with. Ah Ping was told about John's scam to cheat women, but Ah Ping still falls into the "love" trap as she thinks that "love can conquer all". Ah Ping seems passive and helpless when she has to sell her body in order to help John. Nonetheless, I argue that Ah Ping does all these voluntarily. Obviously Ah Ping knows the dangers and consequences of getting along with John yet she is willing to succumb to it in order to overcome her loneliness and emptiness living in the city. We see Ah Ping's naked body in one of the scenes, and this suggests how the woman's body is being objectified but it can also suggest how the abuse of female bodies goes against these supposed strides toward civilization and modernization. The scene of her nude also violates Islamic morale and challenges censorship regulations. As a result, the film was not screened at local cinemas.

In addition, I argue that the role of Ah Ping, who is depicted as trapped in the milieu of hyper capitalism and globalization, also signifies the Malaysian Chinese who are struggling to understand their identity in the process of the city's rapid development where the country's economic policy has situated them in the marginal position.

On the other hand, Ah Ping shares a room with her niece Mei who is an elementary school student. Mei has a pen-pal whom she calls "Mystery Man". Mei is portrayed as having a long-distance relationship with "Mystery Man" who also never makes an

appearance until the end of the film, and Mei's long-distance relationship parallels the equally mysterious and unsettling relationship Ah Ping has with John (Christopher, 2011).

Besides Ah Ping and Mei, who serve as the leads in the two main narrative lines in the film, Ah Ping's aunt, who operates a food stall, plays another important female role. She is perhaps a single mother, as she seems to operate the stall by herself with the occasional help of her sister and Ah Ping. During a scene, Ah Ping, her aunt, and Mei are shown sitting in a row, watching television. I argue this scene suggests the three women are having the same plight, in which they are not playing any important roles in the flow of modernization happening in the city they are living in and are clueless about what their future will be in the fast changing environment.

4.2.2 The Film Aesthetic

4.2.2.1 The Minimal Use of Camera Movements

Love Conquers All is the first feature film by Tan, and one may notice the undeveloped and rough shooting skills by Tan throughout the film. The film consists of a lot of static shots with simple composition, and little camera movement, consisting of pans to the left or right. The simple camera work, however, accurately represents the protagonist Ah Ping's recurring everyday's life. Ah Ping is spotted wandering on the streets, the night market and the red public phone booth where she calls her mom and boy friend, and these sequences keep repeating throughout the film, presented with the same shot composition and camera work. Furthermore the handheld camera work is also used when the camera follows Ah Ping from her back, and the audience is led by the camera to follow and "observe" Ah Ping heading "somewhere". This rough camera work, however, enhances the realism of the film where the audience might find they are encountering the same experience as Ah Ping.

4.2.2.2 The Long Take



Figure 4.0 The first scene of *Love Conquers All* is a 5-minutes-long-take-shot.

The first shot of the film is a 5-minute long-shot taken on an old bus, showing Ah Ping giving up her seat to an old Indian man with a mess of carry-on baggage who complains of a headache. There is no camera movement during this 5-minute long-take, and the shot doesn't contain any information that seems relevant to the development of the plot later, except that the audience can surmise that Ah Ping is traveling somewhere. When analyzing this shot, film critic Hassan Abd. Muthalib (2006) argues that both Ah Ping and the Indian man represent the descendants of immigrants who journeyed to this land for better lives, and they are sitting side by side, signifying they share the same problems. Nevertheless, the Indian is worse off because he carries his worldly belongings and heads nowhere. The Malays are missing from the scene, signifying their distance from the Malaysian Chinese and Indian whose rights are being marginalized. Khoo (2008) suggests that long take is used in Taiwan New Cinema as a form of political and cultural rebellion and to contest mainstream cinema, especially in the films of Hou Hsiao Hsien and Tsai Ming Liang where they eschew fast paced cross-cutting for long takes, still shots, and repetition, and favor realism to convey quotidian life as an oppositional tactic to mainstream film values. The long takes and still shots used in *Love Conquers All* have also made the film unorthodox to those commercial Sinophone films in Malaysia, which are normally fast paced and less critical.

The previous case studies did not include any Indian roles. However, during the first shot in *Love Conquers All*, we see an old Indian man sitting in the same row as the Malaysian Chinese female protagonist Ah Ping, significant even if he does not play a role

in the plot. Nevertheless, there are three Indian roles in total that appear in the film.

Indians make up 7% of the Malaysian population (Department of Statistics, 2020). They are the third largest ethnic group after Malay and Malaysian Chinese. Due to their small number, their rights have always been marginalized. Since the 18th century or earlier, the British colonial government brought in Indian migrants from the southern part of India to Malaya to work in the rubber plantations. Some evidence shows the Indian migrants were exploited and their working and living environments were very poor (P. Ramasamy, 1994). Due to the job separation and division principle implemented by the British government in the past, most Malaysian Indians continue to live in suburban areas until this day. Although there are Indian elites who work as doctors and lawyers in the city, a large number of the Indians still work as laborers, rubber tappers and drivers. Sami Vellu, the ex-president of Malaysia Indian Congress (MIC) pointed out that Malaysian Indians have long been marginalized and their rights are always overlooked by the government (Gabriel, 2000). The Indian is always stereotyped as an alcoholic or criminal, having dark skin and bad odor in Malaysian communities. The Sinophone communities in Malaysia even threaten mischievous children who go against their parents' orders by saying "If you don't act good, I am going to leave you to the Indian" which obviously denigrates the Indian.

In the film, one of the roles played by an Indian is John's cousin, Gary, who according to John is a pimp and often scams women he meets, forcing them into prostitution and eventually selling them to human traffickers. There is no clue as to why John, who is physically recognized as a Malaysian Chinese, has an Indian cousin. One of the possibilities is that Gary is a mix of Malaysian Chinese and Indian which gives him the physical appearance of an Indian. We also see an Indian who sells lottery tickets in the restaurant, representing the typical Malaysian Indian without stable employment. Then, we also see Ah Ping and John at the food stall where they eat "Lok-lok"⁴⁰ and drink *Teh-O-Limau*⁴¹ at a *Mamak* Stall (food stall operated by Indian Muslim). The

⁴⁰ A dish consisting of various steamboat style foods inclusive of meats and vegetables served on a skewer in a mobile form.

⁴¹ Black tea with lime, a common drink that can be found at food stalls and restaurants in Malaysia.

Mamak Stall offers varieties of food, including Malay, Chinese and Indian food, and is frequented by all ethnicities of people.



Figure 4.1 Ah Ping and John are eating *Nasi Lemak* and drinking *Teh-O-Limau* at a *Mamak* stall.

4.2.2.3 The Minimal Background Music and the Noise

There is not much background music used in the film. Most of the time ambient sound is heard and sometimes the ambient sounds escalate to noise that becomes so loud that it covers up the characters' voices, irritating the audience. The ending music is a marching sound which is incompatible with the film that has a title containing "love". Nevertheless, one can perhaps relate this theme to the lives of Ah Ping and her niece Mei: despite being dull, desolate and "miserable" (in the case of Ah Ping), they should "march on" and keep lives going.

4.2.2.4 Repetition of the Shooting Location

The location setting in the film is focused on several spots, and the plot evolves and recurs in the same locations.

During the first shot, we see Ah Ping and the Indian man sitting on the bus. As the bus moves, we can see coconut trees in the background. The coconut trees suggest the film is set in a tropical place particularly close to the sea. When Ah Ping travels with John in a car, they finally reach a Malay village nearby the sea in an outskirts area. Here, we again see shots of coconut trees. The village is believed to be Tan's hometown named *Sungai Ular (Snake River)*, a small fishing village in Kuantan, east coast of West Peninsula Malaysia. Tan grew up in the village where all the residents were Malay and Tan's family was the only Malaysian Chinese family living there. The village had been

demolished some years ago for the state development but Tan says her Malay neighbours were all friendly people and their doors were always opened for any visitors regardless of ethnicity (Lim, 2006). This explained why Tan designed the plot to show John and Ah Ping having lunch in a Malay house which is less relevant to the film plot.

Ah Ping works at her aunt's "economical rice" stall, a food stall that serves more than 20 dishes for customers to choose with their rice and the stall is usually found in hawker centres, food courts or in a shop where there are other stalls selling food. Most of the dishes have their roots in Chinese cuisine: stir-fried vegetables, fried and steamed eggs, sweet and sour pork etc. The dishes are very similar to the "home-cooked food" of the Sinophone community in Malaysia, with rice forming the basis of the meal and accompanied by various cooked dishes (Chan, 2005). It is economic because one can choose less expensive dishes. Unlike the *Mamak* Stall which appeals to customers of all ethnicities, the dishes at the economical rice stall are basically non-*halal*, so it is visited by mainly Malaysian Chinese and others who are non-Muslim.

When Ah Ping fetches her niece Mei back to her house on a motorcycle, the motorcycle enters a "Chinese New village"⁴², the village which was established since the British colonization to control the Chinese migrants from funding the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Viewers can recognize that this is a "New Village" because the area consists of a cluster of the houses sharing the same design and structure, and the red tabernacle for praying to the deities can be seen at the compound of the houses, including Mei's house. However, this "New Village" has been reformed as most of the houses are now made of bricks but not the originally wooden built houses. In order to improve the ethnic relationship, with the implementation of New Economic Policy (NEP)⁴³, the *Bumiputera* Lot Quota Regulation which requires the developers to allocate at least 30% of all property units (be it residential or commercial) to *Bumiputeras* was also introduced (LoanStreet, 2019). Under this regulation, the Malays are seen living in residential areas which are mainly occupied by the Sinophone community. In the film, a mosque is spotted nearby Mei's house. As Ah Ping and Mei pass by the mosque, the broadcast of the

⁴² Refer to Chapter 1, pg. 56 and Chapter 3, pg. 93.

⁴³ Refer to Chapter 1, pg. 33

prayers can be heard. The broadcast of the Muslim prayers has always been an issue in Malaysia, where the official religion is Islam but others are given freedom in choosing religion. As Islam is given special status within the state, the Muslim prayers which are broadcast five times a day are often complained about by non-Muslims as a sound disturbance especially by those who live near a mosque (Bernama, 2015). .



Figure 4.2 Night market epitomizes the multiculturalism of Malaysia.

Another shooting location that repeatedly exists in the film is the night market. The night market in Malaysia is another place after *Mamak* stalls where different ethnicities gather. In the night market, there are a lot of stalls selling cheap wares, clothing, food etc. The night market works as an important location setting in the late Yasmin Ahmad's film "*Sepet*" (literally means single eyelid), where the male protagonist Jason, who is the vendor selling pirated DVDs, falls in love with a Malay girl Orked for the first time and the inter-ethnic relationship between them develop. In *Love Conquers All*, we see Ah Ping and John eat *Lok-lok* operated by the Indian, and then Ah Ping selects shirts for her boyfriend at a stall operated by a Malaysian Chinese boss.



Figure 4.3 Pay phone emphasizes visual fetishes of the past as the film is set before the advent of mobile phones and internet.

Moreover, the pay phone booth where Ah Ping calls her family and boyfriend back in Penang, as well as the place where Ah Ping meets John for the first time also repeatedly appears in the film.

4.2.2.5 The Ambiguous Plot and Open Ending

A large part of the film's plot is left unresolved. The audience is left to fill in the gaps with their own interpretation. For instance, the reason Ah Ping leaves her hometown and leads a new life in the city is unknown. The audience can only hear Ah Ping's mother and her boyfriend's voices through the phone but neither of them appear in the film. The Indian man who appears in the first long take shot does not return. His appearance leaves the audience with doubts. Also, the audience is not told what exactly John and his cousin do, as their activities are kept mostly off-screen. During the last scene, Mei, who is accompanied by her mother, pays a visit to her pen pal's house. Mei asks her mother to ring the doorbell while she hides and prepares to peep at her mysterious pen pal. The film ends here. The audience wasn't given any clues as to whether Mei meets her pen pal successfully and how the relationship between Ah Ping and John develops.

4.3 *Letters from the South* (2013)

In this section, I analyze another work, the omnibus titled "*Letters from the South*", where Tan takes up the role of producer and also directs one of the segments. *Letters from the South* consists of six segments, including Aditya Assarat's *Now Now Now*,

Royston Tan's *Popiah*, Midi Z's *Burial Clothes*, Sun Koh's *Singapore Panda*, Tan Chui Mui's *A Night in Malacca*, and Tsai Ming-liang's *Walking on Water*. The six segments are presented in the letter format, which is one of the significant styles of accented cinema as suggested by Naficy (2001). According to Naficy, the use of epistolarity (letter) as well as other forms, including telephone, video, email, cassette, fax and others emphasize the visual fetishes of the past. The letters in *Letters from the South* are linked to the themes of diaspora and home as all the segments contemplate the ever-shifting relationship between the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and the roots in China through examining the "diaspora" subjects' everyday lives. Rather than confirming that "Chinese" identity comes from the ethnic roots, the film focuses on the sense of belongings towards the vague idea of a "homeland".

The use of letters in this segment links to the phones that appear in *Love Conquers All* that I discuss in the previous section. The letter and phone work as metaphor and expression of misplaced desire: the desire of Ah Ping to be with her boyfriend who is in a different city as well as the desire of Mei to meet her pen pal who is in a different time and space.

Despite the main theoretical framework of my project as Sinophone studies which de-emphasizes the nation-state as its origin, my scope of case studies since the first chapter have focused on Sinophone films made by Malaysian filmmakers. In fact, Sinophone studies also refers to the "circle" where Sinitic languages and dialects are used (Hu, 2019) and the boundaries between nation states should be contested. As such, I find the film *Letters from the South* (2013) comprised of six short films focused on the "Chinese diaspora" in different Sinophone community in the Southeast Asia region, including Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar, as a productive case study to study the connections between different Sinophone communities where themes such as "identities" and "home(land)" can be scrutinized. More importantly, this film may also work as an example which posits the Sinophone communities of different regions within a "circle" (community) and so the national boundaries are challenged.

4.3.1 Tan Chui Mui's *A Night in Malacca: Belongs Nowhere and Everywhere*

A Night in Malacca is a 10-minute-short-film which exhibits Tan's significant poetic style. By citing and conversing with "Malacca Travelogue" (1942) written by the past exiled Chinese writer, Yu Da Fu (郁達夫), Tan explores the themes of homeland, wondering whether the longing for homeland has gone with the passing of time and suggesting the uncertainty of the idea of a homeland. Tan herself appears in the film for a few seconds which foregrounds the personal take. She walks on the street and becomes distorted due to the rough movements of the camera. After that, the short features a female as a flaneur, reminiscent of Ah Ping in *Love Conquers All*, but this time the female actress is wandering in Malacca, a state in the Southern part of the Western Peninsula Malaysia, next to the Malacca strait.

The short film doesn't contain any dialogue, but texts are shown on the back screen and interwoven with montages of random images. Also, the film is dubbed with a monotone background music, which gives the film an experimental style. The film begins with the text, "*A night you could not sleep, your thoughts flicker noisily.*" Soon, it cuts to a montage of seemingly random images. The audience might not get any clues by watching the images but gradually one may notice some of the images are taken in Malacca.

Since the 14th century, due to its strategic location, Malacca⁴⁴ has been one of the international trade centers in the East (Suhaila Abdullah, 2013). Traders from China, India and Arabia traded at the port of Malacca, and from there formed many of the cultures, ethnicities, religions that exist in Malacca until today (Suhaila Abdullah, 2013). Chinese mariner and diplomat Cheng Ho (鄭和) and his fleet arrived in Malacca in the 14th century and since then diplomatic relations between Malacca and Ming China was

⁴⁴ Starting from the 15th century, Malacca was occupied by Portugal, Dutch and British, and so there are many heritage buildings and ancient landmarks with the European styles left behind, including The Stadthuys House built by the Dutch that exists in the film. Renowned as a historical city in Malaysia, together with George Town Penang, has been accorded as one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Wong, 2018).

established (Jin, 2005). It was believed the Ming dynasty then sent princess Hang Li Po to the Malaccan Sultan Mansur Shah (reigned 1456-1477). Hang Li Po was accompanied by 500 followers, and these followers who married with local Malays were called the *Peranakan* (Ch'en J. & Tarling N., 1970). The female *Peranakan* were named *Nyonya* while the males were called *Baba*. The *Peranakan* were characterized by their hybridization of Malay and Chinese cultures as a result of the natural acculturation when there was little state control (Ngo, 2019). They wore costumes that were close to traditional Malay costumes and use a lot of spices in their food, but at the same time they practice the Chinese cultures of praying to their ancestors and incorporate Chinese wedding custom. The *Peranakan* are non-Muslim so they eat pork (Chen, 1984). Nevertheless, today, in the case of a non-Muslim and a Muslim in Malaysia, the non-Muslim must convert to Muslim by law (Zuliza Mohd. Kusrin, 2006). The *Peranakan* were an important part of Malaysian cultural heritage who symbolized the hybridized identity that contests the essentialized idea of “Chineseness” and “Malayness”.

In the film, Tan mentions a *Nyonya lane*, and says it looks like a lane in China. The *Nyonya lane* here perhaps refers to the Heeren Street (also named Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock) in Malacca, which was home to the Malacca *Peranakan*, whose cultural heritage can still be found there. The buildings along Heeren Street adopted a fusion of Eastern and Western design. Originally called the Dutch village, the buildings are narrow and small when viewed from outside but long and spacious inside with high ceilings. Inside, the floors and corridors are lined with intricate tiles, and teak front doors are carved with family names or mottos in gold calligraphy (M.Veera Pandiyan, 2013). Carved wooden signboards were placed above the front door and Chinese lanterns symbolizing family origin or surname were hung in front of the house to display the district in China where the owner originated from, their dialect or their clan (Li, 2017). The windows and roofs are beautifully decorated and carved with the Chinese element images of dragons, birds and flowers (Li, 2017).

The parallel street to Heeren Street is Jonker Street, which is known worldwide today for its antique shops. It has been called the old Chinatown because after the Dutch left, the street was occupied by the *Peranakan* and Chinese immigrants (Ben van Wijnen,

2020). Today, Malaysian Chinese traditional craft arts such as paper cutting, rattan handicrafts, woodcrafts, textiles as well as food can be found on the street. The Chinese dialect clan associations such the “Eng Choon” clan from the Fujian Province and the Teochew Clan Association which once provided support and help to the Chinese migrants are also located on this street (see Eng Choon Association Malacca official website & Teo Chew Association Malacca official website). The rooster and horses which are positive symbols in the Sinophone community are also painted on the walls along Heeren Street and Jonker Street (Li, 2017). What I want to highlight here is how Heeren Street and Jonker Street, both of which are mentioned and appear in *A Night in Malacca*, are located in the hub of Malacca, where Eastern and Western cultures meet. Most importantly, is the history of the Sinophone community in these locations, since these two streets were mainly occupied by the Chinese immigrants after the British colonists left. Wang Der-Wei who refers to the Sinophone in Mandarin as “華夷風”(華=Chinese; 夷=others; 風=wind) rather than “華語語系” (Sinophone) in dialogue with Shih Shu-Mei, was inspired when he saw a Chinese couplet hanging at one of antique shops at Jonker Street. Wang uses the word “風” when pronounced it sounds similar to “phone” to explain that the concept of Sinophone as something “flexible” or that “flows” like wind. He proposes that Sinophone studies should also take the “non-Sinophone” into consideration (Wang, 2020). In the film, the actress is spotted standing confusingly at Jonker Street, near the Tan Kim Seng Bridge across the Malacca River. She is surrounded by many trishaws, which the trishaw in Malacca is characterized with the passenger seat next to the cyclist and decorated with colorful flowers, flags, and flashing lights.



Figure 4.4 The actress stands at the intersection of Jonker street, near the Tan Kim Seng bridge, is surrounded by trishaws.



Figure 4.5 The actress wanders along *Jalan Bunga Raya*.

Another street spotted in the film is *Jalan Bunga Raya* (Hibiscus Street), where the actress takes a stroll. The audience may notice most of the shops along the street are closed. *Jalan Bunga Raya* is short distance away from *Jonker* and *Heeren* Street but in the past, it used to be a busy street occupied by the Malaysian Chinese immigrants running different businesses, including Chinese medicine and herbs shops, stationary shops, book stores, clothes and shoes shops, food stalls, trading shops, photo studios, record stores etc. In the 90s', the street was gradually replaced by Malay mosques, Indian shops (the street next to *Jalan Bunga Raya* is the Little India street) and commercial hotels. Most of the shops operated by the Malaysian Chinese in the past have since closed.

While the inclusion of local streets in the film signifies Tan's attention directed at the local experience, she is perhaps interested in much more complex relations. Rather than just the moving images, the audience may have a better idea of Tan's message by interpreting the texts that appear on screen, which describe Tan herself as a foreigner looking for someone to converse with while she wanders around a foreign place.

The text that appears in Tan Chui Mui's *A Night in Malacca*

*A night you could not sleep,
your thoughts flicker noisily.*

*You walk wildly,
in the streets of some foreign land.*

You want to speak to someone, anyone.

You imagined conversations with fictional characters.

Those who were here before

--Extract from Yu Dafu's *Malacca Travelogue* (1942)

*As if I have been sleepwalking,
the days pass without me realizing.
It seems like it has been a long time,
but then it also seems only a day and a night.*

*Living in the south,
with no clear season changes,
but only summer all year long...
My memory can only dissipate day by day....*

You ask an actress to play yourself.

*You even ask your actors to recite the text from Yu Dafu's *Malacca Travelogue**

*500 years of history in half a day of sightseeing.
Walking back to the rest house under the streetlight,
through a narrow Nyonya lane,*

*looking like a lane in China.
I suddenly forgot that I am a wanderer in a foreign land.*

*Smoking on the veranda,
gazing at the stars,
a strange thought occurred to me.
Let's imagine, right at this moment,
the bellhop came with a name card,
he brought a visitor!
With this strange visitor,
we engaged in a long conversation.
We talked at length about unofficial histories,
of tragedies and heroes of recent wars,
or we talked about love.
By the time we parted,
it was 3 or 4 in the morning*

*When I woke up in the morning,
I tried to recall my visitor,
it was clear that he was not from our time.
When I search for his name card,
it was gone.*

*I asked the bellhop about my visitor,
(Maybe he was a Missionary?)
but he could not recall.
No one else remembered him either.
Isn't this good material for a short story?
The title will be "A Night in Malacca".
Isn't that perfect?*

*One day I will write this short story,
this “Imaginary Conversation”,
or ask you to ask the actor something irrelevant.*

*You suddenly realize,
maybe he doesn't exist.
You imagine meeting the stranger visitor Yu Dafu,
absurd as it may seem,
it wasn't as you thought.
He might have been an explorer,
maybe even a botanist,
he might have planted this tree,
shipped from some exotic land like Madagascar.
You heard him whisper,
we are born to be wanderers.
but maybe he was just talking to the tree.
We are wanderers, aren't we?
Sometimes you joke that your homeland is Ancient Greece,
or you argue that “homeland” is not a place,
it is a time,
and one can only grow further from it,
and watch as it dissipates away completely
You can only remain as an outsider
wherever you are.
For you,
who belongs nowhere and everywhere.*

In dialogue with Yu Da Fu's travelogue, Tan revisits the nostalgic sentiments and memories of Yu in Malacca as well as negotiates herself as being a wanderer and outsider in a foreign land (perhaps Malaysia), yet the homeland (China) is not a “place” but a “time” that can never be reversed. In the last line of text that wraps up the film, Tan

writes, “For you who belongs nowhere and everywhere”, suggesting a Sinophone Malaysian like her does not belong to any place and the relation with her homeland is never in the past but ever present and constantly changing. Mobilized in between the localized and globalized context, Tan’s diasporic status is continually in flux..

4.3.2 Tsai Ming Liang’s *Walking on Water*: Nostalgia of the Past Memories

Tan’s *A Night in Malacca* is in dialogue with the segment of Malaysia-born filmmaker Tsai Ming Liang’s *Walking on Water* which observes a seventh-story flat in Kuching, Sarawak, the city in Eastern Malaysia where Tsai was born and grew up. In the last line of this segment, Tsai claims he spent the best years of his childhood at the flat which was built in the year of 1958. Although Tsai had left Malaysia for many years and currently resides in Taiwan where he pursues his filmmaking career, his films nevertheless have a global trajectory and seemingly have no particular home. Tsai claims that he feels he belongs neither to Taiwan nor Malaysia. He can go anywhere he wants to or fits in but he never feels a sense of belonging (Huang, 2005). This resonates with the statement in Tan’s film of how her protagonist “belongs nowhere and everywhere”.

In Tsai’s previous film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), he delineates his nostalgic feeling towards an old movie theatre in Taiwan that was going to close down and in *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), the Pudu Prison located in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia which had more than 100 years of history before getting demolished was included as a shooting location. In *Walking on Water*, Tsai shows his nostalgia towards a flat in the city where he was born. The themes of “home(land)” and “diaspora” were never explicit themes in Tsai’s oeuvre; instead, he focuses more on localized experiences and nostalgia. *Walking on Water*, then, is more related to the place-based memories and experiences without emphasizing the idea of “diaspora”, while also contesting notions of Chinese cultural centrism. Chan (2007) who studies the political aesthetics of nostalgia, place and lingering in Tsai’s *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, suggests the film as a cinema of lingering, nostalgic for its own time. Chan (2007) delineates how lingering connotes not only a temporal dimension, where one slows down and takes one’s time but also suggests a specific locality or place in the conception of slowing down: one lingers at a particular place of choice to appreciate, to relish, to study, or to reminisce. *Walking on Water*

exhibits similar aesthetic properties as *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, which shows a monk walking (lingering) at a snail's pace around the flat giving the audience (and Tsai) ample time to flesh out, reflect, and contemplate the memories and nostalgic feelings towards the flat where Tsai's spent his childhood .

4.3.3 The Sinophone Communities in Singapore

In the omnibus of *Letters from the South*, there are two short films directed by filmmakers from Singapore: Roystan Tan's *Popiah* and Sun Koh's *Singapore Panda*. The former portrays how a Hokkien family in Singapore preserves the culture of making *Popiah*⁴⁵, the Hokkien's traditional spring roll made to pray one's ancestors on the *Qingming* festival⁴⁶ (Tomb-sweeping Day/ Ancestor Praying Day). Besides highlighting the Chinese values of paying gratitude to one's ancestor and never forgetting one's root, the film more importantly highlights the use of language in how the Hokkien family members speak Hokkien dialects among each other during the process of making *popiah*.

Since 1979, the Singapore government, under the leadership of the premiere Lee Kuan Yew, launched the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" to discourage the use of Chinese dialects, citing the dialects as hindering the learning of Mandarin and English, the official state languages (Zhang, 2017). Soon, the local media refrained from using dialects, Hong Kong Cantonese TV series and Taiwan Minnanese series were dubbed in Mandarin, and the government even limited access to TV3 of Malaysia which carried Cantonese programming (Lent, 1990). Nevertheless, in the 80s' in order to transform into a modernized and globalized nation, the Singapore government enhanced the importance of English, giving English higher status than Mandarin in spite of their bilingual policy. This resulted in many Mandarin-medium schools being converted into English-medium school, shrouding Singapore under English chauvinism. Singaporeans had the mindset

⁴⁵ The main ingredients of making popiah are such as popiah skin, chilli bean sauce, filling of finely grated and steamed or stir-fried jicama, bean sprouts, shredded omelette, thinly sliced fried tofu, lettuce leaves, and fried shallots.

⁴⁶ Chinese families visit the tombs of their ancestors on this day to clean the gravesites, pray to their ancestors, and make ritual offerings, such as traditional food dishes, burning of joss sticks and joss paper.

that English equated to “progressive, freedom, democratic and fashion” whereas Mandarin was linked to being “backward, conservative, authoritarian, traditional” and refused to speak languages other than English (Hee, 2013b). Today, English is widely and commonly used in schools, the workplace, home, and other public areas in Singapore. Nevertheless, due to the emergence of China as one of the world’s biggest capital markets, the Singapore government began to realize the economic value of Mandarin and now encourages learning the language.

According to statistical data, the Singapore Hokkien population accounts for about 21% of the national population (Chua, 2000), making it the largest dialect clan in Singapore. In the film *Popiah*, the filmmaker has allowed the suppressed and marginalized Hokkien dialects to be spoken and, most importantly, heard.

On the other hand, Sun Koh’s *Singapore Panda* is about an old radio station in Singapore taken over by a Chinese, signifying the emergence of China as a major world economic power in comparison to Singapore which is located in a marginalized position in Southeast Asia. The new Chinese executive who speaks in a Cantonese dialect asks the old radio station staff members to perform a new radio play that tells the story of a panda who wants to become an orangutan. The *panda* here could refer to the first generation of Chinese immigrants who arrived in Singapore but longed for a home that is now just a distant memory, whereas the orangutan is a metaphor for the local “native” people in Singapore, as orangutans are native to the rainforests of Southeast Asia. While making the narration for the new radio play, we soon notice the story parallels the staff’s own experiences. The narration script of the radio play is about a “panda” (a reference to the old staff member) which (who) has difficulty adapting to life in Singapore and wishes to go back to the place (China) where “everyone” is a panda (Chinese). However, as the panda slowly adapts to the local culture, he starts to notice the gap between him and his grandchildren, as the grandchildren don’t speak panda or orangutan language but speak a common language (English) with the “coyotes” in the US. With this plot, the filmmaker poignantly indicates the globalization impact of both China and the US on the Chinese diaspora in Singapore.

As mentioned earlier, Singapore emphasized English education in order to catch up with the advent of globalization, causing a sharp decline in the use of Mandarin especially among the younger generations who refuse to speak the language. Mandarin is touted as something uncool and old fashioned, a phenomenon which is always being represented in the local films and drama, such as in Singapore commercial film director Jack Neo's "*I Not Stupid*" series. On the contrary, the older generation, who can't speak English, is always left behind and forgotten in the hyper-globalized nation (Wan, 2017). As a consequence, a language barrier between generations has occurred. In the short film by Sun Koh, the radio staff speaks only Mandarin whereas his grandchildren speak only English. The staff's daughter-in-law, representing the generation in between the kids and her father-in-law, is able to speak English mixed with Mandarin and the Hokkien dialect. She becomes the communication mediator between the children and their grandfather. Worse still, when the radio staff asks the grandchildren whether they learn Mandarin in school and, without feeling ashamed, the daughter-in-law replies that they get an "A" for all subjects except for Mandarin, where they receive an "E".

Through *Singapore Panda*, the filmmaker foregrounds the Chinese descendants in Singapore who identify themselves differently based on their generation. The old radio staff member who longs to go "back" to China identifies closely with China as homeland, suggesting his identity as a member of the Chinese diaspora that has yet adapted to his new settlement; whereas his grandchildren who have completely assimilated into the local culture and environment identify closely with their current place of settlement in Singapore. The idea of Chinese diaspora and Chineseness as contested echoes the idea in Sinophone studies that posits that the Chinese diaspora has an expiration (Shih, 2007). The situation is quite similar in the Sinophone community in Thailand which I will examine in the next section.

4.3.4 The Assimilated Sinophone Thai Community

Aditya Assarat's *Now Now Now* casts light on the Sinophone community in Thailand. The film tells a simple story of a Thai-Chinese teenage schoolgirl, Paula, who is visited by her cousin Li Mu Mu from China. At the beginning of the film, Li gives a presentation in a class where Paula sits in. Li asks and answers her questions by saying:

“Now and past, the past and the present, which are we? Or both are? We live only in the present, no past, no history, no background.” Li’s words can be used to scrutinize cultural assimilation in Thailand, where the Sinophone community doesn’t have an “official” Mandarin label and do not speak any Sinitic languages or dialects. G. William Skinner (1957), writing on the level of assimilation of the descendants of Chinese immigrants in Thailand, notes that “the immigrant's descendant identifies himself in almost all social situations as a Thai, speaks Thai language habitually and with native fluency, and interacts by choice with Thai more often than with Chinese.” Skinner (1957) believed the assimilation success of the Thai Chinese was a result of policies that allowed Chinese tradesmen to advance their ranks into the kingdom's nobility since the 17th century. Nevertheless, there was also forced assimilation through education and encouraging Thai nationalism, seeking to eradicate the Chinese consciousness and identity in between 1930s to 1950s under the regime of Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Wiese, 2013). Besides having had their language and writing suppressed, the Chinese were also required to change their surnames to Thai names (Wiese, 2013). As a result, many younger generations of ethnic Chinese can only communicate in Thai and self-identify solely as Thai. In *Now Now Now*, despite having ethnic roots in China, Paula does not speak Mandarin or any Sinitic dialects, making this segment out of the six the one that features the least use of Sinitic languages. I argue that this segment, along with the situation in Singapore elaborated in the last section, criticizes the Chinese diasporic identity as proposed by Shih Shu-Mei (2007). As Shih contends, Sinophone studies might lose its meaning when the Chinese diaspora stops using Sinitic languages in their host land. Still, there is nothing sorrowful about “losing” Chinese identity as the “route” is always in the “root”. To elaborate further, compared to Singapore and Thailand, Malaysia seems to have a better Mandarin education system since its Mandarin-medium public elementary schools, private secondary schools and University have been preserved until today. This explains why the Sinophone community in Malaysia is able to converse in Mandarin and Sinitic dialects which is a rare case in a nation where the dominant language is Malay.

4.3.5 The Chinese Diaspora Identity Has Yet To Expired

The film also contains a short segment by Midi Z, a Myanmar-born Taiwanese filmmaker, which is about a granddaughter who helps to realize her grandfather's final wish by bringing him the "*Burial Clothes*" (funeral attire, also the film title) he left in his ancestral village back in China.

Midi Z was born in Lashio, Shan state, Myanmar. He left to study in Taipei at the age of 16 and became a naturalized citizen of Taiwan in 2011. Midi Z is renowned for his films about Myanmar that paint intimate and authentic portraits of people struggling with displacement and poverty at the margins of the region.

Since the director himself situates his status as between the diasporic Burmese and Chinese, his films have always taken up the theme of "homecoming" journeys featuring diasporic subjects who are in migratory movement (internally, within the society of settlement, and eternally). These films have led him to prestigious international film festivals, as well as winning awards such as the Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker in 53rd Golden Horse Award and the Federa Award for Best Film in 73rd Venice International Film Festival.

In *Burial Clothes*, the text "*The moment you left home, you knew you could never return*" appears at the end of the film, implying the displaced experience of the people in the globalized world but also signifying how earlier generations of Chinese migrants in a foreign land longed to return to the homeland but their hopes were never granted, in the same way that the grandfather in the film who held his last breath until his granddaughter brought him the *Burial Clothes*, a symbolic item of the homeland (China).

Conclusion

This chapter aims to study Sinophone cinema through the female filmmaker's perspective. A look at Tan Chui Mui's works will reveal how her poetic style is used to deal with issues such as displacement, nostalgia towards homeland, and desolate working-class individuals in the flow of modernization and globalization. Tan is recognized for her cinematic style of using long takes and a minimalist approach to narrative, dialogue and music to depict the mundane daily events in the lives of ordinary citizens who do not benefit from the rapid modernization and globalization that surrounds

them. In *Love Conquers All*, the plot is set in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, a highly developed global city that appears to exist at the forefront of modernization. Nevertheless, Tan portrays the city as a place which is uncivilized and bleak, a place where the female protagonist is cheated by gangsters and is plagued with sexual longing as a result of loneliness and emptiness. Tan uses slow camera movement and focuses on the dark side of the city to challenge the image of the city and its people put forth by mainstream commercial films.

To compliment this style, Tan also employs montages of a series of static and moving images to create the atmosphere of an experimental film, in order to deal with the intertwined present and past, fantasy and reality. In the omnibus *Letter from the South*, Tan contributes a short film titled *A Night in Malacca*, which she uses to dialogue with the late Chinese writer Yu Da Fu about the theme of a nonexistent “homeland”, shooting the film in Malacca where Yu Da Fu travelled more than 70 years ago. This anachronism is handled by fast jump cuts in a series of still and moving images, some stage play performances by the actors in the film, as well as monochrome visual cinematography which lead the audience into a world of mystery and fantasy.



Figure 4.6 Coconut trees to hint the film is set in a tropical place.

Nature becomes one of the most important landscapes in Tan’s film. Coconut trees can be spotted in almost all her works as a reminder of their setting in the Southern area of Malaysia. The tropical rainforest, the sea, the shore, and flora can also be seen in her

film *Year Without A Summer* (2010) and short film *South of South* (2006), where nature is used to delineate the feeling of nostalgia towards Tan's home village located in the outskirts of Kuantan state on the east coast of the Western Malaysia Peninsula which was demolished some years ago. Tan tries to capture the moment of the present in order to connect with her childhood memories of the past. In addition, Tan also shows concern for environmental issues when she joined Liew Seng Tat, Woo Ming Jin and Yeo Joon Han to create the project of *Survival Guide untuk Kampung Radioaktif* (Survival Guide for Radioactive Village, 2012), a project which consists of four short parody films that support the protest against the Lynas Corporation Ltd, an Australian rare-earths mining company that was going to set up a plant with a facility to store radioactive waste in Kuantan Malaysia. The project cynically represents situations in which radioactive activities have gone wrong with the capitalists, profiteers, corrupted policy makers and government officers escaping to safer countries while leaving ordinary citizens behind to suffer the consequences of heavy radioactive contamination (Survival Guide Untuk Kampong Radioaktif FB, 2011). Tan contributed to this project by making a short film titled "*Lai Kwan's Love*", which tells the true story of Madam Lai Kwan, who believes her son's severe mental and physical handicaps are an effect of her work at the Mitsubishi rare earth refinery in Bukit Merah, Perak, Malaysia (Bradsher, 2011).

Despite showing the practice of localization within the discourse of Chinese roots, *Letters from the South*, produced by Tan, is an exemplary film to reconsider the connection between Sinophone studies, diaspora studies and accented cinema studies. The segment of Tan's *A Night in Malacca* where she considers herself an outsider and wanderer who belongs neither to the homeland nor the settlement; both *Popiah* and *Singapore Panda*, which emphasize the ethnic roots of the Singaporean Chinese; as well as Midi Z's *Burial Clothes* which presents a member of the Chinese diaspora longing for the homeland (China) until his last breath, all work together to emphasize the Chinese diasporic identity as closely linked to the idea of China as the homeland. Nevertheless, diaspora studies enable the mobility of individuals in the globalized and transnationalized discourse to be rearticulated, giving us a better understanding of the idea of "homeland" as never linked to a static past but one that is ever-present and constantly changing. The

segment of Tsai Ming Liang's *Walking on Water* which observes the apartment in his childhood memories shows his nostalgic feeling towards the home which is far from relevant to China but rather to the settlement in Malaysia. Furthermore, in Aditya Assarat's *Now Now Now*, illustrates how the Sinophone community in Thailand has totally assimilated into the dominant Thai culture as they nearly all have Thai names and speak Thai better than Sinitic languages. These two segments fit better into the framework of Sinophone studies which foregrounds how the "diaspora" identity has come to its expiration. The letter which exists in *Love Conquers All* and the title of *Letter from the South* suggest how both films can be read as "accented cinema", given their use of the epistolary mode, one of its significant styles (Naficy Hamid, 2001). In fact, studies of accented cinema, which contends that transnational cinema is both global and local as and engages in many deterritorializing and reterritorializing journeys, overlaps with the arguments of Sinophone studies and diaspora studies. This leads me to suggest that diaspora studies and Sinophone studies are not paradoxical but rather can be complimentary in their exploration of issues of identity and "home searching", while also including studies of accented cinema.

While I began this chapter by highlighting Tan's identity as a female filmmaker, I have realized that it may be essentialist to simply categorize her as a feminist. Besides featuring females as the leads in her films, Tan does not necessarily embed any rigid feminist ideology in her films. Rather, by using a poetic and experimental style in approaching themes such as identity, displacement, and nostalgia towards home in a subtle way, I argue Tan's works exhibit a feminine aesthetic which has made her works idiosyncratic compared to the works by other (male) filmmakers such as Lau Kek Huat in chapter 3 who deal with these same themes.

Chapter 5 From Cosmopolitanism to Localization: Exploring works of Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers Edmund Yeo and Namewee

5.1 Introduction

This chapter jointly discusses two Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers: Edmund Yeo and Namewee, noting their similar education and filming background, but also how they both have had their films welcomed by Japanese film festivals. Both Yeo and Namewee have embarked on a transnational trajectory, receiving education and training as filmmakers and later developing their filmmaking career in multiple cities throughout the world. Yeo has included multiple places in his films and tackled global issues while making connections to these issues with the situation happening in the (imagined) homeland. His films also involve actors of different places speaking their own language, which creates a multinational atmosphere. Yeo's films have appealed to audiences worldwide and with cinephiliacs, with his films regularly screened at many international film festivals in different cities. In this chapter, I propose to use cosmopolitanism to delineate the border-crossing experience of Yeo from the periphery to the center of Asia. As for Namewee, the director started off as a Youtuber before making feature films, making use of the freedom allotted by the internet to distribute his works worldwide and accumulate viewers/audiences around the world. Despite his works being controversial for always challenging sensitive sociopolitical issues of post-colonial Malaysia and his use of foul language, he has chosen to develop his career in Malaysia after completing his degree in Taiwan. Compared to Yeo, who departed from his "home" to other cosmopolitan cities to develop his career, Namewee has found himself on the opposite trajectory, taking the route home. The emphasis on "localization" and the use of multiple languages and accent in Namewee's films suggests an anti-diaspora process and echoes how Sinophone studies foregrounds place-based cultural experiences.

5.2 Cosmopolitanism

Cheah (2006) suggests cosmopolitanism as a framework to understand the complex relations between national communities (and imaginaries) and the rising impact of global capitalism. He establishes three arguments regarding the idea of cosmopolitanism which echoes the three forces of nationalism, globalization and multiculturalism as proposed by

Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, Appadurai & Dipesh (2000) in the journal titled “Cosmopolitanisms”. First, cultural and political solidarity and political agency can no longer be restricted to the sovereign nation-state as a unified spatio-temporal container because globalization has undermined many of its key functions (Cheah, 2006). Appadurai (2000) posits the idea of a post-national global order because the idea of the nation-state is challenged. Second, globalization formed a world that is interconnected enough to generate political institutions and non-governmental organizations that have a global reach in their regulatory functions as well as global forms of mass-based political consciousness or popular feelings of belonging to a shared world (Cheah, 2006). Third, the new cosmopolitan consciousness is characterized as a more expansive form of solidarity that is attuned to democratic principles and human interests without the restriction of territorial borders (Cheah, 2006).

Cosmopolitans are interconnections of varied local cultures (Ulf Hannerz, 1990). In a world increasingly deterritorialized by migration and capital flows, the modernist nationalisms with their tendency to connect cultures and identities to specific places have become even more retrograde (Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, Appadurai & Dipesh, 2000). In the end, imaginations of place—home, boundary, territory, and roots—are not tied to fixed geographical places (Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, Appadurai & Dipesh, 2000). As such, home is no longer home, but rather a constant reminder of a pre-cosmopolitan past, a privileged site of nostalgia (Ulf Hannerz, 1990).

Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community (Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, Appadurai & Dipesh, 2000). According to Ulf Hannerz (1990), people who have chosen to live abroad for some period but that they can go home when they see fit can also be considered cosmopolitan.

Cosmopolitanism is criticized for emphasizing the center-periphery distinction, as most of the time it is only efficacious in the North Atlantic that is sustained by the global exploitation of the South (Cheah, 2006). As such, cosmopolitanism degenerates into a set of strategies for the biopolitical improvement of human capital. It becomes an ideology used by a state to attract high-end expatriate workers as well as exploit its own citizens and lower-end migrant workers. The cosmopolitan becomes merely a symbolic marker of

a country's success at the international division of labor and maintaining its position there (Cheah, 2006).

Both Yeo and Namewee traveled across many places in their journey to further their studies and filmmaking. Although their films may relate to the situation in Malaysia they can also concomitantly connect to universal issues occurring in other parts of the world. The films of Yeo and Namewee, which exhibit characteristics of cosmopolitanism, have taken part in many international film festivals but are excluded from the category of national cinema in Malaysia. Nonetheless, this has perhaps benefited the filmmakers, who have a better platform to exhibit their works on the world stage where they do not have to care much about the Malaysia censorship system and are free to discuss otherwise taboo and sensitive national issues. Stringer (2001) contends that film festivals constitute attempts by a coalition of the state, local government officials, corporate sponsors, and film intellectuals, with the aims to establish an international reach and reputation, while spreading the reputation of the city around the world. Take the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF) as an example: as one of the most recognized film festivals in the Asia region, TIFF is desperately seeking recognition from Hollywood and Europe while also aiming to promote the official state narrative while consolidating its influence in the region (Nornes, 2011). Although the opportunities given to filmmakers from a Southeast Asian country might be one strategy for consolidating the power of the organizing state over the participants' representative nations, it nevertheless provides a much-needed platform for the filmmakers of developing countries to showcase their works idiosyncratic in cultural and identity representation.

This chapter will be divided into two parts: the first focuses on Yeo while the second focuses on Namewee. I begin the following section by examining Yeo's educational background and his journey of making short films before releasing his first feature film. I argue that Yeo's educational and experience in making short films was formative to his current status as a cosmopolitan filmmaker.

5.3 Malaysia-Australia-Japan: The Cosmopolitan Filmmaker Edmund Yeo

Edmund Yeo was actually born in Singapore, but moved to Malaysia at the age of 2, leaving some room to dispute his inclusion in my project of Malaysian Chinese

filmmakers. However, since Sinophone studies suggests that a community is not bounded by national boundaries, it seems appropriate to include him here, especially if we consider how Yeo himself has always identified himself as a “Malaysian” rather than “Singaporean”. In terms of his films, too, Yeo has never made any about the Singapore community but instead focuses on Malaysia, making him pertinent to my project.

Born in an upper middle class family⁴⁷, Yeo completed his first degree in Commerce at Murdoch University in Perth Australia. His parents were involved in careers relevant to the cultural production industry which perhaps influenced Yeo to want to devote his lifetime to making film. Besides majoring in Marketing, he also took a diploma course in media production at the same university, which provided him with training and hands-on experience through student film projects. Like many in Yeo’s generation, Malaysian Chinese parents strive to send their children to foreign countries to pursue education so they can secure future economic privilege and social status. In 2008, Yeo moved to Tokyo to continue his studies at the Graduate School of Global Information and Telecommunication Studies in Waseda University. By going over Yeo’s family history, I suggest that his middle class family background has enabled him to travel freely across many places in the world, conforming what Ulf Hannerz (1990) describes as a cosmopolitan, someone who is able to choose where s/he wants to stay and travel home when s/he wants. The ability to receive an education overseas and cross national boundaries freely when making films suggests Yeo as a cosmopolitan filmmaker. As Appadurai (2000) delineates, cosmopolitanism assumes “a certain cultivated knowledge of the world beyond one’s immediate horizons, and is the product of deliberate activities associated with literacy, the freedom to travel, and the luxury of expanding the boundaries of one’s own self by expanding its experiences”, such as the cine-literate. This form of cosmopolitanism has frequently suffered from charges of elitism, as it appears to celebrate a life of privilege reserved for those with sufficient financial and

⁴⁷ Edmund’s father Eric Yeo held an executive position in Polygram Records where he produced the albums of the band Alleycats, a popular Malaysian pop music band in the 1970 which consists of members of Malay, Chinese and Indian. Eric is also a famous film critic who writes articles for the column on local newspapers. Yeo’s mother Chik Soon Come was a pop singer.

social capital to exploit it.

Before furthering his studies in Japan, Yeo spent two years at Greenlight Pictures, a production company founded by Malaysian filmmaker Woo Min Jin, whose films also screened at several film festivals worldwide, most notably the Berlin Film Festival in 2006. Yeo took up the role of producer and editor in several productions and also started to make his own short films. His first short film entitled *Chicken Rice Mystery* (2008) is a light-hearted comedy with a rather simple narrative about a boy who tries to find out the mystery behind his mother's sublime chicken rice, but whose other cooking is seriously appalling. The film is set in Malaysia and the cast speaks in localized Sinitic languages and dialects. A shot of the moving Light Railway Train (LRT) informs the audience that the film is set in the cosmopolitan city of Kuala Lumpur/ Selangor, Malaysia. There is also a shot of the same night market which we have come across in Tan Chui Mui's films. Yeo's first short film earned him international acclaim at the 2008 Dubai International Film Festival and several other film festivals in Greece and Canada, marking the beginning of his film's circulation on the world stage.

After arriving in Japan to pursue his postgraduate studies at Waseda University, Tokyo, Yeo made his first short film in Japan, entitled *Fleeting Images* (2008). The poetic experimental short features footage taken by Yeo during his trip to India in the previous year. With the inspiration of *Sans Soleil* (1983) by French filmmaker Chris Marker, the short features footage of Bodh Gaya (the place where Buddha attained Enlightenment) with Buddha statues and monks walking around. Buddhism, as a world religion originating in India, works as a universal element that connects audiences from different parts of the world to understand that the short takes place in India. In addition, the footage shows a street view in India intercut with footage showing the bustle and noise of Shibuya Tokyo. The sunset at Ganges River is intercut with sunset at Odaiba Tokyo Bay suggests the interchangeability between these places. There is also an image showing a man lying down covered by buzzing flies on a street in India interconnected with a shot of a man lying on the streets of Shinjuku. The film features narration by a female voice interpreting a series of letters from a close male friend in Mandarin that sounds like the "huayu" spoken by Malaysian Chinese. Yeo pays homage to *Sans Soleil*

by using the letters (emails) to ruminate about the passage of time and the unexplained strands of fate that connect people of varying places, time and circumstances (Yeo, 2013). Although India might have a totally different culture and environment than Japan, the short somehow links these two irrelevant places together through its cinematography. Furthermore, some of the shots were actually filmed in Malaysia, such as the one showing the woman reading the letters, so the short actually involves stories that intersect at three different locations. Yet when all the shots are put together, the result is unexpectedly harmonious, suggesting the narratives as happening in a cosmopolitan world, where all the places (territories) seem to exist on the same plain instead of separated by distance. This short film has brought Yeo to connect with the filmmakers in other parts of the world when it won the Grand Prix at the 6th CON-CAN Movie Festival in 2009 from an international jury that consisted of members such as Naomi Kawase.

After *Fleeting Image*, Yeo then made *Love Suicides* and *Kingyo* in 2009 with sponsorship and assistance provided by Kohei Ando Laboratory, Waseda University, both adapted from the works of Nobel Prize-winning Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata's "Palm-of-the Hand Stories" collection. Despite its source work's setting of Japan, *Love Suicides* is set in an isolated fishing village in Kuala Selangor, Malaysia. *Kingyo* on the other hand, based on Kawabata's 1924 short story "Canaries", chronicles a young female student who dresses in a French maid's costume while giving walking tours around the Akihabara area of Tokyo when she meets her ex-lover, a middle-aged professor. *Kingyo* marks Yeo's first ever Japanese language short film and his maiden work in a foreign language was selected to compete for best short film in Venice International Film Festival 2009, making Yeo the youngest Malaysian filmmaker to ever compete in one of the world's top film festivals.

In the following year, Yeo made another short film, *The White Flower* (2010), also adapted from a Kawabata short story, which tells of a young Chinese woman's journey to recovery from tuberculosis and her encounters with a Japanese doctor and a Thai filmmaker. The short is composed of a series of still images and dubbed in Mandarin, Japanese and Thai. The fact that Yeo grew up in the multilingual and multicultural Malaysia has also inspired him to make sure the voices of different ethnics are to be

heard in his films, and the cast of *The White Flower* consists of Yeo's lab mates, who are all from different countries. The short demonstrates a new perspective of the Sinophone Malaysian films when the roles taken by Chinese, Taiwanese and Thai speak their respective languages in the film, making the films multilingual, multinational, multicultural, border-crossing and "cosmopolitanized" under the trend of globalization.

In 2010, Yeo also made two shorts titled *Exhalation*⁴⁸ and *Inhalation* respectively. The former is a Japanese production shot mostly in Fujino and Sagamiko in Kanagawa Prefecture. *Inhalation*⁴⁹, on the other hand, was shot in Malaysia, and depicts a young woman Mei who escaped from the suffocating atmosphere at a pig⁵⁰ farm and butcher shop to Japan illegally but was soon deported back and ended up in the pig farm. *Inhalation* marks Yeo's intention to bring together both Malaysia and Japan into his work. According to Yeo (2013), he has been reflecting about his relationship with Malaysia while in Japan. Yeo is conscious about people (Malaysian Chinese) who wish to move abroad for a better life, depicting the phenomenon through the role of Mei, who expresses

⁴⁸ The monochrome short revolves around two young women Naoko and Sayuri dealing with the death of Yosuke, a former high school classmate of them.

⁴⁹ The short contains a plot of criticizing the government policies and sociopolitical ills in Malaysia. When Mei asks her boyfriend Seng not to change her, Seng replies: "That's inevitable to not change. Everything is inevitable, the May 13th riots, Weed Operation, the murders of Altantuya and Teoh Beng Hock. Those burnt churches..." All the incidents mentioned by Seng refer to the political and religious incidents that happened in Malaysia all these years, with most of these incidents have also been discussed in Lau Kek Huat works in Chapter 3.

⁵⁰ The scenes showing Mei performing artificial insemination for pigs and witnessing workers burning off the hair of a severed pig head with a blowtorch are very impressive, and shocking as "pig" is a sensitive issue in Malaysia due to the reason it is non-*halal* for the Muslims. Generally, films which contain "pig" scenes will be censored off before screening in the local cinema. For example, the American film "Babe" (1995) was banned from screening in Malaysia due to "babe" sounds similar to "*babi*" (the Malay pronunciation of "pig"). The film portrays pigs in a positive light (Jafwan, 2016). Recently, Malaysian filmmaker Namewee's new film titled "*Babi*" inspired by a covered up school ethnic violent incident was selected for screening in Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival but was banned from screening in Malaysia (Tahir, 2020).

her regret for not being able to see the cherry blossom in Japan at the end of the short. Through the eyes of Mei, Japan is imagined as an idealized city, a place of hope. Nevertheless, I argue this plot works as an example of how cosmopolitanism is criticized for being a phenomenon that upholds the exploitation of migrant workers from developing countries by developed countries, maintaining distinctions between center and periphery.

In Yeo's short titled *Last Fragments of Winter*⁵¹ (2011), he once again brings Malaysia and Japan together through intersecting narrative lines, setting the film in Malaysia as well as the UNESCO World Heritage site of Shirakawa-go, Gifu Prefecture, Japan. The green paddy field and riverbanks lined with palm trees in Kuala Selangor, Malaysia are in stark contrast with the snow-covered Shirakawa-go village. The short is set after the Great Earthquake and Tsunami on March 11th 2011 in Tohoku, Japan which resulted in a meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear plant reactor. The audience is well aware of the time frame the film is set in, when a scene shows volunteers asking for donations for the earthquake victims on the train platform set in Malaysia. In another shot also set in Malaysia, the sound of a TV broadcast reporting the disaster are heard in the background. Through these shots, the links between Malaysia and Japan, both literal and metaphorical are established. The work also proves Yeo's talent in harmonizing the cultural differences of two very different national contexts.

In 2011, Yeo joined an omnibus film project titled "*60 Seconds of Solitude in the Year Zero*" in Tallinn, Estonia. The project was an initiative by the European Union where two cities from the continent are annually selected to be Cultural Capitals to attract the attention of the whole Europe to new territories and regions (Yeo, 2013). The project gathered sixty filmmakers around the world, including Naomi Kawase, Park Chan Wook and Shinji Aoyama, each contributing a one-minute film about the death of cinema

⁵¹ Yeo found inspiration in making the short from "The Moon", a short story by Japanese writer Mieko Kanai in her 1979 collection "The Word Book". Born in 1947, Kanai is a short story writer, poet and literary critic who is less known outside Japan compared to writers like Haruki Murakami or Banana Yoshimoto because her works had never been translated for publication until 2009 (Yeo, 2013).

themed around one of five elements (earth, wind, fire, water, spirit). This project has given the opportunity for Yeo's work to be put along with the works of other world prominent filmmakers. For Yeo's segment titled "*I Dreamt of Someone Dreaming of Me*", Yeo used footage from two of his preexisting work, NOW, the one-minute short he made for fashion label Prada's YO! Video Project in 2010 and snowy sequences of *Last Fragments of Winter*. The Prada ad features a woman in Cheongsam chasing a mysterious little girl also wearing a Cheongsam around 100-year-old shop buildings of Port Klang, and the LED lightscape of i-city in the industrialized Shah Alam area in Malaysia. The split-screen editing effect is used to link the women in different zones, separated by time and distance in the short. The Malaysian Chinese woman in Cheongsam, emphasizing her roots with the traditional dress is positioned alongside the Japanese woman walking through the snow in Shirakawa-go. The footage shows traditional architecture of both countries, not simply representing them as separate entities but suggests a combination and blending of both (Yeo, 2013).

Yeo's works are recognized by his filmic style and poetic atmosphere, but thematically he also covers political topics, social injustice, minorities, as well as environmental issues in Malaysia. Yeo claims that he became aware and curious about Malaysia's politics and history when he was away from Malaysia to study. The distance had allowed him to see things better, which is why he had the strong yearning to tell the stories about contemporary Malaysia and its people (Sindie, 2018).

Not only does Yeo focus on the bustling city of Kuala Lumpur, with its moving trains and skyscrapers, and its disoriented inhabitants, he also tells the stories of the working class people in the suburb areas in Malaysia. Yeo has always identified himself as a Malaysian Chinese and Malaysia has always become the subject or central to his works. Still, Yeo's ambitious and distinctive style attempts to bridge the gap between global cities in order to connect a narrative that occurs in different places and times, through the protagonists who are usually female. In several shorts made by Yeo, such as the *Last Fragments of Winter* and *Inhalation*, Japan (Tokyo) is portrayed as an idealized city for escape.

Despite the fact that Yeo actually received his first degree in Australia, which falls

within the Anglophone-speaking region, several of his shorts set in Japan only use the Japanese language, such as *Kingyo* and *Exhalation*, suggesting that Yeo is keen to make films centered around “Asia” a region of postcolonial histories. The educational trajectory from Malaysia to Australia, and then to Japan, constitutes a passage from the periphery to the center, although the center here is not America or any European countries. In terms of the Asian region, Japan is widely considered one of the leading nations, a possible center, compared to Malaysia which is still categorized as a developing nation.

Yeo utilizes modernized urban locations showing passing trains and blinking lights, the banality of city life, as well as universal themes such as love, loss, memory, displacement, and border-crossings in his works, giving it appeal to audiences all over the world. In order to stand out and challenge mainstream cinema, Yeo’s films are also female-centric, and always feature female leads with narratives performed from the female perspective. Furthermore, his works are sometimes adapted from the literary works of award winning novelists and his film style is influenced by prominent filmmakers such as Bela Tarr, Tarkovsky, Apichatpong, Hou Hsiao Hsien and Koreeda Hirokazu (Sindie, 2018). Yeo’s works demonstrate a film style that is appreciated by transnational cinephilia, and he was brought to many international film festivals, including the world renowned Cannes Film Festival, Venice Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival, Rotterdam International Film Festival, Tokyo International Film Festival, and many others, winning several awards along the way. He also joined the “*60 Seconds of Solitude in the Year Zero*” project, placing his work in concert with acclaimed filmmakers from around the globe. However, it is ironic that Yeo’s work has never screened in Malaysia, a place he claims as his (imagined) homeland whenever he introduces himself on the world stage.

By introducing Yeo’s educational background and his early short films, I suggest Yeo as a cosmopolitan filmmaker. His educational background exposed him to foreign culture and this is reflected in his works. Yeo’s films are characterized by their intersecting storylines occurring in more than one place, especially in Malaysia, his homeland, and Japan, where he studied and is based. Through cinematography, Yeo links

these different places, showing the cosmopolitanism world which shares common cultures and experiences. Yeo's works have brought him to travel to many places in the world when the films were entered in international film festivals. To embark on the globalized circuit also allowed Yeo's works to be excluded from the censorship back in Malaysia, although, despite receiving awards on the world stage, his films have never screened there.

In the following section, I aim to study political allegories in relation to both localized and globalized context Yeo's feature films within the framework of cosmopolitanism.

5.4 *Aqerat* (We, The Dead, 2017): Connecting the Local and the Cosmopolitan World

Yeo's debut feature film *River of Exploding Durians* became the first Malaysian film to be invited to the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF) in 2014. The film deals with a history teacher and a group of high school students protesting against the construction of a radioactive rare earth plant in a coastal town. The plot is an overt allegory of the construction of the Australian rare-earths mining company, Lynas Corporation in Gebeng, Kuantan, which intends to store radioactive waste in Malaysia, a topic which Tan Chui Mui and others had also made films about. The teacher role is played by Taiwanese actress Zhu Zhi-Ying who speaks in a “*zhongwen*” Taiwanese-accent throughout the film. The accent is unnatural to the context set in a public secondary school in Malaysia, as the teaching medium is supposed to be Malay for the historical subject Zhu teaches. However, as the teacher becomes the leader of the protest, the selection of a Taiwanese actress is perhaps metaphorical to represent the democratic system of Taiwan where peaceful demonstration and protests are allowed. By taking departure from the radioactive waste plant, Yeo also concentrates on the historical human rights incidents occurring in other Asian countries, including the Thammasat University Massacre⁵² in 1976, the killing of Lilia Hilao⁵³ in the Philippines and the incident

⁵² A violent crackdown happened on October 6th 1976 by right-wing paramilitaries against leftist protestors who had occupied Bangkok's Thammasat University which resulted in more than 100 demonstrators being killed according to unofficial reports (Tyrell, 2017).

where Japanese teenage girls were sold as prostitutes to Malaysia between 1860 and 1920. I am not going to elaborate more on the film *River of Exploding Durians* as I have already covered the Lynas issue earlier in Chapter 4, so here I will rather focus on Yeo's second feature film *Aqerat* (We, The Dead) that led him to win the Best Director award at the 2014 Tokyo International Film Festival.

Aqerat means afterlife in the Rohingya language and sounds the same as the Malay word “*akhirat*” which has the same meaning. Despite the film's title being in a minority language, the story revolves around a Malaysian Chinese lady, Hui Ling who has no choice but to be involved in the human-trafficking business of the Rohingya people in order to collect money to go to Taiwan where she thinks she will have a better future. The plot highlights many socio political issues that are not limited to Malaysia.

First, is the matter of the Rohingya⁵⁴ refugees. In 2015, mass graves of Rohingya refugees were discovered in the border of Malaysia and Thailand, which inspired Yeo to make this film. The Myanmar military crackdown on the Rohingyas rebellion in 2015 resulted in thousands of Rohingyas being forcibly displaced from Myanmar to neighboring countries, including Malaysia, which had taken the stance to provide temporary refuge for the Rohingyas (Piya S., 2020). In the film, the Rohingyas come to Malaysia through Thailand but are overtly coerced into illegal human trafficking. Yeo compares the fate of the Rohingya refugees and the Malaysian Chinese in the film, suggesting that while the Rohingyas are coming into Malaysia, the Malaysian Chinese are yearning to leave the country for a better life (Sindie, 2018). Although he went to a

⁵³ Lilia Hilao was a student activist who was killed under government detention during Martial Law in 1973 (Maramba, 1997).

⁵⁴ The Rohingya people are a stateless Indo-Aryan ethnic group who are predominantly Muslims, and citizenships were denied by the Myanmar government. The discriminated and persecuted condition of the Rohingyas have been widely compared to apartheid and related to “genocide” and “massacre” by activists and analysts (Stoakes, 2014). The Myanmar government sees Rohingyas as illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh despite the Rohingyas claim that they are indigenous to the western Myanmar. UN (2014) has described the Rohingya population as the most persecuted minorities in the world.

Western country himself, Yeo points out the fact that many Malaysian Chinese have gone to Taiwan to further their studies since the 80s due to the state's biased policies. The female protagonist Hui Ling's dream destination is Taiwan as well, perhaps linked to how her actress, Daphne Low, had actually moved to Taiwan to develop her acting career before making appearance in *Aqerat* (Sindie, 2018). Low's experience shares a lot in common with Mei in *Inhalation*, who wants to escape to Japan as she thinks she can have a better life there. Both Low and Mei's situation illustrate the desire of some people from less developed countries in the periphery to relocate to developed countries in the center, which further stabilizes the center-periphery distinction, a phenomenon which has served as critical of cosmopolitanism.

According to Yeo, Malaysia is often fascinated as being a state with multicultural and multilingual environments but it is also been a hub for foreign migration and human trafficking (Sindie, 2018). The Rohingya refugees and human trafficking issues are happening in Malaysia today, but people are ignorant of these situations too involved in their own personal lives. Yeo made this film to shed light on these overlooked and underreported issues. In fact, the Rohingya issue also connects to the refugee issue worldwide, such as the European migrant crisis, a consequence of peoples fleeing from wars of Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq looking for asylum in Europe. However, Yeo's decision in making a film about the Rohingya refugees, a humanitarian theme which is not directly related to his own experience, suggests that the film sought attention for its subject matter. Yeo also includes the multicultural perspective which is definitely something new and exotic to the juries and audience of the film festivals in the Europe, Asia and other parts of the world who are not familiar with the Southeast Asia cultures.

Aqerat is set in Kelantan, a state in the northern-east part of Peninsula Malaysia, where its uniqueness lies in its border with Thailand to the north, so there is a hybridization of the Thai and local culture happening here. Although the Malay marks the biggest ethnic in Kelantan, due to its proximity to Thailand, the state has almost two hundred Buddhist temples⁵⁵. A Thai who married with the local Malay and resides in

⁵⁵ The 40-metre long statue of sleeping Buddha, which is the longest statue of a reclining Buddha in Southeast Asia is located at Wat Photivihan in Tumpat District, Kelantan (Malaysia Traveller, 2019).

Malaysia is called the Malaysian Siamese as they hold the Malaysian nationality. Like the *Peranakan*, an ethnic group that is characterized with its hybridization of Chinese and the Malay culture that we came across earlier in Chapter 4, the Malaysian Siamese is another minority group that practices the hybridization cultures of both the Malay and Thai, especially the Malaysian Siamese believes in Buddhism rather than Islam.



Figure 5.0 The puppet show in Kelantan shows the influence of Thai culture.

In the film, the shadow puppet master, seemingly a Malaysian Chinese, as Hui Ling calls him as uncle Chu, shows Hui Ling two puppets, and introduces the female puppet identity as Malay and the male puppet as Thai. Hui Ling holds the puppet and murmurs by herself: “*Apa khabar*” and “*Sawadeeka*”, words of greeting in Malay and Thai respectively. Due to the geographical proximity, most of the Kelantanese can speak Thai language other than the local languages. Another example of the cultural hybridization of the Malay and Thai is shown when Hui Ling is spotted preparing *Nasi Kerabu* (a blue-colored rice eaten with dried fish or fried chicken, crackers, pickles) at the floating restaurant where she works. The *Nasi Kerabu* which is a popular Malay dish in the Northern part of the Peninsula Malaysia is believed to have been brought into Malaysia from Thailand as there is also similar food found in the southern part of Thailand which is called “*Khao Yam*”. When Hui Ling sends *Nasi Kerabu* to uncle Chu, Hui Ling actually says “Here’s your *Khao Yam*” rather than “*Nasi Kerabu*”.



Figure 5.1 The famous Malay dish *Nasi Kerabu* in Kelantan is called *Khao Yam* in Thailand.

The Malaysian Chinese, making just 4% of Kelantan's 1.6 million populations, is obviously the minority ethnic group (Zurairi, 2014). Under this circumstance, the Malaysian Chinese is recognized as speaking better and fluent Malay language than the Malaysian Chinese of other states. Through the role of Wei, the guy whom Hui Ling meets in the hospital, shows a Malaysian Chinese who can converse fluently in Malay. Although Hui Ling mainly speaks "huayu" in the film, the boss she works with sometimes speaks Cantonese and Hokkien to her. There is also a scene when Hui Ling speaks in Hakka with some of the Malaysian Chinese uncles. Hakka dialect is not usually used in the Sinophone Malaysian films compared to Cantonese and Hokkien, although Hakka is the second largest dialect group after Hokkien and followed by Cantonese. It is probably because the influence of the Cantonese drama and films of Hong Kong have made Cantonese more commonly used in the Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

5.5 Introducing Namewee, Wee Meng Chee

In comparison with Yeo's filming experience which is highly cosmopolitan, Namewee's works can be cosmopolitans but since he is making films in his homeland Malaysia which succumbed him with many restrictions from touching on the sensitive sociopolitical issues, and despite of the rules and regulations, Namewee has continued challenging the status quo by producing controversial works and distributing them on the internet, so I suggest his filming experience is more to an anti-diaspora process and at the same time echoes Sinophone studies which foregrounds the place-based cultural experience. So in this section, besides the distribution and reception of the works of Namewee that are surely cosmopolitan, I would also like to interrogate the localization

elements in the films of Namewee in relation to the social implications and political allegories, as well as examine how he criticizes the Malay-prioritized nationalism and concomitantly deconstruct the idea of China-centrism.

5.5.1 Muar's Mandarin

Before making feature films, Namewee (Wee Meng Chee) started off as a Youtuber. He made his first music video titled “Muar Mandarin” released on Youtube in 2006 and since then, he has continued using Youtube as a platform to release his song, video, short films as well as a talk show series titled “*Tokok*”⁵⁶.

Muar is the hometown of Namewee, located in Johor state, Southern part of Peninsula Malaysia, with roughly 31.5% of Malaysian Chinese population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Namewee made the song “Muar Mandarin” in order to express his frustration at being treated as “Overseas Chinese student” who speaks “inauthentic” Mandarin during his stay in Taiwan for doing his Bachelor Degree in Communication in Ming Chuan University. He often feels that his Muar accent is looked down on and being excluded by people in Taiwan and also in some big cities back in his homeland Malaysia, such as Kuala Lumpur where Cantonese rather than Mandarin is predominantly spoken. The lyrics “Language has no standard, but localization” is a riposte to those people who think his “Muar” accent as inauthentic. However, Namewee does not reject neither Taiwanese “*zhongwen*” nor Cantonese, but he is skilled at mobilizing the language as a cultural agency to carry out his governance (Hee, 2019b).

In the music video, of “Muar Mandarin”, Namewee introduces the area of where his house located is predominantly occupied by Hainanese descendants, disclosing his own dialect clan as Hainanese. However, he doesn't use Hainanese in the song but rather a lot of vulgar and obscene words in Hokkien dialect.

One of the issues Namewee criticized in the song are migrant workers, recurring issue in his feature films later. He is overtly unsatisfied with the arrival of the foreign migrant workers in Malaysia, particularly in his hometown Muar, as the lyrics “*Some of the foreign workers looked 'disgusting'*”, hold the foreign workers in contempt.

⁵⁶ The talk show allows different perspectives on viewing various issues and news in Malaysia via Youtube as the mass media of the country was consolidated by the government.

5.5.2 *Negarakuku*, a Parody of the Malaysia National Anthem

Namewee gained popularity after uploading a controversial song titled “*Negarakuku*”, a parody of Malaysia's national anthem, “*Negaraku*” (“My Country” in English) in 2007. The song sparks controversies in the Malaysian society, as the word “*kuku*” which resembles the male reproductive organ in Hokkien dialect is an insult to the national symbol.

The national anthem which is modified by Namewee by adding in Mandarin rap lyrics with occasional Hokkien phrases and words, describes the police’s corruption, biased government policies, public services bureaucracy, the Malay’s special rights, the dilemma of the Malaysian Chinese being marginalized, as well as criticizing the Muslims’ call for the earliest of their five daily prayers as a “morning call” which would wake him up at 5am. The music video utilizes montage from the promotion video of the Visit Malaysia 2007 campaign with the backdrop of a Malaysian flag.

The song is seen as racist remarks and accused of disrespect towards Islam and Malay. The Malaysian authorities considered arresting him under the 1965 National Anthem Law and Sedition Act⁵⁷ nonetheless, the incident ended after Namewee made a public apology.

5.5.3 Internet—The Borderless World

From the *Negarakuku* incident, one may learn that the internet (in this case Youtube) has become a medium for all, which anybody can upload videos and make comments “freely” especially the Malaysian whose freedom of speech is stifled under several acts and laws by the government to consolidate hegemony (Kuan, 2012). Although there is the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 which aims to control and regulate the internet content, there are still many loopholes to control the mass of information flow in the borderless cyber world so one may easily runaway from legal responsibility of using the internet, just like in the case of Namewee, he is actually in Taiwan when he uploaded the controversial video clip of *Negarakuku*.

In Chapter 3, I have already explained how the Malaysian government adopted the

⁵⁷ A law intended to prevent incitement to rebellion but often used by the ruling party against political critics.

pro-high technology liberal policy that allowed the internet and affordable filmmaking equipment to flow into the market had formed the independent filmmaking wave in Malaysia at the beginning of 2000. When Youtube was established in 2005, it soon became a platform for many Malaysians to watch and upload self-made videos.

After the national anthem incident, Namewee has continued releasing his video on his Youtube channel. He focuses on sociopolitical issues, and social injustices that relate to the structural power imbalance within the context of post-colonial Malaysia (Hee, 2019). With the convenience of the internet, Namewee is appreciated as the hero of the ethnic minorities (more specifically the hero of the Malaysian Chinese community) for constantly challenging the social taboos but with the risk of falling into the existing racist rhetoric, he is also labeled a “racist” who constantly incites racial antagonism especially from the Malay community (Hee, 2019).

Apart from focusing on the issues in Malaysia, Namewee also makes collaboration with artists and Youtubers worldwide and makes use of a variety of languages and dialects, initiating a deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the nation, also reflecting his cosmopolitanism, an openness to the culture of others. For instance, he works with Vietnamese singer and songwriter Hồ Quang Hiếu in making the song titled “Rain in Ho Chi Minh” which the lyrics feature Mandarin and Vietnamese. “Stranger In the North” (漂向北方)⁵⁸, a song duet with Asia’s top star Wang Leehom, describes the diasporas in Beijing China to chase their dreams, also a reflection of Namewee’s personal journey of pursuing his dreams in Taiwan. Namewee’s “*huayu*” accent, fuses with Wang’s American Taiwanese “*zhongwen*” accent in the song, suggesting the two “Chinese diasporas” return to their ancestral home China, only to sing how they fundamentally do not belong there anymore (Hee, 2019). The incompatibility with one’s ancestral home is a criticism of the China-centrism, also put into practice that a Sinophone work should not “succumb to nationalist and imperialist pressure, and allows for a multiply mediated and multidirectional critique (Hee, 2019; Shih, 2010, p. 47).

⁵⁸ The song accumulated a total 173 million views (up to Nov 13th, 2020), creating the highest views of Namewee’s works so far.

Rather than using standard Mandarin in order to resist other Sinitic languages and dialects, Namewee uses Sinitic languages and dialects to form a “Sinophone governance” (Hee, 2019; Wang, 2015, p. 11) in order to link and govern fans all over the world.

Besides, Namewee makes his name in Japan by joining the project of Cool Japan TV, which he writes a song titled “Tokyo Bon 2020” using “Japanglish”, and works with Sinophone Youtubers based in Japan. Namewee is also invited by the Department of Information and Tourism of Taipei City Government to make promotional videos for the city.

Upon graduating from the university in Taiwan, Namewee makes a video about his trip back to Malaysia from Taiwan. He first took a flight from Taiwan to Hong Kong and by land and sea transport, he went through Macao, Zhuhai, Guangzhou, Kunming, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand before arriving in Malaysia. During the journey, he interviewed Malaysian diasporas based at different places he passed by, and with the film titled “I Wanna Go Home”, he made the video as a present for Malaysia's Independence Day.

5.5.4 The Controversial Figure and the Journey Home

Unlike many of the Malaysian Chinese filmmakers who choose to remain in Taiwan for developing their filmmaking career, Namewee had taken the path of going home. In comparison with Yeo, which he embarks a trajectory from the local to the cosmopolitan, Namewee on the other hand, is taking the opposite route, the homecoming way. After returning to Malaysia, Namewee continues focusing on the injustices suffered by the Sinophone community and other ethnic minorities in Malaysia with his trenchant style by using profanity and foul language.

In August 2016, Namewee was arrested for filming a music video featuring performers dressed as religious leaders going to a church, a mosque and a temple, which allegedly insulted the dignity of Islam. The music video is for the song titled “*Oh My God*” which Namewee features with Taiwanese band “*The Last Day of Summer 831*”. Prior to his detention, Namewee published a video titled “*Surrender*”, depicting himself stripping naked to show that he has no visible or existing injuries prior to his detention (Youtube video, 2016). In February 2018, Namewee was again detained for filming the

music video “*Like A Dog*” in front of a mosque in Putrajaya, where the federal administrative centre of Malaysia is located but so far he has never been found guilty and is released. Despite being arrested and prosecuted by the Malaysian authorities on multiple occasions, Namewee has continued remaining in Malaysia to develop his music and filming career (Hee, 2019), which his experience can be seen as an anti-Chinese diaspora process as he identifies closely as Malaysian despite the state policies that excluding him due to his ethnic identity as “Chinese”.

5.6 Case Studies: *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) & *Banglasia* (2013)

In 2011, Namewee made his first ever feature film titled “*Nasi Lemak 2.0*”. In order to apply for filming funds from the government, Namewee emphasized that it was a film that echoed the ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak’s 1 Malaysia⁵⁹ program that aimed to promote ethnic harmony and national unity. Nevertheless, his application ended up in vain and was not entitled to the 20% entertainment tax rebate due to the reason that the film did not qualify for Mandatory Screening status, which means the film can be withdrawn from the cinemas anytime based on the film’s performance in the box office (Noorsila, 2011).

With limited budget, Namewee completed making the film within two months and the film grossed over RM7 million box offices unexpectedly (Ngo, 2019). The success of *Nasi Lemak* has made Namewee become a prolific filmmaker, actor, artist and producer, not only in Malaysia but also internationally. Many local artists and filmmakers have lent their hands to Namewee by making cameo appearance in the film, including filmmaker Liew Seng Tat who acts as the vendor of hidden camera; Pete Teo who had composed the theme song and soundtrack music for the late Yasmin Ahmad’s last film *Talentine* takes up the role of the gangster who is not fluent in speaking Mandarin; the role of Cheng Ho is taken by another local music composer Jovi Theng; the role of Curry Master is taken by David Arumugam, the member of famous band Alleycats which is produced by Yeo’s father, and the role of Nor is taken by famous Malay actress Adibah Noor who had made appearance in most of Yasmin Ahmad’s films. Also, the *Baba* and *Nyonya* roles are

⁵⁹ Refer to Chapter 1, pg. 59.

played by Kenny and Chee⁶⁰ who were best known for their roles in a “*Baba and Nyonya*” Sitcom series shown on the local television station in the 80s’ and 90s’ which were a hit.

The film was invited to the Osaka Asian Film Festival and Namewee won the Best Potential Director Award in the festival. Nevertheless, the screening in Malaysia resulted in some of the Malay organizations boycotting the film and wanted the film to be removed from screening. According to a journalist in Utusan Online, Namewee continued to be seen as a racist Chinese chauvinist who had hurt the feelings of the Malay community (Malaysiakini, 2011).

On the other hand, Namewee’s latest feature film “*Banglasia*” was made in 2013 but it was banned by the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia for its content which was critical of the previous ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* (BN). The film follows the main lead Harris, a migrant worker from Bangladesh, who wants to return home to marry his lover, but before he can return home, he meets Hanguoren played by Namewee, an activist who wants to expel migrants from Malaysia and Rina, the daughter of a mafia boss who falls in love with him. The film was cited as having “problems” in 31 scenes, which amounted to 90% of the film's content. The reasons given were such as the film had a title, theme, storyline, scenes and double-meaning dialogue with implicit messages that were feared could raise controversy and public doubt (Malay Mail, 2016). As a consequence, the film made its appearance in the Osaka Asian Film Festival, New York Film Festival, and Singapore International Film Festival before it was finally released in Malaysia in February 2019 after the government was changed.

5.6.1 Hybridized Multiculturalism

Nasi Lemak 2.0 tells the story of Chef Huang, played by Namewee, who embarks on a journey together with K, in order to look for the best *Nasi Lemak*⁶¹ recipes and finally discover the importance of “localization” in making the authentic taste he has been insisting. *Nasi lemak* is a traditional Malay dish, which assembles ingredients, such as

⁶⁰ *Nasi Lemak 2.0* became the last film for both Chee and Kenny as they passed away respectively in the year of 2011 and 2018.

⁶¹ Also explained in Chapter 1, refer to pg. 60.

coconut milk rice, fried chicken, boiled egg, anchovies, cucumber, peanuts, chili paste, each with its own taste but when mixed together, makes better taste, an idea which the film emphasizes. Due to the dish's popularity, *Nasi Lemak* is consumed by all ethnicities of people in Malaysia at any time of the day.

In the film, one may notice Namewee's intention in emphasizing the harmonious relationship among different ethnics, particularly the multiculturalism as something positive and idealistic. In Chapter one, I discussed Chew Keng Guan's *Ola Bola* which includes roles of Malaysian three main ethnics, the Malay, Chinese and Indian, in order to represent the multiethnic and multiculturalism of Malaysia and highlights the "Malaysian-ness", however, with some alterations of the plot at the end of the film which is based on true event, the film deconstructs the harmony relationship among the ethnic as "cosmetic multiculturalism" (Morris Suzuki, 2002). Similar to *Ola Bola*, "multiculturalism" is very much highlighted in *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, which the film involves almost all ethnics of people, the Malay, the Chinese, the Indian, as well as the *Baba and Nyonya*, and even migrant worker from Nepal was mistaken as Bangladeshi. Unlike *Ola Bola* where the main language is Malay, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* features a variety of languages, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, Malay, English and Tamil. Mandarin becomes the host language, while other languages as guest languages interspersed throughout. Namewee is not proficient in all the languages but he mimics the accents of these languages in a humorous way, deconstructing the myth that such accents must originate from a native speaker (Hee, 2019b), also echoes the "minor" idea as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1986). Perhaps this is the first ever Sinophone Malaysian film which features the Sinitic Teochew dialect and Hainanese dialect. When Chef Huang, the main lead talks to the Indian Curry Master, he speaks Hainanese while the Curry Master speaks Tamil. Although both of them don't understand each other, surprisingly the pronunciation of these two different languages sounds similar. As Hee (2019b) suggests, a marriage of multiple Sinitic languages, other languages, and accents as the result of localization creates the creolized linguistic environment of Sinophone works. This phenomenon is known in linguistics and anthropology as a "linguistic mosaic", which refers to small amounts of guest-language vocabulary and phrases mixed

in with the vocabulary and phrases of the host language, forming a special mixed vernacular in which multiple languages are used at once (Chen, 2003). Sinophone Malaysian works embody the linguistic mosaic of Malaysian society.

Apart from multiculturalism, the film also shows cultural hybridization by portraying Nor, the Malay who sells *Nasi Lemak* is also a Tai Chi master. Nor is seen teaching a group of practitioners, mainly Malaysian Chinese the Chinese Martial Art. Namewee uses the Tai Chi philosophy of balance and equality between Yin and Yang, to delineate the ethnic relationship that is not totally polarized or separated but like Yin and Yang, they are dependent with each other and merge in complete harmony. Also, in *Banglasia*, those who learn Chinese martial art are the Malays who can speak Mandarin.

The Malay is represented as wanting to be away from the hustle and bustle of the cosmopolitan areas. In *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, when Chef Huang and K visit a Malay family living in the rural area, the host tells Huang and K he prefers to live in the suburban because life in the city is too hectic, suggesting the Malays's laid-back attitude in contrast with the Sinophone community who predominantly live in the city, hoping to earn more for better living. The host has four wives indicate the Muslim is allowed for polygamy. One of the wives can speak fluent Mandarin and even recite Chinese poems. Chineseness is highlighted here to show how certain Malay people understand the Chinese culture better than the Malaysian Chinese people who probably only understand popular culture. The culture hybridization also implies the process of localization is a bidirectional process.



Figure 5.2 The Bollywood musical dance element is brought into *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, with the song lyrics are in Mandarin.

In *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, when Namewee and K visit the Indian Curry Master, Namewee tells K that in the Bollywood movies, the Indian roles usually hide behind the trees and flowers and soon after he finished saying this, the curry master is seen hiding behind the tree and her daughter sitting in the bush. Prior to entering their residence, Namewee employs a song-and-dance sequence, showing him and K, together with a group of Indian dancers with colorful attire, singing and dancing together like the Bollywood film. The music follows the Hindi song music rhythm but the lyrics are in Mandarin. Nevertheless, Namewee makes use of the sound of Mandarin words to make the lyrics sound like Tamil language, showing a hybrid art form of the two cultures. *Rasa Sayang 2.0*, the theme song of *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, is a rearrangement of a Malay folk song with new lyrics in a mixture of Mandarin and Malay. The first line of the song is identical to *Negarakuku*, creating an intertextual link. However, the following lyrics deconstruct the anti-nationalism of *Negarakuku*, and constitute an anti-diaspora sentiment which calls the Malaysians to return to Malaysia.

The ending song of the film *Banglasia*, also adopts the Bollywood musical dance sequence, but this time the Bangladeshi is also given the chance to sing and dance together with the Malay, Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indian, suggesting the idea of “Malaysian-ness” which consists of the three main ethnics is now challenged by the migration of the foreign workers which the population has overtaken the 3rd biggest ethnic Indian which is about 2.2 million (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2020).

In *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, the migrant workers are portrayed as well adapted to the local culture. When Chef Huang is asked to make *Char Kuey Teow* (a kind of stir-fry noodle), the hawker stall boss comments that even the Bangladeshi can cook better than Huang who had insisted on making authentic Chinese dishes. In fact, migrant workers from Bangladesh and Nepal have been working as chefs at the hawker stalls, guards as well as other sectors which Malaysian are not willing to do. In *Banglasia*, Hanguoren, played by Namewee, is standing at Petaling Street, the Chinatown located in Kuala Lumpur to call the locals to fight against the migrant workers. The street was used to be the bustling downtown area with most of the shops and restaurants opened and managed by the Malaysian Chinese in the 80s but now it has become a place to shop for counterfeit

branded products and haggling for the tourists. Also, there are more and more migrants, such as the Bangladeshis who run businesses here. As a consequence, there are fewer and fewer locals who visit Petaling Street. When Hanguoren calls the locals to fight against the migrant workers, there is a lion dance performance in the background. All of sudden, the performers stop their performance and disclose their identities as a Bangladeshis, signifying even the Bangladeshi can perform the Chinese traditional culture compared to the local Malaysian Chinese who might not appreciate the culture anymore. In addition, Harris, the main lead of the film *Banglaysia* can do more than this, as he is portrayed as having done many jobs in Malaysia, including mechanic at car workshop, cook, staff of the Malaysian National Electricity company (TNB), as well as magician assistant. The contribution of the Bangladeshi in Malaysia is also emphasized when Rina who falls in love with Harris questions what is Hanguoren (Malaysian Chinese)'s contribution to the country compared to Harris's.



Figure 5.3 Chef Huang learns the *sambal* recipe from *Baba* and *Nyonya*, the ethnic minority group which is the symbol of the cultural hybridization of the Chinese and Malay.

Nevertheless, the *Peranakan* (*Baba Nyonya*) which symbolizes the cultural hybridization of the immigrant Chinese and local Malay is represented as facing the dilemma of extinction in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (Ngo, 2019). Instead of showing the rich and mixed material culture of the *Peranakan*, such as their house architecture, costumes, rituals, music and dance, the film focuses on the establishment of the eerie atmosphere at the seemingly haunted old house, suggesting the precious hybridized culture is in its extinction under the racist and biased policies.

The multi-ethnicism shown through the lens of Malaysia in the films is highly diversified that it epitomizes the cosmopolitan world. The localized discourse of hybridity is emphasized, with multiple languages being used. The various use of domestic languages and dialects used form a vibrant accented style, which gives play to the multidirectional critical agency of Sinophone theory (Hee, 2019b). Also, the discourse of the “Chinese authenticity” is criticized while the Malay myth of “indigeneity” is also challenged, signifying that localness is a fluid idea, particularly in the progress of globalization which has given rise to the incoming of migrant workers in Malaysia.

5.6.2 Anti-Sinification

At the beginning of *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, the role of Chef Huang suggests he has strong ties with the Chinese ancestral origin. His surname “*Huang*” literally means “yellow”, a surname commonly used in reference to the Yellow Emperor, and “*Da xia*” literally means “great chivalric hero”, a word commonly associated with the Chinese Martial Arts films (Ngo, 2019). The heroic chivalrous spirit is displayed when many people of the Sinophone community who are in trouble come to Huang to ask him for help. Huang graduated from a prestigious cooking school in China and insisted on making “authentic” Chinese dishes despite the customer’s request of “*sambal*” (a local chili paste) to eat together with fried rice. However, Chef Huang slowly accepted the fact of “localization” during the journey of looking for the *sambal* recipe and identified himself closely to “Malaysian” rather than “Chinese”. This plot echoes Sinophone studies which emphasize the end of Chinese diaspora status when the diaspora adapted to the cultures of the new settlement (Shih, 2007). At the end of the film, Chef Huang makes *nasi lemak*, with *sambal* that beats his Chinese rival’s fry rice in the cooking contest.

K’s father and a gangster in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* are portrayed as Malaysian Chinese who can’t speak Mandarin (*huayu*) and are called “banana” (yellow outside but white inside). Their roles also suggest the “localization” process which criticizes the concept of Chinese diaspora.

Moreover, the idea of “Made in Malaysia” is better than “Made in China” is also incorporated in the film. For example, when Chef Huang wants to buy a hidden camera, the seller shows him the product of China but Huang thinks product Malaysia is better.

Nonetheless, there are no many choices and he has to buy products from China in the end. Besides, a staff works at Chef Huang's restaurant asks another staff, when watching a badminton match, which team will he support, China or Malaysia? Although the staff does not express his stance, the answer might be clear to all the Malaysian audience. Badminton is one of the popular sports in Malaysia, enjoyed by all Malaysians, regardless of ethnicity. Whenever there is a badminton tournament joined by Malaysian players, people of all ethnicities gather at the Mamak stall to watch and support the Malaysian players.

The emphasis of the "local Chinese" suggests the Sinophone Malaysian community identify themselves as part of the local, but less related to the "authentic" Chinese in China. Nonetheless, the localization is not conflated with identification with the local state authorities because the "become local" is a process of negotiation, not assimilation as suggested by Tan (2013, p. 35), so the Malaysia Chinese still practice the Chinese cultures that have being influenced by the local cultures and show the characteristics of hybridization.

5.6.3 Social Implications

Nomee centers the theme of the migrant workers in both his films, apparently to criticize the loose regulation which has allowed the influx of the (legal and illegal) migrant workers that given rise to the social problems and crime rates in Malaysia⁶². In October 2013, Malaysia recorded around 4 million migrant workers including illegal workers (Central News Agency, 2014). Among the migrant workers, there are about 60 thousand workers from Bangladesh who work as guards and cooks at hawker centers. The Nepalese work in the same sectors as the Bangladeshi while Indonesian mainly works at construction sites and as domestic helpers. During the 2018 General Election, the migrant workers were allegedly given citizenship with the condition that they vote for *Barisan Nasional* (BN, The National Front) political coalition during the election. There are also migrant workers whose identities are manipulated by the BN government as phantom voters in order to consolidate their power. The migrant workers are given

⁶² The Home Ministry of Malaysia disclosed a total of 42,451 criminal cases involving foreigners between 2016 and 2019. (Martin & Hemananthani & Rahimy & Tan, 2019).

citizenship (the blue color National Identity Card as mentioned in the film), yet there are still 60 thousand people born in Malaysia who are rejected for citizenship and hold the Permanent Resident status (also known as the red Identity Card) due to certain reasons, such as inability to converse fluent Malay (Hariati, 2010).

In *Banglasia*, the Luk Luk attackers in the film referred to the Sulu Islamists from the southern Philippine who attacked the Malaysian state of Sabah, in January 2013. The incident involved 235 militants who landed in Lahad Datu district of Sabah and asserted sovereignty over the territory (AFP, 2013). The Malaysian security forces attacked and routed the invading force, killing at least 50 militants after almost a month of standoff (AFP, 2013). The film was condemned by authorities for mocking the national security issues, particularly ridiculing the role of security troops in maintaining peace and national security in this incident.

The main lead which is played by Namewee is named Han Guo Ren (韓國仁), with the pronunciation similar to the meaning of “Korean” (韓國人). From my understanding, this name sarcastically refers to the Korean wave in Malaysia, which Korean dramas, films as well as pop music has made a hit in Malaysia compared to the local-made cultural products. So the name Han Guo Ren is used, trying to attract and gather Malaysians regardless of ethnicity, in the effort to chase away the immigrants. In contrast to Yeo’s films which depict Japan and Taiwan as the places where the Malaysian Chinese yearning for living, in Namewee’s films, Malaysia instead is portrayed as the “ideal” place for the migrant workers from countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal to earn a living, suggesting how cosmopolitanism is criticised as a biopolitical strategy used by the developed country to exploit the labors in order to improve the human capital.



Figure 5.4 The Malaysian authorities deem the scene showing Han Guo Ren wearing a T-shirt printed with the slogan “Save Malaysia” is inappropriate and should be censored off.

Besides, Namewee is wearing a black T-shirt with the words “Save Malaysia” printed on it. It is actually derived from the slogan of anti-Lynas campaign, “Stop Lynas, Save Malaysia” in order to protest the operation of the Australian rare-earth company of setting up the processing plant in Malaysia, an issue which also covered by Tan Chui Mui and Edmund Yeo in their works. However, to put it in the context of the film, “Save Malaysia” could mean “save Malaysia” from occupying by the immigrants, or “save Malaysia” from monopolizing by the BN government. The Malaysian Censorship Board claimed the word “Save Malaysia”, together with the gun shooting scenes in the films would make the audience think that Malaysia is a dangerous place and should be censored.

5.6.4 Political Allegories

In *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, someone tries to defame K’s father by recording a sex video of him with a lady. K’s father tells the media in Manglish (Malaysian English, without following standard English grammar), “In this video, that man's face like me, sound also like me, I’m not saying that man is not me, but you cannot say the person is 100% me”. This dialogue insinuates to a video clip released on YouTube by former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar in 2007, showing lawyer V.K. Lingam allegedly talked to a former Chief judge about the appointing him into the office of the Federal Court with the help of tycoon Vincent Tan and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, indicating the manipulation of top judiciary by political intermediaries and business cronies. When V.K Lingam was brought for investigation, he said almost the same thing as K’s father, denying the person

in the video was him (V. Anbalagan, 2020).

There is a sudden blackout scene in *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, a metaphor of showing the inefficiency of the Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB, the Malaysian electricity company). Namewee made a video clip in 2009, condemning TNB for its poor service as his house and the nearby area suffered a blackout at night but the local TNB branch office nearby remained lit. Namewee was frustrated as he didn't manage to save a copy of the song he was composing, also his brother was sitting for examination the following day. Malaysians born before the 90s will definitely catch the joke of the blackout scenes here as power failure used to be a common thing that happened in Malaysia in the 90s.



Figure 5.5 The three judges metaphorically represent the three main political parties in Malaysia: UMNO, MCA and MIC.

Also in *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, the judges of the cooking competition actually represent the three main political parties in Malaysia, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) which all these three political parties are under the political coalition *Barisan Nasional* (BN) which had formed and led the government for over 60 years before it lost to the *Pakatan Harapan* coalition (Alliance of Hope) in 2018. The MCA and MIC have always been criticized for being passive and do not dare to challenge the decision made by UMNO. With the judges name written in Mandarin, one may notice the name “巫友強” (Wu You Qiang, literally “wu” means the Malay; “you” means friend; “qiang” means “strong”) is insinuating UMNO and he sits in the center among three judges; on the right is “馬大華” (Ma Da Hua, MCA is called “Ma Hua” in Mandarin) which insinuates MCA,

and on the left is “杜國大” (Du Guo Da, MIC in Mandarin is called “Yin Du Guo Da Dang”) which insinuates MIC. Ma and Du become “yes-men” in the film, following every decision made by Wu. When the first bowl of rice is served to Du, Ma grabs the rice for himself first. When the second bowl of rice is served, Wu cues Du to give it to Ma first, and finally Du takes the third bowl of rice. The plot signifies the power status of each party in the coalition; especially the Malay is given the highest position and power.

Nevertheless, Chef Huang has more than just the “chef” role. People from the neighborhood of Huang’s restaurant, mainly Malaysian Chinese come to him to ask for help. A woman says her food stall is banned; another woman says her house has no water; a young lady says her husband goes to gamble; a woman complains she is cheated by God swindler; a young lady says her boyfriend is going to upload her naked photos online; a teenager says he got 10 As but can’t get into local university. When the Sinophone community faces these kinds of problems or in trouble, they usually make complaints and ask for help from the Malaysian Chinese organization, including MCA. Although the MCA doesn’t go against the UMNO but somehow it plays an important role in helping the Sinophone community to settle small matters listed above. In fact, for the *Negaraku* incident, it also subsided through the help of MCA that Namewee made a public apology.

In *Banglasia*, Omar works for the company “Scale Corporation”, which the scale is the symbol of the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition political parties. Following the logic, the couple which Omar works for is referred to Najib, the ex-Prime Minister who had convicted by the High Court on seven counts, including money laundering, abuse of power and criminal breach of trust, involving around RM2.67 billion and his wife Rosmah who is recognized with her flamboyant hairstyle. The money is believed used to buy submarines, luxury goods such as Hermes handbags and diamond rings (Leong, 2018)

5.6.5 The Localized Slapstick Humor

Nasi Lemak 2.0 is intertextualized with Stephen Chow’s *The God of Cookery*, as the theme of both the films are about cooking competition. The slapstick humor always embedded in Chow’s films, is also found in Namewee’s films but associated with

Malaysian localized culture. For instance, when Chef Huang learns how to make *sambal* (chili paste) from *Baba* and *Nyonya*, they prepare all the necessary ingredients needed but do not tell Huang the exact amount of each ingredient. The reason given is there is no exact recipe as they cook based on feeling and “*agak-agak*” (means “estimate” in Malay). The word “*agak-agak*” is a Malay word, but it is frequently used by the Malaysian Chinese, just like my mother has always told me to “*agak-agak*” the ingredients when I ask her for a recipe.

Another scene shows Chef Huang is in the car of K. One of the shots shows strong cold air coming out from the car air-conditioner that has water drip accumulated around it. Chef Huang asks K why the air conditioner is so cold while he tries to scroll down the car window. K replies that the window is malfunctioning and she hasn’t opened the window for two years. This scene is a satirical humor over the poor quality of the Malaysian-made national car Proton⁶³ which quality has always been an issue of public denunciation. Proton is generally criticized for its engine and parts quality except the air conditioner which is believed to have been designed for the drivers in the tropical hot countries (Ng, 2016). In the song *Negaraku*, Namewee sarcastically sings that the only reason for the fact that there are a lot of *Proton Wira* in his hometown Muar, is the low price of the local made cars compared to the imported cars⁶⁴. Since Malaysia developed its automobile industry which encourages people to purchase local cars, the development of the public transportation system has been overlooked. As a consequence, people have no choice but to purchase cars in order to travel to work and school, which causes another serious problem—traffic jam during the peak hours. One shot shows K’s car logo as an “eagle” instead of “tiger” which the Proton logo is supposed to be. This is also a way to deride Proton which always imitates the engine design of foreign cars, such as Honda.

⁶³ Proton is originally founded by Mahathir Muhammad, which the concept of National Car aims to enhance the Malaysia heavy industry. Proton collaborated with Mitsubishi Motors and the collaboration, Proton Saga was launched in 1985, marks the beginning of the Malaysian automotive industry (Proton Holdings Berhad homepage, 2020).

⁶⁴ The imported cars in Malaysia are imposed with import tax and excise tax which resulted in the car price of Malaysia to be one of the most expensive countries after Singapore (Sun, 2014).

The jokes incorporated in the films of Namewee are closely related to the local contexts and applied to the Malaysian audience who share the same experience.

I suppose *Nasi Lemak 2.0* is intertextualized with *The God of Cookery* also because the main female role is being “uglified”. In *The God of Cookery*, the female lead Turkey (played by singer Karen Mok) has buck teeth and one of her eyes is smaller than the other. She became pretty at the last scene of the film. *Nasi Lemak 2.0* adopted the same formula as the *The God of Cookery*. K has thick eyebrows and wears thick glasses but before the final cooking contest, she suddenly becomes prettier and Chef Huang finally falls in love with her.

While Namewee is deriding the national Proton car for copying foreign cars, it's a bit ridiculous to see Namewee himself is also adopting the narrative of the Hong Kong Cantonese film of Hong Kong which has a great impact on the Malaysian Chinese audience in his films.

On the other hand, in *Banglasia*, most of the slapstick jokes are performed by the role of Omar, the mafia. For instances, when Harris is caught by Omar, and Omar seems to torture him, suddenly there is a fly which catch Omar's attention, and Omar starts to cite the script of a local advertisement of the mosquito racket and make joke by naming Lee Chong Wei, the top badminton player of Malaysia as the endorser of the product.

Conclusion

To sum up for the part of Yeo, his works are characterized as local yet globalized, demonstrating the cosmopolitan distinctiveness that the political and cultural representation are no longer restricted with a certain territory border. Also the languages used in Yeo's Sinophone films are not limited to Sinitic languages but non-Sinitic languages as well as other foreign languages, suggesting a new possibility to the Sinophone studies which solely focus on the Sinitic languages that might be too narrow in interrogating works of Yeo.

On the other hand, Namewee portrays a lot of “localized” elements which are related to the context of Malaysia, especially showing the multicultural and multi-accent perspectives of the Malaysian community, yet the localization exhibits a “hybridized” potential, and is fluid under the flow of globalization which allows the other cultures to

come in. The localized discourse of hybridity is a criticism of the “authenticity” of Chinese as well as the Malay-nationalism. Also, the localization signifies it is no longer fixed to a certain culture, but rather maintains an openness to the other, and continuously changes as a result of its imbrications in the national and global forces. Through making films, Namewee embarks upon the journey of homecoming to search for his own identity, definitely contributes to Sinophone studies which emphasizes place-based heterogeneous cultural experience. Moreover, his works feature different accents of the Sinitic languages and dialects which have interconnected different Sinophone communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Thailand as a circle which allows the inter-referencing Sinophone to occur.

Final Conclusion

6.1 Sinophone Studies as Framework

By taking departure from the theoretical framework of Sinophone studies, this research focuses on contemporary Sinophone Malaysian films after the year 2000, the period when more Sinitic language films started to appear as a result of globalization and liberalized policies adopted by the government that made it possible for flows of affordable filming equipment and improved technology available to local markets.

My reason for focusing on Sinophone Malaysian cinema is because Malaysia is one of the countries in Southeast Asia which produces the most Sinitic films every year yet not much research has examined these films compared to the cinema of other Sinophone regions such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. I understand that Sinophone studies does not restrict itself to an easily identifiable nation-state or ethnic group, but because of a need to narrow down the scope of my study, I have chosen to study the distinctiveness and heterogeneities of the Sinophone culture and experience of the Sinophone community in Malaysia. Nevertheless, in order to overcome the problem of focusing only on a certain region, I have also included a case study of *“Letters from the South”* in Chapter 4, which I argue also casts a light on the representation of the Sinophone community in Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar, Taiwan, revealing how this Sinophone community connects to even larger ones. Although I do not focus on any particular case studies from China in this research, I do not simply agree with Shih Shu-Mei’s stance on excluding China from the Sinophone. In fact, if one has to historicize the Malaysian Chinese community, studying the languages and dialects they speak, and investigating the localized cultures they practice today, the connection to China should not be overlooked so easily. It is important to note that Sinophone studies’ focus on the local contexts of its global communities cannot imagine a network of relations without including a certain rethinking of China as part of these relations.

6.2 Contextualizing Chineseness

As such, in this research, “Chineseness” is not treated as merely ethnic essentialism. Instead, I wish to reconfigure the idea within the discursive interrogations in relation to the national and postcolonial context, which has led to the assumption that the Malaysian

Chinese are caught in-between and struggling to engage with the various modes of identification prescribed less by the Malaysia or China dichotomy (Tan, 2013). In other words, “Chineseness” should always be contextualized when approaching the Malaysian Chinese in their plurality and the communities should be understood as highly heterogeneous and diversified, sometimes including cases where accusation, avoidance, and total denial of being “Chinese” is the sole identity label (Tan, 2013). As Malaysian filmmaker Ho Yu Hang (2018) says, “Chineseness is something troublesome. I don’t wish to highlight any ethnics in my films. It doesn’t add any points to my films, rather most of the filmmakers tend to focus on the economic or social issues in Malaysia. Nonetheless this doesn’t mean the Malaysian Chinese filmmakers are giving up their Chinese identities, rather, their identities are in the multilayer and complicated situation, oscillating between ethnic identity, national identity, cultural identity and status identity.”

6.3 Chapters Summary

Before I conclude, I wish to first recap the outcome of the analysis of each chapter. Chapter one and chapter two deal with commercial Sinophone Malaysian films which mainly represent the localized and place-based culture of the Sinophone community in Malaysia.

In Chapter one, I first review the development of Sinophone Malaysian cinema in relation to its historical and sociopolitical context to allow the case studies to be discussed in a discursive way. The literature review reveals how Sinophone cinema has been marginalized since the 1930s, with the situation only getting worse when Malay-centered policies were implemented after Malaya independence. The development of Sinophone Malaysian cinema came to a halt until the 2000s when affordable filming equipment became available. From here, this chapter continues by examining two commercial Sinitic language films made by Malaysian filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan. The first film, *The Journey* (2014) features a cast consisting entirely of Malaysian Chinese roles, speaking localized and creolized Sinitic languages and dialects, while other local languages, including English, Malay and Tamil are mixed into the dialogue. I argue that this film shows how Malaysian Chinese cultures, beliefs and taboos—such as distributing red packets during Chinese New Year and worshipping certain deities—these

essentialized elements of “Chineseness” are incorporated as a strategy to construct a collective identity and memory for the Sinophone community in order to connect them with their cultural roots as well as attract them to watch the film. The foregrounding of Chineseness is also used to contest the hegemonic majority, which is either China-centrism or Malay-nationalism while emphasizing the distinctions of the Sinophone Malaysian communities. This strategy proved to be a success when the film became the highest grossing Sinophone film in Malaysia and marked the starting point of the trend of viewing locally made Sinophone films by the Sinophone community. The second case study, *Ola Bola* (2016) shows an example of the filmmaker’s attempt to tackle the Malay audience market. By setting roles of different ethnicities and featuring Malay as the main language of the film, *Ola Bola* shows a harmonious atmosphere of unity among ethnic groups in scenes that feature, for instance, people dancing together at a Funfair regardless of ethnicity. Added to this is the element of food, utilized as an agent which brings different ethnicities together as one and to discern the Malaysian and the others (foreigners). Nevertheless, this stereotypical representation of Malaysia as a multiethnic cultural country has unwittingly contributed to a kind of “cosmetic multiculturalism” (Morris-Suzuki, 2002), a disguised form of nationalism that overlooks the oppressive reality underneath the discourse of multiculturalism. Through the alteration of one of the most important plots which sparked controversy and anger among the Sinophone community in Malaysia, the film debunks itself as representing an “imagined nation” and idealized “Malaysian-ness” that is essentialized. Both of Chiu’s films are not qualified to be nominated in the “Best Film” category in the Malaysian Film Festival due to the film not using Malay as its primary language, despite the efforts of Chiu to make films which underscore localized elements through creolized languages, shooting locations, actors, and crew. This reflects how he identifies himself as a Malaysian Chinese who tells the stories of the idiosyncratic local Sinophone community and engages in the process of going against the idea of Chinese diaspora.

Because of Sinophone studies’ focus on Sinitic language communities, there are some limits when considering Sinophone Malaysian cinema which features languages and dialects outside Sinitic ones and also mixes in other languages, including Malay,

English and Tamil. In order to tackle this issue, I look at the idea of the “minoritarian”, suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (1986), to delineate the relation between the Sinophone film and non-Sinophone film through three case studies: *Fly By Night* (2018) by Zahir Omar, *Lelaki Harapan Dunia (Men Who Save the World, 2014)* by Liew Seng Tat and *PASKAL: The Movie* (2018) by Teh Adrian. The three characteristics of “minor” proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, is first, the process of becoming minor within the major; second, the minor work is political because an individual story is necessarily linked to larger social framework; and third, minor cinema is able to deterritorialize without the need to reterritorialize and to reify the people in becoming. I do not see the Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers as part of an ethnic minority group and so the films they make are categorized as minor films. Rather, I examine how the Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers who are situated in a marginalized position are making “minor” cinema (Malaysian Chinese made Malay language films within the Malay major film industry which has created a new space for the “polyphony”. I argue that when the Sinophone Malaysian filmmaker makes films in the Malay language, which is the “major” and official language used in Malaysia, it involves itself in the process of “deterritorializing” the Malay language. This initiative to express one’s identity as Malaysian makes the films “minor”. The first case study, *Fly By Night*, a Sinitic language film made by a Malay filmmaker, shows the destabilization of the essentialized representation of the Malaysian Chinese and Malay, for example, the Malaysian Chinese are depicted as criminals while the Malay are the extorted targets, opening up new ways of understanding each ethnic group. The use of Sinitic dialects as the main language of the film allows the “minor” language to become the center of power, but as characters of different ethnicities are speak their respective languages, the idea of ethnicity shifts, suggesting a new identity for Malaysians that also echoes Sinophone studies’ deconstruction of the hegemony of nationality and ethnic identities. *Lelaki Harapan Dunia (Men Who Save the World, 2014)* is a Malay language film directed by Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Liew Seng Tat, which contains a lot of scenes satirizing the ethnic, political, cultural and religious situation in Malaysia. For instance, the Malays are portrayed as superstitious and easily influenced by traditional beliefs and the missing

female roles in the film allowed the “transgender” issue to slip in, which is against the Islamic religion law. Liew, who went to a Malay school, made a film that rearticulates the subjectivity of the Malay and gives the audience new insight to understanding the Malay community, despite criticism that the film offended some who for religious reasons. Situated in a marginal position but filming using the major language enables the filmmaker to express another “possible community” and to forge the means of another sensibility through the subjectivity of the “minor” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). This film had been selected to represent Malaysia as its entry in the Academy Awards, marking the first time a film made by a Malaysian Chinese filmmaker is selected. Its use of the Malay language, the dominant language in Malaysia, implies that the “minor” in the system has the ability to change it from within. *PASKAL*, also a Malay language film made by Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Teh Adrian was given plenty of support by government officials for its almost propagandist stance, promoting the glory of the Royal Malaysian Navy Force Unit. The strategy of making a film which is pro-government proved effective, as the film did not only do well at the box office but was also undisputedly recognized under the “national” category. With these three case studies in Chapter two, I argue that Sinitic films and non-Sinitic films within the context of Malaysia are not in a dialectical relation because in both cases the languages used are not limited to either Sinitic or non-Sinitic languages but a mixture of various languages which have been creolized. In both cases when a Malay filmmaker who makes Sinitic language film and for Malaysian Chinese filmmakers who make Malay language films (be it commercial or non-commercial), the language undergoes the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which then leads to the new imagination of the identity pre-given identities as they are using the language which themselves are not familiar with. In this case, I argue they are in fact making “minor” films which are political, deterritorialized and becoming minor within the major.

Chapter three centers on filmmaker Lau Kek Huat, who is based in Taiwan, and Chapter four focuses on female filmmaker Tan Chui Mui, who is one of the most important filmmakers in the development of independent filmmaking in Malaysia. In Chapter three, I first review the development of independent filmmaking in Malaysia to

clarify how independent filmmaking within the context of Malaysia is low-budget and made with affordable digital video camera, receives funds from international film festivals, screens overseas but not in local theaters, focuses on politics, contains sensitive social and religious issues and focuses on the banal life of the working class. Due to Malay-oriented policies and strict censorship rules, some of the Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers have embarked on the journey overseas to develop their filmmaking careers, such as Lau Kek Huat, who has been actively making documentary and fictional films in Taiwan. Despite receiving funds mainly from Taiwan and Korea, Lau makes films about his homeland of Malaysia, which he left years ago. The concerns, desires and affect towards home projected through Lau's films situate him in the diasporic mode of filmmaking. Lau's trilogy of films: *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) and *Buoluomi* (2019), explore issues concerning the banned Malayan Communist Party (MCP), ethnic riots, ethnic minorities and the special rights given to the Malay. All these issues are deemed sensitive topics in Malaysia where multiethnic people live together. In the first film, *Absent Without Leave* (2016), which is more like a personal documentary, the filmmaker is in search of the memory of his grandfather who was an MCP member. In the film, his personal story is inseparable from political controversy because of its dealings in the controversial issue of the MCP, which is forbidden in the public sphere. Lau questions the floating identity of the former members of the MCP whose sacrifice to the state has been erased from history and demonized. Lau links these to larger social issues when he asks "What should be done to become a real Malaysian", overtly seeking answers to the unequal treatment accorded to the Sinophone community and other minority groups from that of the dominant ethnic community. The "absent" of the title refers to the absence of the father of the filmmaker in the family, the absence of the MCP's contributions to national history, and also the absence of justice in some of the political and social incidents in Malaysia. In the second film, *The Tree Remembers* (2019), the ethnic relationship between the dominant Malay group and the Malaysian Chinese community as well as the minority *Orang Asli* (indigenous people) group is discussed by tracing them back to an ethnic riot involving Malay and Chinese that happened in 1969. The film suggests the root cause of the riot is closely tied to the

Separation and Division Policy implemented since the British colonization. Malay and Malaysian Chinese interviewees who experienced and witnessed the ethnic riot give testimonies regarding the incident that had been officially covered up. The film also implies that the Malay-prioritization policy is the result of the collusion of the Malay monarchy with the British colonial government. As a result, minority groups in Malaysia today, especially the *Orang Asli*, are still being marginalized, living in a post-colonial experience. Facing the camera, the *Orang Asli* interviewees recount how their home has been destroyed, and how they were being treated as slaves during the Slave Raids operation and forced to speak the dominant Malay language. The film also debunks the 1956 documentary “*Timeless Temiar*” as purely fictional, in order to remind the audience that the footages included in *The Tree Remembers* may not be totally factual or reliable either. The third film, *Boluomi* (2019), despite being a fictional film, tells the story of Malaysian Chinese who leave home to further their studies in Taiwan. The background setting of the main protagonist of the film epitomizes the filmmaker Lau’s own experience. The second plot line of *Boluomi* revolves around a mother whose husband was a Malayan Communist Party (MCP) member and had no choice but to abandon her newborn baby. This film shares the same theme with *Absent Without Leave* and the words related to nature which the main protagonist teaches the Filipino migrant worker to speak also connects with *The Tree Remember’s* theme of nature. Moreover, the song “*Terang Boelan*” serves to link Lau’s three films together, suggesting that *Absent Without Leave* (2016), *The Tree Remembers* (2019) and *Boluomi* (2019) serve as a trilogy. *Terang Boelan* (*Bright Moon*) is an Indonesian folk song but the Malaysia national anthem uses the same rhythm with different lyrics. In all the three films, the lyrics of the song are slightly changed to adapt to the development of the plot. Lau’s trilogy is transnational at the extra-textual level but at textual level the films distinctively focus on the history and political struggles of Malaysian communities.

Chapter four examines the aesthetics of two works by female filmmaker Tan Chui Mui, one of the pioneers in the independent filmmaking industry in Malaysia. Tan’s works are characterized by her poetic filming style and she tackles issues such as nostalgia towards homeland and the desolate, working-class individuals in the flow of

modernization and globalization. *Love Conquers All* (2006), is set in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur which is usually depicted as a modernized and highly developed global but Tan challenges mainstream commercial films by using slow camera movement, long takes, and a minimal narrative. She portrays the city as a place which is uncivilized and bleak, where the female protagonist is cheated by gangsters and obsessed with sexual longing due to her loneliness and emptiness. In the omnibus of *Letters from the South*, not only does Tan take up the role as the producer, but she also contributes a short film entitled *A Night in Malacca*, which is in dialogue with the late Chinese writer Yu Da Fu about the theme of “homeland”, that Tan contends is “nowhere.” Tan shot the film in Malacca where Yu Da Fu had travelled more than 70 years ago. This anachronism is handled by a montage of still and moving images to create the atmosphere of an experimental film. Some stage play performances are also incorporated and the monochromatic visuals and cinematography lead the audience into a world of mystery and fantasy. I argue that these aesthetics and cinematography have made Tan’s work idiosyncratic compared to other (male) filmmakers who deal with the same themes. *Letter from the South* also works as an exemplary film to reconsider the connections between Sinophone studies, diaspora studies and accented cinema. Through the segment in Tan’s *A Night in Malacca* where she considers herself an outsider or wanderer who belongs neither to the homeland or settlement; in *Popiah* and *Singapore Panda*, which emphasize the ethnic root of the Singaporean Chinese; as well as *Midi Z’s Burial Clothes* which depicts a member of the Chinese diaspora longing for his homeland (China) until his final breath, are all segments that emphasize the Chinese diasporic identity as closely linked to the idea of China as homeland. Nevertheless, diaspora studies enables the mobility of individuals in the globalized and transnationalized discourse to be rearticulated, allowing us to understand the idea that “homeland” is never connected to a static past but ever present and constantly changing. The segment of Tsai Ming Liang’s *Walking on Water* which observes the apartment in his childhood memories shows nostalgic feelings towards home, a home which isn’t related to China but the director’s settlement in Malaysia. Through Aditya Assarat’s *Now Now Now*, we can see that the Sinophone community in Thailand has totally assimilated into the dominant Thai culture,

as they have Thai names and speak Thai better than Sinitic languages. These two segments fit better within the framework of Sinophone studies for their foregrounding of a “diasporic” identity that has come to an end. Also, the letter, which exists in *Love Conquers All* and *Letter from the South* suggests how both films can be considered accented films since the use of the epistolary mode is one of the significant styles of accented cinema (Naficy, 2001). In fact, accented cinema’s contention that transnational cinema is both global and local as well as engages in many deterritorializing and reterritorializing journeys overlaps with the arguments in Sinophone studies and diaspora studies. These leads me to argue that diaspora studies and Sinophone studies are not paradoxical in nature but complimentary, in their exploration of identities and “home searching” issues, in collaboration with accented cinema.

Chapter five discusses the works of both Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers Edmund Yeo and Namewee by using the concept of cosmopolitanism, an idea that suggests how the globalized world is interconnected by various local cultures and that cultural solidarity can no longer be restricted to the sovereign nation state or a fixed geographical place (Cheah, 2006; Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, Appadurai & Dipesh, 2000; Ulf Hannerz, 1990). I argue that the idea of cosmopolitanism also intersects with Sinophone studies, which contends that Sinitic language communities are connected by language as a sphere but each is heterogeneous and its own cultural experience. I suggest Yeo as a cosmopolitan filmmaker, not only because he has embarked on a transnational trajectory for educational purposes and to pursue his filmmaking career but more importantly for his works’ depiction of issues occurring in Malaysia that concomitantly appeal to audiences worldwide. Yeo was born in Singapore, grew up in Malaysia, and completed his first degree in Australia before receiving his Doctoral degree from Waseda University in Japan. This multinational educational background has led Yeo to include multiple places in his films, tackling global issues and connecting them to the situation in Malaysia. Yeo’s works are recognized by his distinct filmic style that incorporates modernized urban locations, passing trains and blinking lights, the banality of city life, as well as universal themes such as love, loss, memory, and border-crossings. This variety of themes has allowed his films to circulate beyond the local market and appeal to the

audiences all over the world. Also, some of Yeo's short films were adapted from literary works of award-winning novelists, including Yasunari Kawabata, and his film style is influenced by prominent filmmakers such as Bela Tarr, Tarkovsky, Apichatpong, Hou Hsiao Hsien and Koreeda Hirokazu (Sindie, 2018). Yeo's works demonstrate a filmic style that is appreciated by transnational cinephilia, and he was brought to many international film festivals, including the world renowned Cannes Film Festival, Venice Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival, Rotterdam International Film Festival, Tokyo International Film Festival, and many others, winning several awards along the way. Yeo's second feature film *Aqerat* (2017) which brings him the title of the Best Director at the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF), focuses on the Rohingya refugee issue, a local issue that resonates with the global refugee crisis. The hybridization of Malay and Thai cultures in Kelantan, a state in the northern-east part of Peninsula Malaysia where *Aqerat* is set, is represented through the puppet show and food as well as the film's language which is a mixture of Thai and local languages. Yeo also joined the "60 Seconds of Solitude in the Year Zero" project, which placed his work side by side with renowned worldwide filmmakers. Yeo's works demonstrate the distinctions of cosmopolitanism, where political and cultural representations are no longer restricted to a certain territorial border. This suggests a new possibility for Sinophone studies which solely focuses on Sinitic language, an approach that may be too narrow to interrogate the Yeo's works. Namewee on the other hand started off as a Youtuber before making feature films. He makes use of the freedom of the internet to distribute his works and accumulate viewers worldwide. In comparison with Yeo who departs from "home" to the other cosmopolitan cities to develop his career, Namewee takes the opposite route, venturing home to make films in Malaysia where he has succumbed to the many restrictions of government censors for touching on sensitive sociopolitical issues. He is seen as a controversial figure and a "racist" by the Malay community after making a parody of the Malaysia national anthem which contains foul language and insinuates the government bureaucracy, as well as a music video which allegedly insulted the dignity of Islam. Namewee made his first feature film titled "*Nasi Lemak 2.0*" in 2011. In order to apply for a filming fund from the government, Namewee claimed the film echoed the ex-

Prime Minister Najib Razak's 1 Malaysia program that aimed to promote ethnic harmony and national unity but were in vain. With a limited budget, Namewee managed to complete the film, winning the Best Potential Director Award in Osaka Asian Film Festival. His 2013 film *Banglasia* on the other hand, was only released in Malaysia six years later after a change in the country's government. The previous government had asked to censor a total of 31 scenes, which amounted to 90% of the film's content. In both films, Namewee foregrounds the idea of localization by showing the multi-cultural and multi-accent perspectives of the Malaysian community. His localization exhibits a "hybridized" potential and is fluid under the flow of globalization which allows the inflow of other cultures. In *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, the Sinitic dialects of Hainanese and Teochew are featured in Sinophone Malaysian films for the first time. Namewee is not proficient in all the languages but he mimics the accents of these languages in a humorous way, deconstructing the myth that such accents must originate from a native speaker (Hee, 2019). The hybridized localization portrayed through the films is a criticism of the Sinification discourse of "authenticity", and also a deconstruction of Malay-nationalism. The Malay roles in the films are portrayed as *Tai Chi* masters, practicing Chinese martial arts and even reciting Chinese poems. In addition, Namewee has made use of the rhythm of a Bollywood song by dubbing over it with Mandarin lyrics. The plots of both films also metaphorically refer to several political and social incidents occurring within the context of Malaysia such as the dispute over the sovereignty of Sabah state, the inefficiency of the Malaysian national electricity company, the money laundering cases involving ex-Prime Minister Najib and so on. Through making these films, Namewee embarks on a journey of homecoming and a search for identity. The filmic experience of Namewee goes beyond the nationalistic and diasporic discourse and contributes to Sinophone studies by emphasizing a place-based heterogeneous cultural experience. Moreover, his works feature different accents of the Sinitic languages and dialects that have interconnected different Sinophone communities such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Thailand as a circle which allows inter-referencing within the Sinophone.

6.4 Final Note

Sinophone studies allows Sinophone Malaysian cinema to be studied along with other Sinophone cinemas, and interconnects these films with other Sinitic speaking regions to further envision a wider Sinophone sphere. This is, however, limiting in that it does not look at the complexities of Sinophone Malaysian cinema insofar as they involve multilingual code switching and a variety of languages and dialects that have undergone creolization. In order to fill this gap, I use diaspora studies as complement to study the experience of localization and political struggles of the Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers based in Malaysia, as well as those who engage in border-crossing and experience the process of being “in place” and “displaced”, “deterritorialization and reterritorialization”, in the context of globalization and transnationalism. As Hee (2019) contends,

“Malaysian Chinese diaspora discourse is not completely a narrative of anti-localization; Malaysian Chinese against diaspora discourse is not necessarily nationalism (patriotism) filled with admiration and hope for the state. It is this long-term tension interventions between diaspora and against-diaspora discourses which gives Sinophone Malaysian culture its unique accented style.” (p. 276-277)

Likewise, along with diaspora studies, the idea of accented cinema is also used to study the Sinophone Malaysian films as a product rooted in the negotiations between local Sinophone cultures and of flows of capital generated by the globalized international capitalism (Hee, 2019). The concept of “minoritarian” is also utilized to deal with Sinophone Malaysian filmmakers who make films in non-native languages, which I consider minor cinema as they have potential to contest the hegemony. Considering the flow of globalization and prevalence of technology, not only is Sinophone Malaysian cinema characterized by its localized elements but also “cosmopolitanized” as the place-based cultures are no longer bound to certain territorial borders but are highly hybridized as the result of the integration by global forces. At the extra-textual level, Sinophone Malaysian films which circulate in the transnational circuit more than at local theaters can also be scrutinized under the concept of cosmopolitanism along with Sinophone studies which look beyond the national boundary. All these concepts are

complementary to Sinophone studies in providing different imaginations when studying Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

This research may have a lot of limitations but it somehow contributes to the overall discourse of Sinophone cinema studies especially from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian regions which are not researched as often. As a Malaysian Chinese who is familiar with the historical, social and political context of Malaysia, I hope this research will provide a better understanding of these particular localized elements and the denotative meanings embedded in the films to audiences worldwide. Sinophone Malaysian cinema is unique as it features creolized Sinitic language and dialects, and exhibits hybridized local cultures which make it distinct among other Sinophone films. My hope is that this project will open up further discussions of Sinophone Malaysian cinema and there will be more research and analysis regarding it in the future.

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Now. Dir. Yeo, Edmund. Ando Laboratory. 2010

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Tiger WooHoo! (Da Ri Zi). Dir. Chiu Keng Guan. Astro Shaw, Woohoo Pictures & DreamTeam Studio. 2010

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