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Questioning the Myths of Origin: Amir Muhammad's Historical Film about the Communist Party of Malaya and Malaysian Independence¹

*Malaysian independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad has become known internationally for his witty and satirical documentaries on Malaysia and Malaysian society. One of Amir's latest works, *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* ('The Last Communist', 2006), was well received internationally. However, the film has been banned in Malaysia. This documentary recounts the life of exiled Communist Party of Malaya leader, Chin Peng, now living in exile in Southern Thailand. The film was inspired by Chin Peng's autobiography, 'Alias Chin Peng: my side of history' (2003). In his film Amir juxtaposes Chin Peng's life (past and present) against scenes of modern day Malaysia, simultaneously exploring issues of social development and progress, and notions of loyalty to the state and to a cause. The paper has a number of aims. Firstly it examines the circumstances of the banning of the film and the reasons or justifications given for the ban. Secondly it highlights and explores a main contention put forward by the filmmaker, the need to re-examine the role of the much maligned Communist Party of Malaya in the Malaysian independence movement in the period leading to independence from the British, and particularly the function and contribution of Chin Peng in this period, an aspect of Malaysian history that has been suppressed since independence in 1957. Thirdly it examines Amir Muhammad's alternative documentary style, and his mode of raising issues about contemporary Malaysia by via processes of ironic commentary and subtle juxtaposition.*

Introduction

Amir Muhammad is one of Malaysia's most significant independent filmmakers, and he has specialised in making light hearted but fundamentally serious political documentaries that are designed to provoke mild controversy, and constitute a gentle challenge to establishment views in Kuala Lumpur. In the last few years he has made two documentaries about surviving members of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), who opposed the Japanese during World War II, and then continued a campaign to rid Malaya of the British, culminating in the 'Malayan Emergency' of 1948 to 1960. The films are *The Last Communist* (2006), and *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (trans. 'Village People Radio Show', 2007). Both of these films were banned on being submitted to the Malaysian Censorship Board, and cannot be screened publicly in Malaysia, though they have been shown internationally at film festivals, where they have been well received.² This paper explores the first of these films, *The Last Communist*, which recounts the life journey of Chin Peng, the leader of the CPM, and what his story, and the stories of other communists in Malaya at the time, means to people in Malaysia today. The film was initiated as one response to the publication of Chin Peng's biography, *My Side of History* (2003).³ The paper asks what it is that Amir is saying about these communists, what are his methods for representing them, and why his documentary takes the form it does. The paper argues that the film presents a more diverse view of the communists in a way that counters official establishment views of the movement, but that it is primarily about how they may be viewed in the present, rather than being an account of their past actions. By returning to this forgotten history, the film also reminds us that these members of the CPM, though their opposition to the return of the British, however controversial at the time, made a contribution to the eventual achievement of independence, and hence to the creation of present day Malaysia. The film in effect counters ideas that communists are a continuing threat to Malaysia and that anyone associated with communism should be demonised.

At the opening of *The Last Communist* the audience is positioned looking along the side of a moving green car, as it travels a well paved modern road and crosses a bridge. Even as early as this first shot, the film signals some of its intentions: this is to be a relaxed journey, a road

movie, and the bridge perhaps signals the idea of a transition – a transition in both time, and thought. The car continues its journey and the film's title appears, *The Last Communist*, in which the word 'Communist' is highlighted with a provocative momentary red-tinted colouring, and the sound of a 'ping'. This kind of mild provocation and eloquent use of film language is what has given Amir both recognition and criticism from the Malaysian public. Nonetheless, this has never prevented Amir from pursuing his exploration of numerous national sensitivities within his films. Examples are evident in three other of his films, *The Big Durian* (2004), *6Shorts* (2006), and his most recent instalment, *Malaysian Gods* (2008), in all of which, sometimes using songs, he humorously juxtaposes a range of issues (racial ties and racial tensions, state interference in everyday life, hypocrisy in sexual matters, and the cult of deference to ministers and politicians) about which in Malaysia truth is rarely told.

The Film and its Stories

The Last Communist is, then, a semi-musical travel documentary that aims to relax its audience regarding the issue of communism, precisely because communism is a very sensitive issue in Malaysia, especially given the prominence in Malaysian history of the Malayan Emergency.⁴ Tracing Chin Peng's past and his role within the CPM, the film presents history and facts in two time dimensions, which are juxtaposed together simultaneously: the past, and the present. The film engages with the past by presenting, in chronological order, basic facts about Chin Peng's life (his movements around Malaya and important decisions he took) through the use of titles briefly superimposed against a background of present day footage that introduces and later explores the various towns in which Chin Peng once lived and the events that occurred in each of them involving him. The film continues to shift from place to place, retracing Chin Peng's journey (as indicated by the earlier travelling car) and provides a simple linear account of the basic facts of his story, mainly from 1938 to 1955. It begins in Chin Peng's home in the town of Sitiawan and describes his early childhood growing up in British colonial Malaya. The film identifies the school where Chin Peng first began to hear about communism, and subsequently continues on to other towns, outlining his involvement in the underground campaigns against the Japanese, his eventual appointment as leader in 1947, and the killing of three British at Sungai Siput in Perak in 1948 that sparked the Emergency.⁵ The second

approach, and time dimension, that the film takes is to present contemporary life in Malaysia. In each of the places connected with Chin Peng that he visits, Amir has conducted interviews with local people, often about what they know of communist actions in the areas approximately 60 years ago. Through these real time filmed interviews, contemporary history is summoned up and captured by the camera as people talk about their pasts, their present lives, and their future aspirations. Here we are given a sense of how people remember communists from their region, but often as not they know little of this, and talk about their current lives, which may display a number of pre-occupations, some of them relevant to topical issues in contemporary Malaysia (which Amir has dealt with in other films), others tangential to them. Sometimes, even, racial tensions appear innocuous, and communism forgotten, for example, in the sequence filmed in Bidor (where an agreement between the CPM and the British was signed in December 1943), as three contented young Indian men, Petai bean sellers (also known as 'The Petai Boys') jokingly classify three types of the bean they sell in terms of which racial group favours which type of Petai bean the most. Therefore, while the film traces Chin Peng's story and history, it also captures the stories of contemporary Malaysians, as they reflect on their lives, possibly not so different to the life of the young Chin Peng.

This dual sense of history in the film, unusual in documentary, creates a very different sense of time – a time of the past and a time of the present, in which the time of the present tends to efface the time of the past, or to bring it back in new and unexpected ways. In the course of interviews, a diverse range of attitudes towards Chin Peng and the communist movement come to light. And while the Malaysian State and the Malaysian establishment appears to hold one view (as found in official history books and the government media), Amir's film presents a more diverse picture. Contrary to the government's efforts to discredit Chin Peng and the role of the CPM during the Japanese occupation and the guerrilla war against the British, there are Malaysians who differ in their attitudes. In effect, the film reveals that there are people in Malaysia (mainly those from the Chinese community) who have good memories of the underground communist movement against the Japanese. For instance, there is a story told by a young Chinese bun maker, Lee Eng Kew, interviewed by Amir in Taiping, Perak. He tells a story about a young Chinese who joined the CPM to fight the Japanese but who was captured and brutally tortured. During his captivity, the young man had a dream of a deity who fed him lotus petals, inspiring him to live on. Surviving

Japanese captivity, and nursed back to health in his home town, the young man later rejoined his comrades in the jungle to fight for independence against the British, after which he never returned. After he disappeared, his mother began to make buns with flower petals in memory of her lost son, and in the hope that he would return. This story shows how a personal memory was transformed into a localized folk memory, via the buns with lotus petals, the origins of which are widely known in Taiping. Ironically, these buns of communist commemorative origin are now popular all over Malaysia. The retelling in the film circulates a local popular memory that counters the national demonization of the communists, by giving the point of view of the Taiping Chinese community, who have memories of a Chinese communist hero who ultimately sacrificed himself in the name of independence, and whose own family suffered grief at his loss. The idea of the communist as only being a threat is negated in the film, because there are people who tell good stories about them, and history is discovered in new ways. This effect within the film is done innocently as it is the mother's personal experience that becomes the source of legends and a positive element of hope during troubled times, where very ordinary people get caught up in difficult events.

Another story that reflects both how the communists operated, and how local attitudes to them were manipulated during the emergency, is told by Sallehuddin Abdul Ghani, a Malay interviewee. As a naive, very young boy he was recruited by a beautiful female communist, and he reveals fond memories of this encounter, for he was not forced or coerced into joining the communists. However, he later secretly worked for the British when the British offered large sums of money (approximately 500 ringgit per person) for the capture of communists in his village, resulting in his turning in to the British his uncle and cousin, who were also recruited into the communist party.⁶ This story however forms a slightly disjunctive portrait of Malays, because the adult, and by now apparently retired, Sallehuddin appears to have no regret at betraying family members when he was a child (perhaps not an issue at the time due to his young age). But neither does he address in his interview his family's reaction towards their capture. Nor does Amir question him about this. Amir, of course, does not appear in the film, but even so in the course of the interview these circumstances could have been further explored.

In terms of the narrative of the past, events unfold rapidly as the Japanese leave, the British return, and the CPM are betrayed by their

wartime leader, the Vietnamese Lai Te, allowing for Chin Peng to take over, and it is during his leadership that the Emergency is declared.⁷ The climax of this history is almost certainly the account of the massacre of three British planters at Sungai Siput, Perak in 1948 that led to the declaration of the Malayan Emergency.⁸ The extent of the involvement of the Party leadership in the planning of these local killings is not fully resolved in the film, though the event is seen as a turning point which galvanises the British response and ushers in the Emergency.

To some extent in the film Chinese and Malay interviewees tend to have different memories of the communists. While some Chinese have good memories about the communists and their role in history, the Malays are less committed in their views about the CPM. However, one attitude that is commonly found in contemporary Malaysian society is that while it is sometimes admitted that the CPM did play some role in Malaysia gaining its independence from the British, they were people who were primarily evil and violent. One scene in the film that depicts this is when Amir identifies a well known teacher's training college in Tanjung Malim and states that many Malay intellectuals were trained there. As Amir interviews a Muslim Malay girl (she appears to be a student from the college), he reveals that her perception of the history of the period is very much a text book recital of the Malaysian State's perspective, one that is told in all school text books. As a result, one senses that the negative perceptions of the communists have and continue to be that formed by the State. Thus, the resulting attitude of the film, only indirectly presented, is that the State has demonized the communists enough and should now move on with the changing times. Present circumstances are not what they used to be 60 years ago and the mentality of the overall society should also change with the times.

The Last Communist has a running time of ninety minutes and can be divided into two parts. The first hour of the film focuses on contemporary Malaysia and the ways in which Chin Peng's life is still reflected in it, or not. At the end of this first hour, the film shifts to Southern Thailand, and presents interviews with former CPM members now living in exile there. Those interviewed are all Chinese. In Thailand they form a community that has the official backing of the Thai government. They live in a village, known as 'Peace Village', that was established in 1989, at the time of the Peace Settlement between the Malaysian Government and the CPM. The official title of their village is the 10th Village of the Princess Chulabhorn, and the village has been established under the patronage of the youngest daughter of the current

King of Thailand. The lives of these former communist members, and their families, are far removed from the dilemmas and conflicts of World War II, the freedom struggle and the Emergency. In their interviews it becomes clear why they made the decisions they did – they were ideologically motivated to win independence for Malaya. There is also some discussion of the morality of some of the actions taken by the CPM, and they admit that some mistakes were made. The picture presented in this part of the film, of the lives they are leading now, is in sharp contrast to the past they conjure up in the stories they tell of the Emergency period. This works to reinforce the impression of the first hour of the film, that times have significantly changed and that no one is living in a situation of crisis now.

Song Sequences: Bollywood with a Brechtian Influence

The breezy slightly provocative style of the film is further developed through its musical interludes, specifically designed song sequences, broadly of the kind found in a Bollywood musical. Some of the songs appear substantially modelled on the Bollywood style. Others are more mellow and are modelled upon popular Malay romantic singing of the kind found in the P. Ramlee films, made in the 1950s and 1960s, in the 'Golden Age' of the Singapore Malay cinema. However the songs in Amir's film have a distinct edge to them, designed to make the audience feel slightly uncomfortable. Instead of the participants singing of love, or loss or sorrow, they sing of issues such as the economy, tin and rubber, war, illness (malaria), identity cards, and even communism, or the fear of communism. The songs are performed in a satirical manner, by singers who are at times Malay, Indian, Chinese and Eurasian, and who sometimes sing alone and sometimes in groups. There is even one song that sings romantically of Malaysia's role in the world economy as the foremost supplier of tin and rubber. This song is satirically presented, as a young Chinese woman stands on a bridge by a waterfall located near an old mine, and sings her thankfulness for the bounty of the country. The interruption of the flow of the documentary here, the sardonic tone of the address to the audience by the singer, and the unromantic nature of the song's topic all show the distinctive influence of Berthold Brecht. The Brechtianization of the songs produces a detached sardonic tone that mocks the values of both governments and the global media, obsessed

with the market economy, economic rationalism and neoliberal economics. The song on identity cards attacks the excessive surveillance of the Malaysian State, as it attempted not only to hound communists, but used the communist threat as a way of justifying its own power. Other songs are based on Bollywood style colourful costume and strong rhythms, as in the song on Communism and the Socialist Revolution, sung around a red-hooded Ku Klux Klan like figure symbolising communism. The effect of all this is not only the mockery of dominant Malaysian attitudes and ideologies, but to varying degrees destabilizes the attitudes and expectations of the viewer, as the songs work against normal conventions and expectations.

Filmic and Historical Absences

This loosely structured and partly improvised film has a number of absences or gaps in it. For example, a more comprehensive and systematically planned historical documentary would have shown how in the 1930s Chinese in Malaya followed closely the progress of the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945) and supported the resistance in China by sending money back to their homeland. Overseas Chinese (especially those in Southeast Asia) were mortally affected by the invasion of the motherland by Japan, and the numerous reports of atrocities there. Nor is there any mention in the film of the notorious Sook Ching massacres in the weeks following the fall of Singapore in February 1942, when possibly up to 25,000 Chinese, regarded as potentially subversive, were murdered by the Japanese.⁹ These absences are partly a consequence of the film's reluctance to engage too closely with all the historical facts, preferring to shift between past and present, and avoid presenting an over-systematic and perhaps closed and final view of history.

Some of the absences in the film are not oversights as to content, but are related to the stratagems and apparent aims of the film and the way it has been structured. These further structural absences are as follows. Firstly, although Amir titles the film *The Last Communist*, Chin Peng never appears in the film, even though he is still alive and living in Southern Thailand at the time the film was made. Chin Peng's absence throughout the film remains unclear, in that no explanation for this absence is provided at any point.¹⁰

The result is that while the first hour of the film is directly about Chin Peng, the last third of the film is not about Chin Peng, 'the last communist',

but about the many surviving communists living in exile. It is perhaps they who are the real subject of the film, in that it is their lives and situations that are most likely to engage the feelings of the viewers. Secondly, Amir does not interview any of the former Malay communists living in Thailand, even though they live in a similar Peace Village only ten kilometres away from their former Chinese comrades (the film suggests their living in separate villages was an amicable decision taken in order to avoid possible conflicts between two people with different traditions, and with different religions). Amir has subsequently rectified this omission by making *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung*, a more conventional documentary, about Malay members of the communist party. Thirdly, and most significantly, when the Malaysian government, with the help of the Thai government, arrived at a peace agreement with the CPM in 1989, substantial numbers of communists living in Thailand were permitted to return and take up their lives again in Malaysia. But those communists who returned to Malaysia are not interviewed in the film at any point, neither in the first hour, when Amir is touring Malaysia, revisiting the towns where Chin Peng lived or worked or operated for the CPM, nor in the last third of the film at the time when the film is cutting between interviews with various ethnically Chinese communists living in Thailand.

Why are these omissions in the film? Answers one might give are as follows. Firstly, Chin Peng is used to provide a high profile central focus for the film that could not have been provided by the lesser surviving communists. As well, if the film had visited the towns of other communists it would have been over complicated and over long. But the tactic of touring contemporary Malaysia and juxtaposing the recent history of a changed Malaysia with the outline of the history of Chin Peng in a mid twentieth century Malaya is fundamental to the project of the film. By doing this the film is able to challenge the hegemony of the tightly narrated and comprehensive historical documentary and to pose a view of history as constant change. Amir clearly wanted to avoid as well the idea that the film should make tight or absolute judgements about those whose active lives were lived in very different historical times. One may still speculate as to why no returned communists are interviewed. This may have focused the film too much on the history rather than the present. As well, those who returned were not entirely free but were subject to certain requirements of reporting. This in itself could be the subject of another film, opening numerous thorny issues not in the first two parts of this potentially open ended project.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while *The Last Communist* attempts to recount the historical journey of Chin Peng as a single communist, the film concludes with an account of the lives of the numerous surviving communists. Amir's seeking out and reporting on these nearly forgotten people provides a perspective that compassionately resituates these exiles as people who in their own way made a contribution to Malaysian society. One of their spokespeople acknowledges that they had made some mistakes in the time of struggle, but insists they have no regrets for fighting the Japanese and the British, as they believed that they were fighting for an independent Malaya. In addition to Amir's documenting the lives of these communists, his use of inter-titles, and of song sequences strategically entwined in the film, presents a more relaxed perspective about communism, a perspective that he hopes will be more fully shared by contemporary Malaysian society. The interviews filmed in Southern Thailand are complemented by some of the interviews conducted with young people in Malaysia that reveal unexpected folklore and popular memory of the courage of individual communists in the 1940s. This results in Amir succeeding in presenting a more diverse view of the communists as a method of countering the Malaysian State's more dominant view, by allowing the viewer the opportunity to consider the circumstances of history during the war, in contrast to contemporary Malaysia, that has not experienced such hardship for more than 60 years. The film's concluding stand is that these surviving communists be considered non-threatening due to their present age, disabilities, disadvantages and the influence of changing circumstances. Unfortunately, effectively altering a State established portrait of violence is a much more challenging task than making the film.

Notes

- ¹ This paper was presented to the 17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Melbourne 1-3 July 2008. It has been peer reviewed via a double blind referee process and appears on the Conference Proceedings Website by the permission of the author who retains copyright. This paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

- ² *The Last Communist* was premiered at the 2006 Berlin International Film Festival, and was also screened at the Seattle International Film Festival and the London Film Festival.
- ³ Chin Peng (2003), *My side of history*. Singapore: Media Masters.
- ⁴ Andaya and Andaya suggest that the CPM was briefly in a position to seize power in the interim between the Japanese surrender and the return of the British in September 1945. After the British declined to grant Malaya its independence, the CPM declared war (through guerilla tactics) on the British. In Andaya, B.W. and L.Y. Andaya (1982), 'The functioning of a colonial society, 1919-57', *A history of Malaysia*. London: Macmillan, p. 257-261.
- ⁵ 'A spate of murders and attacks on European estate managers in June 1948 alerted the authorities to a change of direction in MCP policy... [the] continuing murders of Europeans on the estates finally forced the government to proclaim a State of Emergency throughout Malaya on 18 June 1948'. In Andaya, B.W. and L.Y. Andaya (1982), 'The functioning of a colonial society, 1919-57', *A history of Malaysia*. London: Macmillan p. 258.
- ⁶ According to the film, Sallehuddin was offered RM500 per Malay communist and a special reward of RM2000 for the Chinese communist.
- ⁷ Lai Te's betrayal of the CPM as a triple agent nearly destroys the CPM movement as he runs off with the Party's funds. However, this betrayal forces Party leaders to put Chin Peng in charge even though he is young and untested in any leadership positions prior to this. See Stubbs, R. (1989). 'The path of revolution', *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare: the Malayan emergency, 1948-1960*. Singapore, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 58.
- ⁸ On 16 June 1948, three British planters in the Sungai Siput area of Perak were killed... On 18 June 1948, a State of Emergency was proclaimed for the whole of Malaya. In Stubbs (1989), *ibid*, p. 61.
- ⁹ 'The long and bitter Chinese struggle to oust the Japanese invaders from their homeland had been generously supported by funds from

overseas Chinese... To root out these enemies, the Japanese systematically rounded up all the Chinese male population of Singapore in the first week of the Occupation and massacred thousands, estimated between 5,000 and 25,000'. In Andaya, B.W. and L.Y. Andaya (1982), 'The functioning of a colonial society, 1919-57', *A history of Malaysia*. London: Macmillan, p. 250. This systematic killing of the Singaporean Chinese is also referred to as the Sook Ching massacre which in Chinese means 'a purge through cleansing'.

- ¹⁰ Although Amir tried to get in touch with Chin Peng for the film, no form of communication or response could be established with Chin Peng by the completion of the shoot. (Statement by Amir Muhammad at a forum on the film at the Southeast Asian Cinema Studies Conference, Kuala Lumpur, December 2006).

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