FILM IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTHEAST ASIA

Cultural interpretation and social intervention

Edited by David C. L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto

Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia

This book discusses contemporary film in all the main countries of Southeast Asia and the social practices and ideologies that films either represent or oppose. It shows how film acquires signification through cultural interpretation and how film also serves as a site of contestations between social and political agents seeking to promote, challenge or erase certain meanings, messages or ideas from public circulation. A unique feature of the book is that it focuses as much on films as it does on the societies from which these films emerge: it considers the reasons for film-makers taking the positions they take; the positions and counter-positions taken; the response of different communities; and the extent to which these interventions are connected to global flows of culture and capital.

The wide range of subjects covered includes documentaries as political interventions in Singapore; political film collectives in the Philippines; films about prostitution in Cambodia; patriotism in Malaysia; and the Chinese in Indonesia. The book analyses films from Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, across a broad range of productions – such as mainstream and independent features – across genres (for example comedy, patriotic, political and historical), alongside documentary, classic and diasporic films.

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Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia

Cultural interpretation and social
intervention

**Edited by
David C. L. Lim and
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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
1 Introduction: Southeast Asian film as a site of cultural interpretation and social intervention	1
DAVID C. L. LIM	
2 From contested histories to ethnic tourism: cinematic representations of Shans and Shanland on the Burmese silver screen	23
JANE M. FERGUSON	
3 Toward a Laotian independent cinema?	41
PANIVONG NORINDR	
4 Screening the crisis of monetary masculinity in Rithy Panh's <i>One Night After the War</i> and <i>Burnt Theatre</i>	53
BORETH LY	
5 When memories collide: revisiting war in Vietnam and the diaspora	73
VÕ HỒNG CHƯƠNG-ĐÀI	
6 Malay(sian) patriotic films as racial crisis and intervention	93
DAVID C. L. LIM	
7 'Our People': telemovies, <i>bangsa</i> and nationalism 3.0 in Sabah, Malaysia	112
HIROYUKI YAMAMOTO	
8 The hero in passage: the Chinese and the activist youth in Riri Riza's <i>Gie</i>	130
ABIDIN KUSNO	

viii *Contents*

9	Alternative vision in neoliberal Singapore: memories, places, and voices in the films of Tan Pin Pin	147
	KENNETH PAUL TAN	
10	Documentary filmmaking, civil activism, and the new media in Singapore: the case of Martyn See as citizen journalist	168
	YASUKO HASSALL KOBAYASHI	
11	Cinema and state in crisis: political film collectives and people's struggle in the Philippines	186
	ROLANDO B. TOLENTINO	
12	Nostalgic parodies and migrant ironies in two Thai comedy films	203
	PATTANA KITIARSA	
	<i>Index</i>	219

Figures

2.1	Film poster of <i>Guests in Shanland</i>	33
4.1	Savannah and Srei Poeuv dance the <i>Ramvong</i>	58
4.2	Savannah takes his Hanuman mask off and rapes Srei Poeuv	59
4.3	Srei Poeuv rides a motorcycle taxi to work	69

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1 Introduction

Southeast Asian film as a site of cultural interpretation and social intervention

David C. L. Lim

In the past decade, having long been under the shadow of the more established East Asian cinemas, film in Southeast Asia has emerged as an exciting new field of enquiry for scholars across disciplines. There has been a profusion of new scholarly works of diffused foci produced in the same period, mostly dispersed across wide-ranging journals, volumes, the internet and other media sources. Although the new input has helped to shed some light on the field, David Hanan's observation in 2001 that little has been published in English about film in Southeast Asia remains as true in essence today as it was ten years ago. There remain large gaps in knowledge on film in the region. Since the publication of Hanan's now-classic but out-of-print edited volume, *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region* (2001), no other book on film in the region had been published, until this volume.¹

This book studies film but it does not narrow the enquiry to a film type or a particular genre such as fictional narrative, documentary or independent but engages instead with a broad range of productions. Aside from mainstream and independent features across genres (comedy, musical comedy, political, patriotic, national, historical, etc.), it examines also documentary, classic and diasporic films, as well as telemovies. Also, although book focuses on film, it does not take film as the sole or final target of enquiry, nor does it set out to provide a comprehensive country-by-country historical overview of film in the region in the way that Hanan's (2001) anthology has accomplished, as have other volumes with substantial focus on Southeast Asia, such as *Being and Becoming: The Cinemas of Asia* (Vasudev *et al.* 2002) and *Contemporary Asian Cinema: Popular Culture in a Global Frame* (Ciecko 2006). As final qualification, this book does not seek to problematize 'Southeast Asia' as a construct but employs the term on one level as denoting the geopolitical region whose internationally recognized coherence has largely been the outcome of Western imperatives during the cold war and ASEAN efforts initiated by political elites to guide the conduct of inter-state relations. On another level, 'Southeast Asia' is imagined herein also, following Ananda Rajah (1999: 51), as a system of 'interpenetrated systems' consisting of 'variable, synchronically

and diachronically disjunctured hierarchies of political, economic, social and cultural linkages over geographical space and time'. These systems are contingent, shaped by interactions of varying intensity and density, marked by subjective perceptions and produced and sustained by 'brokers', namely 'individuals and institutions, able to transcend diversity or difference, whether it is linguistic, cultural, political or economic' (1999: 51).

Having thus cleared the ground, it can now be stated that this volume of essays is interested primarily in film *and* society in contemporary Southeast Asia. Specifically it interrogates film from the region as a site of cultural interpretation and social intervention. Film, with its technological ability to represent social reality in vision, sound and narrative, is framed as a site of cultural interpretation insofar as its meaning is neither singular nor endogenously generated without human mediation but the result of meaning-making by its makers and viewers/interpreters. The surplus of meaning that any film text can symbolically engender is cultural in the sense all meanings are discursively mediated by individuals who construct them out of shared interpretative reservoirs on which they draw in order to create their own interpretive patterns and to communicate and share meanings with others (Cahoone 1988: 247). Film meaning is thus like culture in that both are 'pluralistic, contingent creation[s] of historical human acts of interpretation and construction' (Cahoone 1988: 248).

If film is a site for the inscription of cultural meanings, then it is also a site of contestations between social and political agents seeking to promote, challenge or erase certain meanings, messages or ideas from public circulation. Agents may seek to intervene in a number of ways, for instance, by being directly involved in the production of films that communicate certain desired meanings; by lobbying for particular kinds of films to be made and disseminated; through funding and censorship policies that privilege films carrying approved messages while discouraging or prohibiting others; or through acts of interpretation, which are in themselves interventionist in the critical communicative-performative sense of having a 'reflective, transforming effect on what is being criticized' (Dubiel 1992: 13).

The documentaries produced by the political film collectives in the Philippines examined in this volume serve as an instance of how the film form is strategically employed by the underclass as a medium of social intervention aimed at generating new levels of community consciousness and initiating sociopolitical change in a country where crisis has become second nature in everyday life. Another example of films made to affect change in society is a subgenre of Burmese classics known as 'inter-ethnic harmony' films. These are state-aligned productions, which were ostensibly made to promote harmony between the dominant Burmans and the ethnic minorities in Burma/Myanmar but which effectively helped to other the latter until today. Yet another example is found in the state-backed Malay(sian) 'patriotic' films examined in this book, which aim to rouse exclusive Malay racial patriotism in multi-ethnic Malaysia. Even popular but unassumingly 'lowbrow' comedy films, an

evergreen favourite genre in Thailand that urbane cosmopolitan viewers might look down upon as ‘mindless’ mass culture that engenders passivity, can in fact intervene socially through the laughter they generate from viewers, for instance, by critiquing the pretensions of high society or by giving voice and reaffirming the identities of the marginalized. These are but a handful of examples of filmic interventions case-studied in each chapter in this volume.

That film meaning derives from cultural interpretation and is routinely deployed for the purposes of intervention in Southeast Asia and elsewhere is unsurprising, given that soon after the Lumière brothers’ first public demonstration of their invention of cinematography in 1895, the moving image was already recognized as a powerful new medium that could attract and reach vast, even illiterate, populations. On the potential of the cinema, Russian writer Leonid Andreyev observed in 1911 that, although it had ‘no language’ (as it had yet to acquire soundtrack), it was ‘equally intelligible to the savages of St Petersburg and the savages of Calcutta’ (cited in Taylor and Christie 1988: 30). Like many of his peers across Europe and beyond where cinematography quickly spread, Andreyev found it so ‘miraculous’ an invention that its potential was self-evident: ‘It copes with everything, conquers everything, conveys everything’ (cited in Taylor and Christie 1988: 31). Just as the power of film was recognized early on in its existence, so too was film recognized from the outset as a potential threat to traditional moral standards and to those in power, thus requiring censorship in the name of morality or the national good.

The contention that viewers do not passively internalize the ideological mandate carried by a particular film has, of course, done little in practice to dissuade filmmakers from continuing to encode certain ideologies into their films with the hope that viewers will consume them in a way that ensures the mandates are decoded and internalized as intended. It has not persuaded governments to abolish film vetting and censorship, policies for which remain (unevenly) strict in contemporary Southeast Asian countries, if not autocratic in some. Nor did it discourage governments from systematically mobilizing film as a medium of propaganda during the First and Second World Wars. Then, and now, ‘In a world of mass politics, politicians of every political colour [recognize] the need to manage and manipulate the attitudes and aspirations, the hopes and the fear, the beliefs and the ideologies of the masses they sought to govern’ (Reeves 2004: 4–5). In this context, film invariably serves as the main choice for its multisensory powers, alongside other communicative media such as visual art, music and literature.

Film was introduced to Southeast Asian countries at different paces in early twentieth century, mainly through colonial contact. From Manila and Rangoon to Singapore and Jakarta, wherever film was screened in the early days, it received overwhelming and enthusiastic reception. In the years that followed, domestic film production grew across the region but subsequent local social, economic and political realignments precipitated by such global events as the Second World War and the cold war soon impacted upon the number and type

of films produced and consumed domestically, the degree to which the state exerted control over the industry, and the societies out of which these films emerged. Over the decades right up to the 2000s, each Southeast Asian country, although exposed to global influences in varying degrees, had developed its own trajectories and patterns of film consumption and production. There were certain overlaps but each ultimately had its unique cycles of highs and lows, as governments changed or became more entrenched in power, technologies advanced and the region opened up and became more integrated with the global capitalist system, facilitating flows and mobilities of people, objects, images, data and cultures across and beyond Southeast Asia.

Despite the divergence, there is a deepening sense of shared understanding between stakeholders across the region today that film has evolved far beyond entertainment that attracts viewers across such divides as gender, ethnicity, class and nationality. Bearing multiple functions, it has come to serve as a way of reconciling with the past or preserving tradition from the tide of modernity; a vehicle for the projection of national identity and the assertion of national pride; a medium through which socio-historical memory is constructed and contested; an instrument of propaganda and resistance; a mode through which neoliberal capitalism extends itself; and other functions, which the essays in this volume collectively examine.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I briefly review some trends in film consumption and production in Southeast Asia in the first decade of the twenty-first century as a way of putting in a larger context the kinds of cultural interpretation and social intervention examined in each chapter.

Contextualizing film in contemporary Southeast Asia: the decade in review

More than a hundred years after it was first invented, film today, while remaining rooted in its local context of production, ‘no longer has its own place’ since ‘it is [now] everywhere, or at least everywhere that we are dealing with aesthetics and communication’ (Casetti 1999: 316). Film is still consumed in the cinema but it is no longer confined as celluloid to the site, liberated for some time now by the videotape that plays in domestic players, and subsequently by digital technologies, such as personal computers and free/illegal file sharing across global networks, that escape effective institutional control. If not already digitized, film can easily be rendered into the format, circulated and consumed anywhere through portable digital gadgets, making it ‘at once an object, an affectual experience, an idea/memory, a system of code, and transferrable data’ (Harbord 2007: 7). Indeed, as Janet Harbord (2007: 1) underscores, ‘technological convergence has disarmingly blurred the distinction between modes of dissemination and cultural forms’. The computer, for instance, although commonly associated with specific practices of production, has also become a transmitter of cultural forms such as film. The dislocation of film, which results in its everywhere-ness today, has essentially changed

the nature of film. Liberated from the spatial site of the cinema and moviegoing as a social practice, film loses the appeal of immediacy but retains its powerful auratic qualities which distinguish its form (Harbord 2007: 37).

The ubiquity of film and its independence from cinema as site and practice are evident everywhere in contemporary Southeast Asia, where consumption of film is generally on the rise and film is assuming greater importance as a form through which identities, relationship and futures are imagined and contested. Film consumed is not always in the digital format, especially in areas lacking broadband infrastructures, satellite television or digitally-equipped cinemas; the videotape, for instance, is still popular in Laos, where few if any movie theatres remain operational. Digital or otherwise, film has become a staple in the lives of a majority of Southeast Asian peoples. Even in a closed authoritarian country like Burma/Myanmar, and in landlocked Laos, pirated movies are routinely sold in the open by street vendors. Varying in degree, the situation is essentially the same across most parts of the region, where illegal motion picture and television piracy thrives, with the exception of Singapore, which has a piracy rate of 15 percent, making it one of the lowest in Southeast Asia by the 2002 estimate of the Motion Picture Association (MPA) (Chai 2003). Vietnam tops the MPA list at 100 percent. Indonesia and Malaysia rank at 90 and 75 percent respectively, while Thailand's rate is 70 percent. These figures cover only MPA member companies' films (mostly Hollywood type) pirated as hard goods (optical discs, for example) and online media in a variety of formats downloaded using peer-to-peer (P2P) and other web technologies. Excluded from the count are overwhelming numbers of non-MPA copyrighted releases covering the entire spectrum, from art film to pornography. These include virtually everything else circulating under the counter, ranging from local productions and popular films from Hollywood, Bollywood, Korea, Hong Kong and China, to niche titles from European and other cinemas.

While film is available everywhere in contemporary Southeast Asia, local film production in the region has been uneven, with significant disparities in output evident between countries. Filmmaking in **Burma/Myanmar**, for instance, has not seen the 'golden age' it had in the 1950s and early 1960s. The number of films produced in Burma/Myanmar today is low compared to other Southeast Asian countries with much larger entertainment industries, and has been since the film industry was nationalized by the state. Furthermore, as critics have noted, local productions continue to suffer from 'outdated technology, government censorship, hackneyed screenwriting and mediocre acting' (Min Zin 2004; see also Aung Zaw 2004; Clark 2006; Yeni 2006). Nevertheless, local film output in Burma/Myanmar has been on the rise with the advent of digital technologies in the 1990s. Low-budget dramas and comedies sold in the VCD format proliferate in Burma/Myanmar today; hundreds if not thousands of local titles are available for sale or rent, even in the villages.

Increasingly, too, films considered a threat to Burma's military regime are coming to light. Recently banned films are as varied as recorded dharma

lectures by respected senior Buddhist monks which have been ‘interpreted as criticism of the government and its policies’ (Min Lwin 2009; see also Wai Moe 2007), and the hot-selling live recording of a variety show featuring well-known comedians like Godzilla, King Kong and Kyaw Htoo daringly poking fun at the military junta (see Shah Paung 2007; Kyaw Zwa Moe 2008). Also, despite an internet penetration rate of less than 1 percent of the population, more film footages of real life in Burma/Myanmar are escaping the junta’s repressive control of information, leaking out to the world clip-by-clip through slow internet uploading using proxy servers, or smuggled out across the border. At great risk to their lives, citizen journalists are now using the cameras on their mobile phones or concealed video cameras to capture short footages of life under the totalitarian regime (Holmes 2007). The award-winning documentary, *Burma VJ* (2008), is a popular prime example of intervention against the odds. Shot clandestinely by a group of video journalists with concealed video cameras, captured scenes of the violence inflicted upon the mass anti-government protestors in 2007 were put together in Oslo and subsequently broadcasted by satellite back to Burma.

The military casts a long shadow over Burma today and has been since 1962, when General Ne Win staged the first military coup. With the military continuing to dominate international media focus on Burma, one might be led into thinking of Burma’s problem as a simple binary of the people against the state, overlooking how the undifferentiated ‘people’ in fact consists of eight national races and 135 ethnic groups, and how major tensions exists between the ruling majority of Burmans and the minorities comprising the Shan, Karen, Kachin and others. Significantly, as Rachel M. Safman (2007: 51) underscores, the proportion of ‘minority’ members of the population in Burma is larger than that the population of any country in the region other than Laos. The Shan, for example, continue to fight for autonomy and self-determination from the military junta.

In Chapter 2, Jane M. Ferguson examines, through the case of the Shan, how ethnic minorities in Burma began to take on the status of the ‘internal other’ in the 1960s amidst militaristic Burman ethnic chauvinism. The moment of othering coincided with General Ne Win’s military coup in 1962, and the subsequent stultification of the film industry, inducing it to produce films that portray the Burmese army as a liberating force, downplay the country’s ethnic plurality, or promote power-laden ideas that privilege the Burman majority. Reading Burmese films from the 1960s, such as *Guests in Shanland* (1963) and *Shwezayan* (1963), Ferguson analyzes how ethnic minorities such as the Shan began to be constructed on film as the ‘exotic’ other in relation to the Burman majority as part of the government’s ‘incomplete attempt to secure national solidarity’. Significantly, she argues, these formative cinematic othering of the minorities through codes and genres continue to frame the contemporary Burmese view of the Shan as simpler and ‘cooler’ people compared to their counterparts, occluding the severe conditions under which people live in the Shan state today.

In comparison to Burma, **Laos** has been much less active in film production, which is unsurprising given that ‘Laos never had a film industry like that of other countries’ and ‘the production system has never been fully commercialized’ (Bounchao Pichit 2001: 85). Early Lao films produced between 1960 and 1975 were documentaries used for propaganda purposes. When the Laotian Civil War between the Communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao government ended in 1975, local filmmakers made revolutionary films that educated the masses about state socialist policies. Film production since then still remains dependent on scarce government subsidy. Despite minimal output, remedial steps are being taken by the Lao government, according to the online Laos Cultural Profile (‘created in partnership with the Ministry of Information and Culture of Laos with financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation’). ‘Since the establishment of the National Film Archive and Video Centre in 1991, documentary video production has resumed on a modest scale’, mostly for archival purposes, although some were for television and VCD release (‘Filmmaking in Laos’ 2005). Also, since 1997, three feature-length fiction videos have been made, all directed by Vithoune Sundara.

Where feature films are concerned, only twelve have been produced in the entire history of Laotian cinema; out of these only three remain in existence (Som Ock Southiponh 1999). The recent commercial hit release, *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* (*Good Morning Luang Prabang* 2008), a Thai-Lao co-production, has undoubtedly generated new excitement about an emerging ‘Laotian’ cinema; the popular media dubbed it ‘the first commercial movie shot on location since Laos adopted communism in 1975 (‘First Laos film’ 2008). The question that Panivong Norindr asks in Chapter 3, though, is: given that Laotian cinema barely exists, how will derivative films like *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* – as well as Thai television, which appeals to large segments of the Lao people – shape Laotian film culture and cultural identity? Can an indigenous Laotian cinema that does not give in to popular tastes and state directives emerge in our time? Norindr explores these questions in relation to Som Ock Southiponh, the ‘only professional, independent Laotian film director’ left in Laos who, due to lack of funding and commercial interest in his artistic vision, has not been able to produce another feature film since his black-and-white *Boa Deng* (*Red Lotus* 1987). Reading *Boa Deng* against the grain, Norindr traces Southiponh’s cinematic vision which seeks to capture the essence of Laotian arts at risk of being displaced by popular tastes and cultures of Laos’ dominant neighbours such as Thailand.

Similar to Laos, **Cambodia** is struggling to build a film industry at a time when ‘there is no Cambodian film industry to speak of’ (Rithy Panh, cited in Nette 2008). Unlike Laos, however, Cambodia had a vibrant filmmaking scene in the 1960s, a ‘golden age’ when more than 300 Cambodian films were made and cinemas screening Western, Indian, Khmer and Hong Kong films, drawing huge crowds, were aplenty. Phnom Penh alone had more than thirty cinemas at the time. The Khmer Rouge, which seized power in 1975, virtually decimated the film industry. Actors and directors were killed, film prints were

stolen or destroyed and filmmaking equipment was smashed. After the Pol Pot regime was overthrown by Vietnamese troops in 1979, local film production resumed and cinemas were reopened. Starving for filmic entertainment, 'many people flocked to the cinema' irrespective of what films were being screened (Nette 2008). Although more than 200 films were produced in the 1980s, most production houses began to collapse in the early 1990s due to rising production costs, the poor quality of films they produced, and competition from video and television ('Cambodian Filmmaking' 2008). By the end of the 1990s, domestic film production began to recover and re-emerge, cinemas reopened and film production houses increased in numbers.

Today, however, the kinds of film that are being produced have mostly fallen short in quality. They continue to 'suffer from poor production values, poor acting and clichéd stories' ('Overview' 2008). Poorly made low-budget horror flicks and slapstick comedies predominate in a creative economy that is unsustainable due to the lack of funding and equipment, trained technical, creative and acting crew, and copyright enforcement to protect intellectual property. Adding to the decline of Cambodian cinema is the shrinking number of cinemas to screen local features. Only two cinemas remain in operation in Phnom Penh today; due to rising real estate prices, the rest of the cinemas have been turned into more profitable hotels and clubs (Rosenberg 2009). Despite the dismal state of contemporary Cambodian cinema, and despite the belief held by some Cambodians that 'Cinema might be finished in Cambodia. We have forgotten the grammar of film. We know nothing anymore' (Porée 2008), several torchbearers have appeared on the horizon. Film production companies such as Khmer Mekong Films (KMF), which evolved from a Khmer production team assembled and trained by the BBC, have recently released feature films that raise the quality bar for local productions. Of course, there is also Rithy Panh, the only Cambodian transnational filmmaker recognized by both contemporary Cambodians (intellectuals and, to an extent, the popular audience) and the global community. Panh, who escaped the Khmer Rouge genocide at the age of fifteen while his family perished, is known for his interventionist films, which seek to aid in the healing of Cambodia's 'massive collective wound' (Panh 1999). For Panh, 'the terrible thing about [. . .] the Cambodian genocide is not only the millions of dead, the widows, the orphans, the amputees and the depressed, it's also our shattered identity, the ruins of our social cohesion.' All his films address this double trauma.

In Chapter 4, Boreth Ly analyzes two of Panh's films, *One Night After the War* (1998), which, as the title suggests, begins the night after the war ended, and *Burnt Theatre* (2005), a meditation on Cambodia's cultural loss and recuperation. Ly demonstrates how, on top of the traumatic legacy of genocide, post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia in the era of transnational capitalism also has to contend with the destabilization of gender roles and the rise of what he terms 'monetary masculinity'. Traditional masculinity in Cambodia is culturally dictated by agrarian work, creating an image of masculinity defined by the hard body and virility, and by military power. Traditional notions of

masculinity, however, are being undermined by transnational flows of capital into Cambodia, effectively emasculating a vast majority of Cambodian men, particularly poverty-stricken villagers such as those represented in Panh's films, without access to the new hegemonic 'monetary masculinity', the marker of which is wealth owned mostly by a class of businessmen and enterprising military leaders. The emasculation of Cambodian men deeply impacts upon Cambodian women too, who ultimately pay a heavier price, as Ly explicates through his reading of Panh's films.

In comparison to Burma, Laos and Cambodia, **Vietnam** has had a relatively more robust film production scene in the 2000s, although only about ten local feature films were made annually for cinemas by state-owned film production companies receiving state subsidies. Vietnam's local film industry still faces significant hurdles due not only to the lack of proper equipment and expertise but also to low audience demand and appreciation of locally produced films. A recent local survey showed that 'Only 13 percent of Vietnamese moviegoers enjoy Vietnamese films' ('Survey' 2009). Notwithstanding, since the inception of *Doi moi* (Renovation) in the late 1980s and assisted by the government decree in 2003, which allows private enterprises to produce and distribute films in Vietnam, mainstream Vietnamese cinema has evolved to become more market-driven, producing more commercial films that depart radically from the revolutionary type of the old days. The state still regulates the industry through the Cinema Department of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. But as scholars such as Võ Hồng Chương-Đài (2008) and Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương (2008) have noted, the state is no longer able to keep tight control of the film industry and cultural production in general as both expand in response to neoliberal market forces.

Even state-owned production houses have changed tactics to produce films that are far from the overtly revolutionary kind that they used to produce but which drew scant interest from Vietnamese viewers whose tastes have become more globalized. A result of this has been the release of 'propatainment' films which are popularly appealing especially to the young generation and simultaneously able to propagandize the state's line to the public, of which *Gai Nhảy* (*Bar Girls* 2003) and its sequel, *Lo Lem He Pho* (*Street Cinderella* 2004), are examples. Set in the nightclubs and slums of Ho Chi Minh City, revolving around the lives of female sex workers, and featuring drugs, skin and the 'first government-approved topless shot' (Mangat 2003), the former film took Vietnam by storm to become the country's highest-grossing film to date. The combination of skin, sin and propaganda is clearly strategic; as director and co-writer Le Hoang has been quoted as saying, 'Nowadays, if your film is not appealing enough, your propaganda efforts will fail' (Mangat 2003).

The state's turning over of film production to the market economy, and decree that private companies be allowed to produce films, have yielded a series of privately funded films that were mostly co-produced with foreign companies. An example of this is *Saigon Eclipse* (2007), a co-production by Film

Studio 1 and Canadian producer John Board, starring Vietnamese-American actor, Dustin Nguyen. Othello Khanh, the Vietnamese-French director, was quoted to have said that, with *Saigon Eclipse*, he sought to ‘present a different Viet Nam, a Viet Nam not of war, but full of love and vitality’ (Mack 2007). Local film critics, however, differed in their opinion of the film, considering it instead as disparaging of Vietnamese women and Vietnam in general. That the film portrays Vietnamese girls ‘voluntarily lining up to sell themselves, and prostitutes shamelessly pestering foreign men with emails asking for money’ (‘Local Film Critics’ 2007) is but one instance, which, from the standpoint of local critics, demonstrates how a *Việt Kiều* (overseas or diasporic Vietnamese) like Khanh lacks ‘a deep understanding of Vietnamese culture and the interpersonal relationships in the life of the Vietnamese’ (‘Local Film Critics’ 2007).

In Chapter 5, Võ Hồng Chương-Đài delves into the problematic of the ‘overseas’ versus the ‘local’, underscoring that the simple binary in fact belies complex, overlapping and contradictory historical and community ties between the two. Võ Hồng explains that contemporary Vietnam has become increasingly transnational with thousands of diasporic Vietnamese moving in and out of Vietnam for work and familial purposes, and thousands of Vietnamese leaving the country for education and employment. The same cross movement of capital, labour and culture has also transformed Vietnamese filmmaking, so much so that it is no longer practicable to conceive of Vietnamese filmmaking in purely local or national terms. Framing Vietnamese film as a ‘transnational, multi-genre and multi-style cultural realm’, Võ Hồng examines the ways in which diasporic subjects insert themselves into the Vietnamese nation, anchoring her discussion on two documentaries, Duki Dror’s *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* (2005) and Đoàn Hoàng’s *Oh, Saigon* (2007). Her discussion of these transnational filmic texts demonstrate that the bitter memories of the Vietnam War, which the likes of Khanh sought to eject into the past, are far from salved and that film has the interventionist power to disrupt the state’s construction of a national history that elides the ghosts that continue to haunt post-war Vietnamese society and its diasporic communities.

Cinemas in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand have in the past decade experienced their own versions of revival after a history of highs and lows. In **Malaysia**, the number of mainstream Malay feature films produced has been increasing almost year-on-year (as has the number of Malay TV dramas). Twenty-nine Malay feature films were released theatrically in 2009, the highest figure in the past decade, compared to eleven in 2001, and seven in 2000. The industry has evidently recovered after the slump in output following the Asian economic downturn in the late 1990s. However, lowbrow flicks catering to non-urban audiences continue to make up an overwhelming majority of films released in the past decade or at any point after the ‘golden age’ of Malay cinema during the immediate post-war period. Of all the mainstream Malay films released in the past ten years or so, *Puteri Gunung*

Ledang (Princess of Mount Ledang 2004) is arguably the only mainstream Malay film that stands out from a crowd of standard slapstick comedy, romance, horror and street-biker films, all on account of its ambitions and heavy state-backed promotion. This is not counting Yasmin Ahmad's much-loved 'independent' films, including the path-breaking and popular *Sepet* (2004), which, as 'Malay' films, attract a disproportionate number of non-Malay viewers on account of their compelling storytelling and compassionate spirit. Nor does the tally include 'Malay' films by directors working outside the system, such as Hishammuddin Rais' *Dari Jemapoh to Manchester* (From Jemapoh to Manchester 1998) and U-Wei Haji Sarji's *Buai Laju-Laju* (Swing My Swing High, My Darling 2004).

Aside from detracting quality issues, the increasing number of mainstream Malay films released annually in the 2000s, while celebrated by the industry that produced them, also tends to be overshadowed by the successes of a new wave of young independent filmmakers who, in the past decade, have been winning international recognition and awards coveted by mainstream Malay filmmakers. The rise of 'indie' filmmakers in the late 1990s through the 2000s in Malaysia occurs also in Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, where film has been liberated not only from the cinema but also from the studio system that used to have production monopoly. The digital camera and laptop editing software have enabled scores of aspiring filmmakers to produce films at almost no budget and to promote or disseminate them for free on new media sites like YouTube. Young Malaysians whose indie films have won international acclaim include Woo Ming Jin, Tan Chui Mui and Ho Yuhang. The excitement generated by the new breed of young indie filmmakers in Malaysia, while justified, belies, in fact, the reality that the indie scene occupies only a marginal place in popular imagination, at least in comparison with mainstream Malay film releases which are supported by visual promotions and which, despite their flaws and monoracial outlook, attract far more viewers and followers.

In Chapter 6, I analyze the persistence and sociopolitical utilities of Malay cinema through a set of Malay 'patriotic' films, demonstrating at the same time how both Malay cinema and its 'patriotic' films constitute part of the state machinery that iterates the racial ideology of Malay dominance dividing multi-ethnic Malaysia. I show also how, even as they seek to entertain, these films construct and cast the Malay race in crisis mode, disseminate historical truth-claims about the Malays and Malaysia's founding, and intervene in society by attempting to rouse the target Malay audience to identify with the exclusive racial messages they contain. Although the films are successful to an extent in fulfilling their racial-ideological function, they have failed not only at the box office but also in totalizing the sociopolitical field in such a way as to render unthinkable other more egalitarian ways of organizing human relations. In the chapter, I demonstrate the foregoing in a discussion that considers how the failure of Malay patriotic films to attract Malay viewers in

large numbers is paralleled by the declining fortunes of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant Malay political party in Malaysia which champions the racial ideology of Malay supremacy.

In Chapter 7, Hiroyuki Yamamoto examines film and society in the *other* Malaysia, namely the state of Sabah in East Malaysia – a ‘country’ within a country – where, in radical departure from West Malaysian norms, local low-budget telemovies promote openness to racial, religious and national difference. Sabah’s telemovie phenomenon, which began with *Orang Kita* (Our People), first released in 2002, has since spawned about 40 to 50 titles in VCD format catering to the multi-ethnic populace of Sabah. Through *Orang Kita* and *PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin* (PTI: Love Without Permission; 2005), Yamamoto traces the ways in which the telemovies, despite their low production value and seemingly simple narratives, articulate an inclusive third-generation conception of ‘our people’, or what he terms as Sabahan ‘nationalism 3.0’. He overviews the historical evolution of the first two waves of nationalism in Sabah before explaining how nationalism 3.0, although not yet an organized political movement, is an emergent ideal and a sentiment that is fast gaining popularity in Sabah, where the concept of ‘race’ (*bangsa*), although hegemonic in West Malaysia, has never developed into a zero-sum framework of relating to the ‘other’. Nationalism 3.0, Yamamoto demonstrates, is steadfastly inclusive, even at a time when the political map of Sabah is being altered by mass illegal immigration into the state from neighbouring countries. This, he argues, derives ultimately from the values inherited by indigenous communities from their forefathers, as from practical considerations.

From Malaysia, we turn to **Indonesia**, where cinema, which declined in the 1990s, had radically turned around in the 2000s, improving in ways that far surpasses Malaysia’s modest gains. Not only has output increased from sixteen feature films between 1999 and 2001 to nearly a hundred annually in recent years, the market share of Indonesian films now stands at 55 percent, exceeding even Hollywood films, which have historically dominated the box office (Barker and Kusuma 2009). There has been a fair share of populist releases, including horror and racy films that incensed religious groups with such titles as *Namaku Dick* (*My Name is Dick* 2008) and *Anda Puas Saya Loyo* (*You’re Satisfied, I’m Exhausted* 2008). But there have also been many critically-acclaimed releases, such as *Petualangan Sherina* (Sherina’s Adventure 2000), *Laskar Pelangi* (*Rainbow Warriors* 2008) and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (*The Love Verses* 2008). Much of Indonesian cinema’s success in the post-Suharto era has been credited to a new generation of independents consisting of young Indonesians such as Mira Lesmana and Riri Riza. Mira is a producer while the latter is a director, whose award-winning film, *Gie* (2005), reconstructs a national hero out of the film’s namesake, an ethnic Chinese, who, during Suharto’s rule in the 1960s, would never have been one on account of his ethnicity. In contrast to Malaysia, where the overwhelming majority of independent filmmakers operate from the margins, Indonesian filmmakers like Riri Riza have successfully moved to the centre to become ‘the closest thing

the [recently revived Indonesian film] industry has to an Establishment' (Sharpe 2002).

Abidin Kusno, in Chapter 8, interrogates *Gie*'s on-screen representations of the 'Chinese', a figure whose rare presence in Indonesian cinema in both the New Order and post-New Order periods belies 'the role of the ethnic Chinese in the foundation of Indonesian cinema, not just as producers, financiers and distributors but also as the creative fount of cinema as directors and camera-men' (Sen 2006). Historically, under the Suharto regime, the law publicly effaced all signs of 'Chineseness' and all ethnic Chinese-Indonesians were expected to assimilate into the indigenous community. It was only with the removal of restrictions on Chinese language and culture in the post-Suharto era (1998 onwards) that debates on Chinese-Indonesian identity began to re-emerge in cultural productions such as literature and film. Riri Riza's *Gie* is, in a way, an example of the re-emergence of the 'Chinese', although there is, as Kusno argues, a twist to it. Based on the published diary of Soe Hock Gie, a student/youth activist and intellectual during the Suharto era who aligned himself with the people instead of with the powers-that-be, Gie, the lead character, is represented in the film as a new kind of Indonesian hero, one who is an alternative and an antithesis to the traditional heroic figure embodied by the military generals. The filmic recuperation of Gie as a politically conscious heroic figure that transcends political interests is, however, stripped of the hero's ethnicity, since, as Kusno notes, 'the idea of the Chinese as national heroes is not something Indonesia seems rightly ready for'. Kusno explains how this remains true despite the openness of Indonesian culture and politics in the post-Suharto era.

As mentioned previously, aside from Indonesia and Malaysia, **Singapore**, too, although a small island state, has had a relatively active film production scene in the 2000s, a boom which was essentially an extension of the revival in the 1990s (Uhde and Uhde 2010). Benefitting from Singapore's new creative economy policies which sought to reverse the lack of cultural and intellectual vibrancy caused by the state's intolerance of alternative voices, both periods saw significant increases in the number of feature films put out after a long drought from 1980 to 1995. *Bugis Street* (1995) and *Mee Pok Man* (1995) started the chain of releases which have become significant artefacts within Singapore's cultural landscape. Notable films released in the 2000s include accomplished 'art-house' titles like *Be With Me* (2005), *4:30* (2006), and *Solos* (2007), as well as mainstream features including *I Not Stupid* (2002), *Singapore Dreaming* (2006), and *881* (2007). While the former set of films is more likely to be appreciated by cosmopolitan Singaporeans, the latter set is more likely to attract and resonate with the 'heartlanders', namely Singaporeans at the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic order with local rather than international orientation and interests, including taxi drivers, stallholders, provision shop owners, production workers and contractors (Goh 1999). Themes that resonate with the heartlanders include the struggles of those who cannot cope with Singapore's unforgiving education system, the plight of the underclass in

highly competitive and status conscious Singapore, the suppression of Hokkien by the government, which privileges Mandarin over all Chinese dialects in its language policy, and so on.

The emergent Singaporean cinema has in the past ten to fifteen years established such filmmakers as Royston Tan and Eric Khoo, and produced artistically notable feature films which are furthermore remarkably entertaining in their own ways, although it has been argued that Singaporean films can be 'too localized, too colloquial, to be exportable or consumable further afield' (Khoo 2006). Worse, as Kenneth Tan argues, the more commercial ones may even 'serve usefully in a politics of distraction', where Singaporeans are encouraged to escape their problems through film consumption. They might simultaneously offer 'social commentaries which appeal for change, through its objective and reporter-like portrayal of social life, while highlighting the moral struggles that the people face' (Cher 2009). *I Not Stupid* is but one example. However, they are never overtly critical of state policies and actions, nor are they like to be made on a commercial basis or approved by the censors, let alone released for public consumption, given the government's draconian control and monitoring of all media in Singapore. Indeed, as Kenneth Paul Tan posits in Chapter 9, the state with its power of authoritarian capitalism can and have co-opted practitioners in the arts scene, including filmmaking.

In Chapter 9, Kenneth Tan delineates film and filmmaking as part of the Singapore government's strategy to develop the creative industries – not for their own sake but rather to instrumentally develop Singapore's capitalist economy. Tan examines how Singapore's embrace of neoliberal globalization, which also drives its arts policies, has led to national problems that negate Singapore's success story: 'more frequent and protracted economic crisis, rising unemployment, a widening income gap, greater social divisions, and the emergence of poverty and an underclass', and so on. Tan then relates the foregoing to the filmic interventions of Tan Pin Pin, an award-winning Singaporean documentary filmmaker who, although she benefitted from state support, maintains her artistic and political independence by working on very small budgets and by seeking funding from local foundations and think tanks. Tan Pin Pin first sprang into prominence in the early 2000s with *Moving House* (2002) and subsequently deepened her mark with credits like *80km/h* (2003), *Singapore GaGa* (2006) and *Invisible City* (2007). Her films are subtle and good-natured compared to the political documentaries by Martyn See, which Yasuko Hassall Kobayashi interrogates in another chapter, but they are, as Kenneth Tan demonstrates, no less thought provoking or critical of Singapore's nation-building efforts which are aligned with global capitalism, and of the violence they wreak on the physical environment, traditions and values, social memories and local identities, as well as on those who resist or oppose the state's effort.

In Chapter 10, Kobayashi examines the political documentaries of Martyn See, a Singaporean citizen journalist who seeks to challenge the dominant social meanings and codes constricting Singaporean society. See's films are,

unlike Tan Pin Pin's, overtly critical of the state of Singapore in their attempt to expand civil democratic space in the island-state. Kobayashi's essay illustrates what happens when a citizen and filmmaker, rather than being compliant or compromising, refuses to be co-opted and silenced by the state and persists in making what Singapore's Films Act defines as 'party political films', that is, films 'made by any person and directed towards any political end in Singapore' ('Party' 2005). See's first short documentary film, *Singapore Rebel* (2005) revolves around Chee Soon Juan, a former opposition leader of the Singapore Democratic Party, who, for challenging the dominant social perceptions and meanings promoted by the Singapore government, was ridiculed, sued and made bankrupt by the state. See not only had his film banned by the government, he was also put under police investigation and forced to endure the kind of harassment which other 'rebels' such as Chee and others before him had endured. Refusing to back down, See circumvents the state's media control by uploading *Singapore Rebel* to new media platforms including YouTube, thus giving the public free access to what the government wishes to downplay, and by blogging about the suppression of alternative voices in Singapore which goes unreported in the mainstream media. See has since gone on to produce more political documentaries, including *Zahari's 17 Years*, which highlight the dark side of neoliberal Singapore. Kobayashi demonstrates in the end that See is but one of several minoritized figures in Singaporean history whose social intervention holds the promise of giving birth to a liberated civil society in Singapore.

Unlike Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (as we shall see), whose mainstream cinemas underwent their respective revivals in the 2000s, mainstream **Philippine** cinema has been floundering in the past decade and continues to slide in film output and cinema admissions for a variety of reasons: Hollywood competition deemed to have run out of control, rampant piracy, the overproduction of formulaic local films, over-taxation of the industry that leads to the high price of movie tickets, a poor national economy, a shrinking number of movie screens, and censorship, being among the key reasons (see Conde 2007; Escandor 2010). In the 1980s, Philippine cinema used to produce more than 200 films; the figure has now dropped to about 30. What had helped to sustain the declining Philippine film industry in the first half of the 2000s, notes Rolando B. Tolentino in Chapter 11, were domestic soft-porn movies, until the largest cinema chain in the country banned the exhibition of R-18 films in 2004. Hardcore sex films, which continue to be produced locally through subcontracting by Korean producers and distributed in the underground market, earn an estimated US\$1 billion annually, making the Philippines the eighth most-profitable country for pornography (Barcelona 2009). The 2000s also saw the continued popularity of 'OFW' (Overseas Filipino Workers) or 'OCW' (Overseas Contract Worker) films, a subgenre that revolves around Filipino migrant workers in places like the United Arab Emirates, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. These include *Dubai* (2005), *Homecoming* (2005), *Sukob* (2006), *Ina . . . Anak*, *Pamilya* (2006), and *Emir* (2010).

At a time when the Philippines' mainstream film industry is at its nadir, the independent filmmaking scene is fast rising and has already gained international recognition as 'a cinematography filled with energy and audacity' ('Philippine Indie' 2009), as described by the organizers of the 2008 Paris Cinema International Film Festival, which honoured the new generation of Filipino directors. In the past year alone, Filipino indie filmmakers, including Pepe Diokno, Raymond Red and Brillante Mendoza, have collectively won no less than thirty-four international awards (Panaligan 2010). Indie filmmakers are in fact producing more films than mainstream studios. Their films are expected to perhaps eventually replace mainstream cinema, although at present the problem of limited audienceship persists. As Brillante Mendoza, winner of Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival, observed, 'indie films don't have commercial value because we don't have the famous stars, we don't have the formula story and we don't have the money to promote the film' ('Philippine Indie' 2009).

In Chapter 11, Tolentino discusses how, in sync with the phenomenal rise of indie cinema in the Philippines, another genre of indie production – that of political documentary films – has also been flourishing over the past decade, albeit without receiving as much limelight as feature-length narrative indie films. Unlike the former, which is in search of an audience, documentary films produced by political film collectives are made with input from the community, whose feedback is integrated into the final product. These films are purposely and directly linked to the collectives' triple objectives of arousing, mobilizing and organizing the people in their political struggles as the underclass dispossessed by the state's neoliberal economic policies. They are screened at sites of community socialization such as basketball courts, hallways and trade union offices to raise consciousness towards issues affecting them individually and as a community, and to mobilize the people to act on these issues and affect material change, despite having little, if any, access to social mobility. Appreciated by their audiences representing the disenfranchised 'sea of people', the films, Tolentino argues, play a key role in disrupting the 'state's signification process of middle-class-ness', calling into the foreground the materiality of the conditions and corruption that disengages individual transformation from ever taking place other than through state-endorsed processes.

To cap off our review, we come finally to contemporary **Thai** cinema which has, in the past ten years, in the words of film critic, Kong Rithdee (2009), 'come of age through [. . .] thick and thin'. Thai cinema was in decline throughout most of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, with viewers staying away from a deluge of derivative titles until around the time of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, during which new indie Thai directors burst forth with a diversity of path-breaking films such as Pen-Ek Ratanaruang's debut, *Fun Bar Karaoke* (1997), which was featured in the Berlin International Film Festival; Wisit Sasanatieng's *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000), the first Thai film featured at the Cannes Film Festival; and Apichatpong Weerasethakul's

Tropical Malady (2004), which won the Jury Prize at Cannes in the year of its release. However, as in the Philippines and Malaysia, few indie films emerging from Thailand that have garnered rave international reviews and awards have translated into local box-office hits: 'they remain at best a cultural curiosity' (Kong 2009). Aside from imported films from Hollywood and elsewhere, mainstream studio productions remain the staple for the overwhelming majority of Thai audiences. Of the forty to fifty domestic films produced annually since 2005, about half are of the horror or comedy genres, while most of the rest are action films featuring Thai martial arts, such as *Suriyothai* (2001) and *Ong Bak* (2003). Kong (2009) underscores that all 15 of the highest-grossing Thai films are mainstream productions. The top three blockbusters – *Suriyothai*, *Legend of King Naresuan 1* (2007) and *Legend of King Naresuan 2* (2007) – were funded by the Thai government as part of its campaign to drive the creative economy and present the world with a state-sanctioned 'Thai' identity.

Commercial Thai films made for mainstream consumption may be 'lowbrow' and therefore arguably not to the taste of those segmentized as the 'educated, urban audiences in Thai society' (Chaiworaporn 2006). They may not be made for export, except for those that have gained regional or global cult following, such as Tony Jaa's box-office *muay thai* hits, namely the *Ong Bak* trilogy and *Tom-Yum-Goong* (2005), as well as horror films like *Shutter* (2005), which inspired the American remake of the same title in 2008. Nonetheless, they remain highly popular with the masses, especially the ubiquitous comedy genre which, as Pattana Kitiarsa emphasizes in Chapter 12, has been an unwavering constant in Thai cinema across all phases of its history. *Yam Yasothon* (2005) and *Noo Hin the Movie* (2006), as examples of recent kitschy comedic releases, might seem unworthy of critical attention but Kitiarsa argues that their seeming lack of intellectual or cultural capital in fact belies their status as ethnographic records of the social transformations unfolding in neoliberalizing Thailand, particularly in the poorer rural Northeast Thailand constituting the main support base of former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Interrogating the sociocultural meanings of laughter, Kitiarsa frames the two aforementioned comedies as filmic interventions that, among other things, give voice to rural villagers and rural-urban migrants caught in a flux of social change but sustained by hope and confidence in Thaksin's populist promises to the poor and the dispossessed in the early 2000s.

Kitiarsa reads *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* as testaments to the optimism of Thailand's rural population during Thaksin's rule, a time when young migrant workers from the rural countryside and the urban underclass were on a high, expecting to soon possess the promised good jobs and better lives in modernizing Thailand. Employing the tropes of nostalgic parody and migrant irony to generate laughter, the films channelled the abundant energies of the underclass who were not only able to laugh and poke fun at themselves but also at the material excesses and pretensions of the 'high-so' (high society) of Bangkok. Laughter reconnected the migrant/grassroots Thai viewers to their

countryside identity, the poetics of which are celebrated in the films. This laughter of the underclass was, however, abruptly halted in real life by Thaksin's deposition in the 2006 military coup, turning into a grimace.

Note

- 1 An edited book on the region's independent cinema is forthcoming (Ingawanij and McKay). This volume is preceded by non-book publications such as special issues on film in Southeast Asia published by *South East Asia Research* (2006, vol. 14, issue 2, edited by Rachel Harrison; 2010, vol. 18, issue 2, edited by Mulaika Hijjas), *Asian Cinema* (2007, vol. 18, issue 2; edited by Khoo Gaik Cheng and Sophia Siddique Harvey), and *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (2007, vol. 8, issue 2, edited by Khoo Gaik Cheng).

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2 From contested histories to ethnic tourism

Cinematic representations of Shans and Shanland on the Burmese silver screen

Jane M. Ferguson

Burma, or the Union of Myanmar, is internationally known for possessing one of the longest-running internal conflicts in modern history. In 1947, on the brink of the country's independence from Britain, ethnic Karen insurgents first took up arms against the soon-to-be-installed Yangon government. The ongoing civil war continues to this day, and it is estimated that since its inception, this conflict has produced approximately 10,000 deaths annually (Smith 1994: 324). While non-Burman ethnic nationality groups are estimated to comprise one-third of the country's population of approximately 59 million people, particularly since the Ne Win military government installed itself in 1962, political domination has been concentrated among the Burman majority, and is often accompanied with rhetorical strategies of ethnic chauvinism while the Burman-dominated military government continues to maintain its authoritarian rule over the country.

Although themes of conflict, economic woes, and political oppression tend to dominate international news stories about Burma, partially due to the country's relatively high rate of literacy from pre-colonial times onward thanks to widespread monastic education, as well as the country's connections with British India, the first half of the twentieth century saw a thriving media scene. This scene is characterised by newspapers in multiple languages, various weekly magazines, as well as electronic broadcast media and multiple motion picture studios. The considerable dearth in international scholarly attention on the subject of Burmese cinema belies the fact that Burma has a nine-decade history of motion picture production, and active cinema production continues to this day. The existence of numerous film studios in Yangon and Mandalay, which have produced thousands of feature films in the Burmese language, the myriad film magazines, as well as the popular affection for Burmese movie stars, in the general public, and even among some members of ethnic separatist armies are testament to the robust influence of this industry.¹ Examination of the motion picture scene of Burma presents a dynamic,

fascinating challenge to the social relationships represented and engendered by the motion picture industry, particularly in light of the political struggles that have long plagued the well-being of the people in the country, the peripheral and minority areas especially. In examining popular representations of ethnic relations in Burma, we can see a culture industry which has some of the most stringent and authoritarian regulations in the world, but at the same time, a highly literate and diverse audience, not to mention potentially irreverent directors and screenwriters who will not necessarily tow the line of the status quo in their production of popular motion pictures.

Tracking film history in Burma

Burmese film production dates back to 1920, and by the time of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, the handful of Burmese motion picture studios, in varying degrees of cooperation with Indian studios, had produced approximately 640 films (Tun Hlaing 2000: 187). Directed political use of the mimetic capacities of the motion picture industry in Burma can be traced back to the nationalist movements of the 1930s, and several of the key figures involved in the Burmese independence movement were actively involved in film production. This enthusiasm among important political players for film production is partially the cause for the generous government funding allotted to the Burmese film industry post-independence, and consequently the film industry in Burma grew rapidly in the initial decades following independence, and reached its productive apex in 1962. Following the Ne Win military coup of 1962 and the re-structuring of the national economy along the lines of his Burmese Socialist Programme Party we can see the ways that the film industry was transformed, both economically and ideologically. In particular, amidst the ongoing insurgencies and battles for autonomy and self-determination among ethnic nationality groups, there is occasional directed use of the motion picture industry to promote a positive, or simply benign, image of non-Burman groups, the Shan in particular. As we will see, the relative success of this endeavour is debatable.

Through examination of the political and social context of Burma, this essay first discusses the historical inter-relationship between the Burmese and the Shan, and the ways in which the vision for the Union of Burma crucially depends upon a notion of ethnic pluralism, yet asserts and privileges the Burman majority. Tracking the history of the Burmese motion picture industry following the Ne Win military coup of 1962, I will discuss how the growing industry was stultified by the nationalization of the economy following the inception of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party government, and then constricted in terms of its content and representation by an increasingly stringent, often arbitrary, Motion Picture Censor Board. I will then discuss notions of ethnic pluralism and how they manifest themselves in Burmese cinematic discourse, particularly regarding how these political and structural

developments affected representation of Shan symbolic elements. Here, I will discuss specific films which involved representation of Shan geographies and/or Shan people. While some of these films were explicitly produced in order to foster inter-ethnic harmony, in one particular case Shan audiences perceived one representation of an eleventh-century Shan princess as an explicit attack on Shan culture and history. Though I predominantly focus on Burmese films from the 1960s, as we will see, this period in national history was tumultuous in that it signified the first decade of Ne Win's 'Burmese Way to Socialism' restructurings amidst an ongoing war, and concurrently, a time in which ethnic minority groups began to take on 'internal Other' status amidst militaristic Burman ethnic chauvinism. It was these decades also, that the Burmese popular culture industries effectively framed cinematic and popular representational discourse regarding ethnic pluralism in the country, so in order to understand popular codes at work today, it is necessary to examine how these codes and genres were constructed during the early decades of national independence, as well as the years immediately following Ne Win's coup. Arguably, it was during these formative years that Burmese cinematic discourse crucially framed the ways in which popular audiences would identify and understand ethnic diversity and ethnic pluralism in the Union of Burma for decades to come.

In theorising the relationship between ideologies of national unity and inter-ethnic relations as presented by films and understood by diverse audiences, I find Purnima Mankekar's (1993; 1999) work on television production and viewing practices in India to be most generative; in her discussion of the ways in which national discourses regulate those of gender (and vice versa), Mankekar argues that television plays a crucial role in communicating those discourses, but that role cannot be merely understood according to 'a clear-cut division between the hegemonic text and the passive viewer' (Mankekar 1993: 557). Similarly, there is a dynamic interplay in discursive constructions of Burmese nationhood and how this relates to ethnicity, and the motion picture industry has been repeatedly mobilized to broadcast this complex message to the masses.

Although it is often the imperative of the ruling classes to use the means of mass communication in order to dominate the means of symbolic reproduction (Scott 1985) we know as well that cultural production is not the exclusive domain of the large-scale culture industries; all peoples produce culture, and experience will inevitably intervene (Roseberry 1989). Theodor Adorno's totalizing assertion that the ultimate goal of the culture industry is to 'remove the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo' (Adorno 1991: 9) is particularly provocative in the context of Burma, where one can see a tightly controlled culture industry on the one hand, and on the other hand, a very different experiential reality for many of the people in Burma. This is no doubt partially informed by the results of the machinations of the pervasive black market as well as the ongoing ethnic insurgencies and various other sources

of news and political information sidestepping the government-scrutinised channels. In the context of the longest-running internal conflict in modern history, it would seem a tall order for the popular entertainment industries effectively to convince the general public of inter-ethnic harmony in Burma. As we can see through examining the many films which speak to notions of ethnicity in Burma, let alone the veritable fractal of myriad interpretations of those texts by various viewers, we can begin to understand the ways in which the goals of government regulation of the motion picture industry are an incomplete attempt to secure national solidarity through varying representations of ethnic 'others' on the silver screen.

Representing 'minorities'

Numerous studies of film have revealed the ways in which filmmakers' representations of cultural 'others' have produced contested reactions among diverse viewers, especially among those who identify with the 'other' being presented on the screen. In her examination of two films produced by white American filmmakers focusing on marginalized African-American people, *Paris is Burning* and *Hoop Dreams*, Davis (1999) presents the compelling argument that while she was able to 'read' an intended irony of representation of the marginalized groups, she recognizes how convoluted and fraught the device of irony can be, and how and why some African-American critics found the films' representations of the minority groups patronizing and/or offensive. Crucially, Davis reminds us that filmmakers aim to manipulate their human subjects on the screen in order to produce their product, but when those people are minorities, or from a different culture, the film will likely carry political ramifications (Davis 1999: 30). In his history of cinematic representation of homosexuals and homosexuality in Hollywood cinema, *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo (1986), in addition to other arguments regarding various historical examples of both subtle and overt representations of gays in motion pictures, details the ways in which some gays who were involved in film production purposely encoded gay 'sub-texts' and double entendres into the plot and character blocking of mainstream Hollywood movies. The compelling point of this kind of minority representation is that the minority subject is one which can and often is occluded or largely overlooked by majority discourses. While *Hoop Dreams* and *Paris is Burning* are films dealing with different populations of marginalized groups, they would not be marketed or explicitly labelled 'minority films'; it would not be politically correct for Hollywood to label or package a film as a 'black film' or a 'gay film' even though implicitly its content might deem it as such. Audience demographics can de facto ascribe such labels later. In China, however, there is such a genre, the 'minority film' (*shaoshu minzu dianying*) which became a part of Chinese cinematic discourse in the 1950s. The purpose of this institutional labelling was to represent ethnic diversity (or in their terms, minorities) in such a light that the films would

instrumentally promote national unity and solidarity (Zhang 1997: 79). In Burma, as well, such an explicit genre of minority film does exist, though the genre classification would translate more closely to 'inter-ethnic harmony' film. But first, it is instructive to understand how and why inter-ethnic relations would be a priority of the Burmese government in this period following independence and the subsequent military coup.

A thumbnail sketch of Burmese-Shan relations over the *longue durée*

The Shan, as they are known in Burmese and English, or Tai, as they call themselves, are one of the largest stateless, ethnic nationality groups in mainland Southeast Asia, in that they number an estimated 10 million people, and can be found in Laos, Thailand, China, as well as the Shan State of Burma, and constitute approximately one tenth of the total population of Burma. Archaeological evidence shows Shan settlements existing in the northeast of what is now Burma for over 1,700 years, and throughout the waxing and waning of Burmese kingdoms in the past millennium, Shan kingdoms and political rulers had their period of rising and declining influence as well. However, following the third and final Anglo-Burmese war in 1886, British colonial authorities annexed Burma as part of British India, ousting the Burmese King Thibaw in Mandalay and replacing the indigenous political apparatus with their colonial system of rule. The Northeastern territories were not fully annexed, though; the Shan rulers were allowed to maintain semi-autonomous rule over the subjects in what would become the colonial 'frontier areas' to 'Burma proper'. As the historian Thant Myint-U has argued, it was during this period immediately following the fall of Mandalay and the inception of colonial ethnic mapping with its territorial grid system that the notion of who is Burmese (and concurrently, who is not) began to have both social and political implications (Thant 2001: 10).

For some members of the Shan ruling classes, they would later look back upon the period of semi-autonomous rule under British Colonialism as a time of peace for the Shan States. The Shan *sao pha* (or princes) no longer had to worry about their former enemies; the Burmese kings were gone and the potential threat of the forces of the Chiang Mai royalty was being subsumed by Bangkok authorities. Even when there were uprisings in the Shan States, the British colonial authorities could dispatch troops to quell them. But one significant disadvantage for the peasantry was that there were no longer the former means of ousting political opponents, as the British method allowed no recourse, thus potentially keeping Shan dictators in their positions of power over the people (Smith 1999:47). However, one dimension of this administration that Shan politicians and members of the elite classes would later lament is the fact that the British dedicated significant resources to neither the integration of the Shan areas with the international economy, nor in the higher

education of students in that area. The former economic integration could be seen as a double-edged sword: dependency on foreign income would make the Burmese lowlanders increasingly dependent on the anarchic whims of the international market, but at the same time, the Shan rulers began to feel that their areas were 'backward' compared with their lowland Burman counterparts. In terms of higher education, the Shan States would lack direct access to higher education in the Western sense until the end of the twentieth century. Rather than send their children to the recently opened Rangoon University, often the Shan royalty would bypass their Burman lowland counterparts and send their wealthy sons and daughters to England or the United States for higher education. This marks a distinct departure from the previous practice of the Shan rulers sending their kin to join Burmese courts and harems. The ousting of the Burmese royal family from their seats in Mandalay ushered in the end of ruling-class kinship alliances between Shan and Burmese elites, though monastic education could very well have still been an important vehicle for inter-ethnic connection, but more for the peasant classes than the elites.

Middle-class nationalism and the nascent motion picture industry

During British colonialism, Burmese middle-class nationalism tended to concentrate itself in the urban areas, Rangoon especially. Although, as we will see, Shan elites did have their own national aspirations; the particularly anti-British angle was one more sharply pursued by the Burmese nationalists. A number of these privileged nationalists took a keen interest in media production, and sought to engage in motion picture production as a means by which they could broadcast their message to the masses. The best-known director of such films is 'Parrot' U Sunny, whose studios produced a total of 92 films in its years of operation between 1931 and 1957 (Arkar Moe 2009). Another studio known for producing nationalist films was A1; a 1938 film of theirs documented workers' protests in downtown Yangon led by the then-president of the All Burma Students' Union, Thakin Ba Hein. Another film produced by A1 actually provoked a social outcry: the 1937 film *Aung Thapyay* (The Triumph of Thapyay) written and directed by U Tin Maung, depicts the final days of the Burman monarch King Thibaw. The film was withdrawn from cinemas by British colonial authorities, following a film-inspired revolt in the town of Monywa (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 252). Although the uprising came as a result of the film's depiction of the humiliation of British colonial conquest, as a historical film, there are specific representations of a Shan princess, as well as the presence of Shan actors within the cast and storyline. However, notions of ethnic unity are not prominently featured in the main thrust of the plot. Nevertheless, in the cinema in Monywa, it was clear that viewers were sensitive to the ways in which political power was presented on the silver screen. Although U Sunny has a generally positive

reputation within Burmese nationalist historical discourse, we do know that when he got his start in the film industry, he was initially dissatisfied with the significant Indian involvement in Burmese cinema, from phases of film production to actual cinema owners (Sagaing Hla Shwe 1981: 45).

Following the Second World War, independence conditions imposed by the British colonial authorities stipulated that the Burmese politicians would have to demonstrate unity between themselves and the ethnic nationalities in order to be granted independence. Because of this, General Aung San travelled to the Shan town of Panglong, where he met with Shan, Kachin, and Chin political leaders, and thus drafted the Panglong Agreement, which indicated that the former 'frontier areas' would join in a newly formed Union of Burma, and that the Shan and Karenni states would have the right to secede following ten years' initial membership, and the Chin State being incorporated as a 'special administrative area'. Following its independence in 1948, the newly established Union of Burma would officially contain fourteen administrative territories: seven (predominantly Burman) divisions and seven so-called 'ethnic' states, named for the predominant ethnic group in the area. With the territorial mapping, then, we can see that the Union of Myanmar crucially depends upon the existence of multiple groups. Although the notion of eight 'official' national races belies the on-the-ground ethnic diversity within and between these somewhat arbitrary groups, the point here is that Burma was founded as a plural ethnic nation.

As mentioned earlier, this accord was not sufficient to pacify the growing discontent with the fledgling Yangon government. Prior to independence, ethnic Karen militia formed the Karen National Union, a group that has fought for self-determinism to this day. Furthermore, the Communist Party of Burma was arguably the strongest political force in the country at the close of the Second World War. However, it would be international political events that would have the greatest impact on the political economy of Burma: following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, straggling Kuomintang (KMT) forces retreated across the border into the Shan State from Yunnan and in the years following, began systematically to build their forces for a counter-insurgency against the Maoists. The newly installed Union of Burma government saw this as an incursion on their sovereignty and initially ordered the Shan *sao pha* to mobilize forces against the KMT. The *sao pha* were hardly united in their political stance, and some of them balked at the government's proposal, thus provoking the Burmese central government to establish martial law and dispatch their military to the Shan areas, (ostensibly) to fight the Kuomintang. It is this response to the Kuomintang in particular that was the basis for the expansion of the Tatmadaw (the army) and, by the end of the 1950s, its emergence as the strongest political force in the country.

Recalling the caveat for the Shan political authorities, as stipulated by the Panglong Agreement, the Shan State had the right to secede from the Union of Burma following ten years' initial membership. The deadline for this

stipulated – but never realised – secession came along in 1958, the same year in which the Burmese civilian government was replaced by a ‘military caretaker’ government, which ruled until 1960, when U Nu was re-elected in a landslide victory. During that interim, however, the military government had successfully coerced many of the *sao pha* to relinquish their political control of various parts of the Shan State in exchange for concessions. For those Shan politicians eager for full independence, prospects were increasingly bleak, and in 1958, the first Shan insurgent army, *Num Serk Harn* (Brave Young Warriors), took arms against the Burmese military, and in the decades that have followed various other militias have formed; it is estimated that in the Shan State alone there have been up to 40 anti-government militias in operation at a given time.

Cinema in independent Burma

In spite of the growing political turmoil, these post-Second World War years have since been looked upon as the ‘golden age’ of Burmese cinema; a more critical analysis might attribute this ‘golden age’ of cinematic production to government impetus to harness the mimetic capacity of the silver screen in order to foster political consent. We can trace this newly independent government’s enthusiasm for cinema back to the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the film industry in 1946, in which General Aung San himself presided over the celebration. The newly independent Burmese government also allocated 50,000 kyat to support the national film industry, and, in particular, to upgrade its technology (Khin Maung Ni 1980: 19). Every year initially following independence saw a rise in the number of films produced, and the founding of the Burmese Motion Picture Academy Awards in 1952 added to the prominence of the industry. It was during this period that a total of four Burmese films were exported to international markets, including those of China and the Soviet Union (Takkatho Ne Win 1973: 36). One film in particular, *Bawa Thanthaya* (Life’s Samsara) directed by U Thuka, specifically depicted Burmese culture and customs, and included vignettes featuring Shan geography, that of Inle Lake in particular.

As the post-war Burmese film industry expanded, so did its star system, and within that system we can find specific representations of non-Burman individuals and groups. A particularly well-known female lead who repeatedly appeared as a ‘Shan beauty’ of sorts on the Burmese silver screen was Mary Myint, born in the Shan town of Nam Kham in March 1929. She got her start in 1948 in the film *Thitsa Pan Hnint Kaing* (Two Faithful Flowers) directed by U Bi Aung (Daraikta Ne Don 1970: 8). It was from this cameo appearance as a Shan beauty that Mary Myint became known to mainstream cinemagoers, and would later become *the* Shan girl known to Burmese audiences. Although cancer ended her life prematurely in 1957, before her death she appeared in at least four other feature films, although seldom did these films specifically deal with Shan-related themes.

Post-1962 motion picture production

Following the military coup of 1962 and the subsequent instalment of the Revolutionary Council government, followed by that of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), a new Motion Picture Enterprise (MPE) was established which maintained strict control over all phases of film production and distribution (Yeni 2006). The partner organization of the MPE was the Motion Picture Organization (MPO) which replaced the previous government's Film Council, and tightened the censorship controls on films. The following Union of Burma Cinematograph Law of 1962 allowed the government to oversee film production, in both form and content (Charney 2009: 114). It was through these bureaucratic organizations that the right to criticize the government was systematically stripped away (Allott 1993: 3). Increasingly, the culture industries were turned to in order to produce government propaganda; as the military continued to expand, the motion picture industry was looked toward as a tool for obtaining the masses' consent. In reference to the mimetic capacity of motion pictures to bolster sentiments of national identity, Slocum (2005) has presented the argument that it was the very pleasures of spectatorship of war films and the violence that they portrayed which contributed to a pacification among American viewers and one which also allowed some of them to seek within the motion pictures a sense of their own national identity (Slocum 2005: 38). We can see how the Burmese motion picture industry would seek to build national solidarity in light of many perceived security threats; it was the imperative of the culture industries following the 1962 coup to present the Burmese Army as a liberating force that was also entrusted with safeguarding the nation's independence. This notion that the Tatmadaw is crucial for the maintenance of the political health of the nation continues to this day; government propaganda 'exhorts its citizens to be wary of Western machinations and projects the military as the saviour of the nation and its cultural and religious heritage' (Ganesan and Hlaing 2007: 3). The military government also made it an imperative to downplay the issue of ethnicity, either by ignoring it altogether or using ideas about ethnic harmony for public relations purposes (Steinberg 2001: 54). One Burmese film scholar, Takkatho Ne Win, notes a sharp downturn in the number of historical films produced following the regime change; although Win argues that the government had not specifically shut out historical films, there were simply fewer produced (Takkatho Ne Win 1972: 28). Tracking film production, we can see, for the most part, that the motion pictures of the Burmese motion picture industry were disproportionately 'Burman' in that any representations of Shan people or Shan symbolic elements are very few and far between.² Following the military's tack of using ethnic harmony and pluralism as a form of public relations, we can see some ways in which films about Shanland as a touristic site or as a cool and calm mountain land become part of popular cinematic discourse on the Burmese scene. On the other hand, we can see occasional examples of overt efforts made by Burmese film directors to include 'Shan'

tagged symbolic elements into their films, though changing political circumstances have, at times, precluded such productions altogether.

Shans on the Burmese silver screen

Within the corpus of Burmese feature films, those which involve representations of Shan people and Shan territories can be grouped into four major analytic categories: (1) fictionalized or documentary-style sojourns to the Shan areas;³ (2) historical dramas, either historical fiction, or historical narratives presented as re-creations of fact; (3) Burmese narratives which include the Shan State as a setting; and finally (4) Burmese features which include a Shan character in the plot, either related to the plot structure, or in the form of a cameo appearance. As we can see from these categories, there can be a varied degree of symbolic presentation of Shan elements, and to the untrained eye, the very fact that some narratives actually would have taken place in the Shan State might pass without notice.⁴

Released in Burma in 1956, the film *Pusa Hnit Kain* (Two Unthwarted Destinies) was a Burmese adaptation of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, which was originally an adventure novel, but then was made into a film in 1937 and later 1952, starring Steward Granger and Deborah Kerr. The Burmese version, produced by British Burma Motion Pictures, and directed by Hla Maung Lay starred Kyaw Swe, Htun Way, and May Thit. The prominently featured song in the soundtrack, sung by Maung Thaung, was *Nga Tha Saw Bwa Pyit Chin Tay* (I want to be a Saopha, or Shan prince) a song written by Saya Shew Pyi Aye (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 117). A much later film, but a historical drama set during the Second World War, *Thwe Thauk Nga Yaok* (Five Comrades), based on a novel by Kyaw Myint U and directed by Ant Kyaw features British soldiers as well as people from various 'National Races' of Burma including Myanmar, Shan, Karen, Karenni, and Chin (Sein Khin Maung Yi 1990: 49).

One director in particular who is associated with films representing ethnic nationalities is Myint Maung, who directed a total of twelve feature films, which have included films depicting nature, culture, and customs of Shan, Kayah, and Kayin ethnic nationalities (Myint Maung 1977: 49). In 1960, for example, Myint Maung directed a film entitled *Pantaing Pwint Ba Say* (May the Angel's Trumpet Blossom) which was produced as a promotion for inter-ethnic harmony and as a concerted effort to increase the visibility of ethnic nationality groups (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 216). The film itself, written by Seya Tin Maung, contains representations of the Shan countryside, peasant lifestyle, and highlights Shan cultural festivals. This particular film is one method through which popular awareness of these particular dimensions of Shan life was raised. Another example of Myint Maung's work is the film *Ta Moe Ta Myay* (Rain and Earth) released in 1962 and produced by Pyi Thu Met Sway Film Company (Myanmar Youbshin

Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 216). The film starred Maung Thin, May Thit, Khin Than Hnu, and Kyaw Li Sway and features a Tatmadaw platoon engaged in battle deep in the forests of the Kayah (Karenni) State. The film depicts the generosity of local villagers in that some take in wounded Tatmadaw soldiers and give them assistance. Another film which prominently features scenes from Inle Lake, including depictions of the Intha leg-rowers, is the 1983 film, *Nay Kyauk Ke* (Sun Rock), directed by Thin Thin Yu, and starring Kyaw Hein and Tun Tun Hnaing.

One of the best-known and often-referred to films involving Shan symbolic elements is the 1963 film *Shan Pyi Youk Aythay Yay* or *Guests in Shanland*. The film is remembered to this day by members of older generations of Burmese filmgoing audiences. The film was written by Naung Ni, directed by A1 Maung Chit, and stars San Sha Tin as a beautiful Shan woman who attracts the affection of the romantic male lead, a Tatmadaw officer played by Win Nyunt.⁵ Film commentators in Yangon claim that this film, upon release, was immensely popular among both Burmese and Shans alike. *Guests in Shanland* is a love story about a soldier, Tin Htun Aung, who is considered a straight, honest simple man of a humble background with no major problems. However, when he gets a promotion within the army, his new status creates obstacles for his love life which cause him to worry. Tin Htun Aung has essentially made a social sacrifice in order to progress in his work (Youbshin Thit 1963: 9).

Figure 2.1 Film poster of *Guests in Shanland*.

Source: Youbshin Thit (New Film Magazine) August, 1963, pp. 76–77.

This film also featured actors and extras wearing the characteristic Shan-style long pants (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 300).⁶ It is when Officer Tin Htun Aung is out with his platoon that he meets Kham, a beautiful Shan girl, as she is out bathing in a creek, donning a Shan-style sarong. As they soon fall in love, Kham, because of her expertise regarding the local terrain, serves as a guide for Officer Tin Htun Aung and the rest of his platoon (Youbshin Thit 1963: 9). The plot thus revolves around the Burman officer and his love for the local Shan girl.

Representing Shan and Burmese history on the silver screen

While the above examples of Shan representation in Burmese cinematic discourse did not, as far as I know, produce adverse reactions among audience members, a cinematic example of a controversial historical representation would be the film *Shwezayan*, produced by Aung Mingalar film company, directed by Khin Maung Nyunt and starring Khin Maung Zin as the eleventh-century Burmese King Anawrahta and Kyi Kyi Tay as the Shan princess Saw Mon Hla. On the promotional posters for the film, the story is advertised as portraying 'the first example of Burmese-Shan Love.' The film itself – named after a temple founded by the Shan princess thirteen miles from Mandalay – presents a specific story which took place during the Pagan era: as the Burmese empire was expanding across mainland Southeast Asia, the Shan *sao pha* of Mōng Mao agreed to give over his daughter, Saw Mon Hla (in Shan: Sao Mon La) so that she would join King Anawrahta's harem. From there, Saw Mon Hla joined King Anawrahta on his return journey to Pagan. According to the legend, because of the effervescent glow of Saw Mon Hla's earrings (which actually contained a Buddha relic) other women in the harem – perhaps out of jealousy of the possibility that King Anawrahta favoured Saw Mon La – accused the Shan princess of sorcery. The accusation created such unrest and disorder within the palace that King Anawrahta decided to send Saw Mon Hla back to Mōng Mao.

Along the journey, just outside of Mandalay, Saw Mon Hla began to fall ill. At one point, she stops at a creek thirteen miles east of Mandalay, and as she is washing, one of her earrings falls into the muddy water. She searches for it but is unable to retrieve it. Soon thereafter, the earring appears in the sky, with a luminescent golden (*shwe*) glow. A flock of sparrows (*sa*) encircles (*yan*) the earring in the sky. Seeing the auspicious event, Saw Mon Hla decides to found a pagoda, and encases her other relic earring in the pagoda, naming it *Shwezayan*. Following the founding of the pagoda, Saw Mon Hla dies soon thereafter; although some Burmese discourses (including that of the film) will say her death was caused by a broken heart, others will argue that she was weakened by the journey and died of malaria.

As for the film *Shwezayan*, its production and cinema release saw considerable controversy. Its production had been complete prior to General Ne Win's

coup, and it received censor approval. Following the coup, and the installation of the Revolutionary Council government, the film was ordered to be re-submitted to the changing censor board, which ordered additional cuts to be made to it. Upon release, however, some Shan audiences were offended by the representation of Saw Mon Hla, particularly involving the scenes in which she was accused of sorcery. According to some interpretations, she was presented as an evil witch, not as an innocent Shan princess. Because of this, some Shan-identified audiences protested, and the uprising compelled the Censor Board to pull the film from public screenings.⁷

Lest we forget, also, that in the decade prior to the release of *Shwezayan* the autonomy of the Shan political authorities had gradually been stripped away and the 1958 promise of self-determination of the Panglong Agreement had been ignored altogether by the Burmese authorities. Furthermore, it was during the 1950s that there had been a concerted effort on the part of the Burmese popular culture industries to foster national unity. This project, however, is fraught, as we can see the ways in which minority representation (especially when a majority group is creating the discourse – as was the case in *Shwezayan*) will inevitably carry political ramifications for that group. Another example of popular culture in Burma which caused outrage among some Shans was a series of novels written by Bo Ni. These novels fictionalized *sao phas* as tyrants, and depicted them entrapping women in their palaces. While the ostensible intention of these representations was to attack the Shan *sao pha* ruling elites in the Shan areas, many Shan farmers conflated the attack on their rulers with an attack on ‘Shan State autonomy and culture’ (Elliott 2006: 250). While novels such as those by Bo Ni were likely written with the intent to build solidarity within Burma among Burmese people (or rather, those literate in Burmese) by deflating the importance of the role of Shan political leaders, the novels had the adverse affect of splitting its readership along ethnic lines, with Shan people interpreting the attack on the Shan elites as also an attack on Shan people in general. We are left to speculate, as well, whether the Burmese readership of the novels of Bo Ni was enraged by the representation of Shan *sao pha* in such a negative light, or whether they might have created their desired effect among those Burmese consumers of popular fiction.

Although *Guests in Shanland* does contain a Shan female romantic lead actress, the thrust of the plot involves a Burman coming to the Shan areas; it is the Tatmadaw platoon which is dispatched to the Shan State, after all. The film, arguably, could be seen as an exemplar of the ‘ethnic harmony’ genre of Burmese film in that it promotes the charming and identifiably positive aspects of Shan nature and people, as well as a Burman ‘romantic’ stance toward these Shan symbolic elements. A more critical reading would argue that the film’s representation is overly simplistic, if not patronizing. In addition to the representation, that the Burmese Tatmadaw was arguably an unwelcome occupying force in the Shan States during the 1950s is a moot point entirely.

Again, it is a Burman majority setting the scene, and even though the title would suggest that the dominant context is that of the Shan, the Shan elements are narrated through a Burman lens of sorts. This genre of film, therefore, is not unlike the Chinese 'minority film' (*shaoshu minzu dianying*) in which the minority people seldom occupy the position of the subject, but rather are part of the 'setting' and eventually are 'directed to pay homage to the nation-state' (Zhang 1997: 80). In considering this minority representation, we are reminded of the late film historian Vitto Russo's observation regarding mainstream films about homosexuality not being for gays; for Russo the important point is that the existence of people of various sexualities should not be controversial (Russo 1986: 326). In other words, the Burmese films in which Shan symbolic elements are part of the narrative, but 'othered', in effect is not necessarily done with the purpose of appeasing Shan audiences (who might constitute less than 9 per cent of national film audiences) but rather to show *majority* audiences that the Shan minority is a happy, cool, and peaceful crucial component of the Burmese nation. In other words, like the Chinese 'minority film' in which groups are portrayed as part of the setting in order to 'pay homage to the nation-state', the Burmese film industry makes use of representations of Shans as a minority in order to demonstrate ethnic unity to a country which they perceive (and insist) to be dominated by the Burmese. Films such as *Guests in Shanland* serve to remind audiences that the *Union* of Myanmar (emphasis mine) is intended to be a plural society.

Although Ruby (2000) has rightly pointed out that the general public is increasingly aware of the anger of misrepresented minorities in the popular media (Ruby 2000: 139), the strict censorship guidelines in Burma seem to push only for harmonious representations of the Shans and Shanland. Whether the overly positive representations are interpreted as saccharine by majority audiences demands further ethnographic investigation, as such a reaction would doubtlessly be cut from Burma's strictly censored news media. However, the very fact that 'Burma-Shan Unity' constitutes a named film sub-genre in Burma indicates that the authorities themselves are very sensitive to the ways not only that ethnic tensions are a serious political concern for the regime itself, but also that film representation of ethnic pluralism is a contentious issue. While films that adopt a romantic stance toward a people and a place, such as *Guests in Shanland*, might be well-received among viewers in multiple sectors of Burmese society, this is hardly a foregone conclusion. The extent to which a representation can be read as 'romantic' versus 'patronizing' is the subjective experience of the viewer, as well as the political context of that viewing process. Lest we forget, it was the negative representation of Sao Mon Hla in the film *Shwezayan* which provoked outrage among some Shan viewers, to the point that the Censor Board pulled the film from public viewing. It is this point that reminds us that viewers are not passive; there is always the possibility that they will not take what is presented to them at face value (Platinga 1997: 200, cited in Davis 1999: 45).

We know from the rhetorical strategies of Burmese nationalism that, in spite of ethnic insurgencies, a full vision for a *Union* of Burma (or Myanmar, for that matter) crucially depends upon ethnic pluralism; lest we forget, there are 8 national 'races' and 135 ethnic groups. Although some chauvinistic Burmans might insist on their own ethnic superiority, or simply in terms of numbers alone, relegate the Shan, Kachin, Chin, etc., to the status of 'ethnic minority,' bear in mind that their nation still intrinsically depends upon the presence of Shan people, as well as Shan symbolic elements within the national imaginary. For the production of motion pictures, this political scenario creates a situation in which film can intervene in popular understandings of the Shan, as well as Burmese-Shan relations.

In looking at the adverse reactions incited by productions such as Bo Ni's novels and the film *Shwezayan*, we can see how negative representations of ethnic minorities, while ostensibly intended to garner (ethnic majority) solidarity, had the unintended consequence of inciting angry reactions among the minority. Perhaps the Burmese culture industries underestimated ethnic solidarity among subordinate groups; the fact that Shan people equated an attack on the ancient Shan royalty as an attack on Shan people as a whole implies that asserting a negative Shan icon could be one mode by which Burmese cinema inadvertently cemented oppositional communities. However, this is not to say that 'ethnic unity' films were entirely unsuccessful; often, among some communities of Burmese people today, ethnic Shans are perceived to be simpler, or 'cooler' than their Burmese counterparts. The picturesque cool mountains of Shanland are indeed part of the popular Burmese imagination, and though an ongoing insurgency, grinding poverty, and the fastest-growing HIV infection rate in the world constitute social problems that are part of a sobering reality for people in the Shan State, the popular media have played a significant role in occluding some of these problems in their representations.

Notes

- 1 For an ethnography of Shan insurgent spectatorship of Burmese popular movies, see Ferguson (2007).
- 2 This is somewhat different from Win's discussion of the lack of Burmese historical film production. Win laments the fact that many of his contemporary films featured 'modern' times, with people listening to 'modern' music and wearing 'modern' clothing which, he felt, failed thematically to distinguish Burmese films from international films. There is no discussion, as such, in his article, of any of these films being ethnically tagged.
- 3 Within Burmese cinematic discourse, these types of films are referred to as *Kayi Thwa Youbshin* or 'Travelogue Films' (Myanmar Youbshin Sainyatuthabin Chyin Pa Yay 1996: 197).
- 4 Furthermore, a number of historical dramas, especially regarding battles between the Burmese Tatmadaw and the Kuomintang, have entirely obliterated the fact that these battles would have taken place in the Shan State. In some cases there is an

- anachronistic erasure of Shan symbolic elements altogether, and local villagers are Burman.
- 5 Incidentally, during the Second World War, Win Nyunt had learned Japanese and collaborated with Japanese film companies during the Japanese occupation of Burma (Nway Sin Oo 2010: 137).
 - 6 Another film which featured actors in these 'Shan pants' was the film *Yin Pwint Lay Thaw Aka*. Whether the extras were actually Shan is not certain, though given the patterns of the Burmese motion picture industry in presenting ethnic nationalities, more likely than not, extras were Burmans, but wearing Shan ethnic costumes.
 - 7 This certainly was hardly the first time that a controversial film was pulled from the cinemas. Recall earlier discussion of the film *Aung Thapyay* which incited Burmese colonial subjects to protest British colonial rule after watching a cinematic representation of the final exile of the Burmese King Thibaw during the fall of Mandalay and the beginning of the full annexation of Burma to British India.

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3 Toward a Laotian independent cinema?

Panivong Norindr

Introduction

Can one speak of a Laotian independent cinema or, for that matter, of Laotian cinema, *tout court*? And if Laotian cinema does exist, how does it figure in the larger context of globalization and regional trade relations, and as an essential part of an undifferentiated Laotian media landscape that is part and parcel of an ideological state apparatus whose primary aim is to create a shared, national realm of experience? What role does television, and more specifically, transnational satellite broadcasting, play in the erosion of national cultural identity and the process of redefining Laotianness. Are diasporic Laotian subjects or Western film directors in the position of reshaping Laotian film and new media culture? These are some of the questions that I would like to address in this chapter. But before I explore these issues, I would like to begin with an incident that I hope will frame and highlight my concerns.

If you doubted that cinema still had the power to stir controversy, let me evoke very briefly a diplomatic incident that occurred in May 2006, between the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand. The Laotian embassy in Bangkok complained to the Thai Foreign Ministry about *Mak Tae* (Lucky Loser; 2006), a comedy about football that pitted the Laotian and Thai national teams in a qualifier's match that was to determine which team would qualify for the World Cup. Laotian officials were concerned that the movie depicted the Laotian national team in a bad light. The Lao ambassador to Thailand complained that the film portrayed his compatriots as 'backwards and comical – with Laos on the receiving end of the film's jokes' (Rithdee 2006).¹

While keeping the original story intact, the film's producers agreed to remove all references to Laos. Every time the name Laos had been uttered on the original sound track, it was replaced by the word 'Awee,' which now referred to an imaginary nation. The release of the film was postponed until a new version could be re-edited, with all signs and references to the Laotian national team, with its flag, anthem, and even alphabet erased digitally, at a cost of millions of baht.² The Laotian government seemed to have been satisfied with these relatively minor changes and the 'unnaming' of Laos, which were of great symbolic importance for the Lao government. Of course,

the original storyline was not altered at all, and one may legitimately wonder whether the Thai audience still saw the opposing team as being made up of 'Lao' players. So what did this controversy reveal about Thai-Lao relations? And what were the real stakes in this dispute?

I believe that this squabble brings to light the kind of discursive violence transported in representations of the other, in the way a more powerful nation portrays a weaker one by mobilizing stereotypes and clichés that seem to merely reinforce the preconceived ideas of a people toward another one. Here the 'cute' and 'simple' Lao/Awee folks engender endearing but powerful fantasies of an impoverished neighbor's backward ways, eliciting a rather facile, comic effect. A perceptive Thai critic suggested that rather than poking fun at the Lao/Awee team, perhaps a more 'humorous scenario' should have featured the Thai team, 'considering the actual performance of our team' (Rithdee 2006). Of course, we also 'support the idea that filmmakers are entitled to craft stories about countries that are not their own'; a problem arises when 'a powerful nation can impose its fantasies about other "exotic" countries, while justifying that its actions have the high-minded purpose of celebrating those foreign cultures and peoples' (Rithdee 2006). In other words, the process of orientalizing the Orient has never been the exclusive domain of the West, as Edward Said has shown so powerfully more than thirty years ago. Removing a word out from the soundtrack may be in fact much easier than changing the Thai imaginary, the mentality and popular disposition of an entire nation and its people. Rithdee (2006) reported that 'many Thais still use the slang word *lao* to condescendingly refer to something cheap, unfashionable, or plain lousy.' How does one go about undermining these stereotypes and bring new knowledge about a nation and consideration toward a people. A cynic would see the producers' desire to be accommodating not only as a gesture to appease the 'oversensitiveness of the Laotian government' (Rithdee 2006) but simply as a good business practice, a ploy to recover their investment.

Although the demeaning characterization is certainly an issue that needs to be brought to the fore, I want to turn my attention to the popular Thai phantasmatic projection concerning the Lao people and its culture as being 'cheap and unfashionable,' and reclaim the term 'Lao' used in that popular register (Thai slang) as a catalyst to reconceptualize the defining features of a Laotian cinematic aesthetic. I believe that one must embrace such an 'unfashionable' cinema. In fact, I would go as far as to argue, that, in spite of, and perhaps because of its 'unremarkable' technical quality, Lao cinema is of great importance and relevance to a differentiated Southeast Asian cinema culture. The very low-budget films of a nation that is not known for its cinematography are not perforce devoid of interest. They may, in fact, help reveal the very real fault line between competing cinematic visions and aesthetics.

In what follows, I want to examine these existing and very real technical deficiencies or limits and consider them as part of the creative forces that

shape and define the form and the aesthetic style of a still emerging Lao cinema. Although I recognize the fact that technical and financial limitations certainly affect the look of a film, I want to distinguish the glossy look from a style that reveals a director's original filmic vision of the world. The challenge, of course, would be to 'educate' a public that has been groomed on and is clamoring for high-value productions, big budget, fast-paced, action movies filled with pyrotechnics and special-effects, movies that have found a wide popular audience in Asia and the rest of the world. By focusing on Som Ock Southiphonh's *Boa Deng* (Red Lotus; 1988), I want to explore the merits of a low-budget, unpopular Laotian film, without forgetting to discuss briefly the conditions of its production. And if we are to gauge the reception that this film has garnered all over the world, we must also distinguish the expectations of very different constituencies, from the sophisticated film audience members who attend international film festivals to the poor, autochthonous inhabitants who cannot afford to go to the movies and prefer television dramas.

Laotian independent cinema: the strange case of Som Ock Southiphonh

The name of Som Ock Southiphonh is probably unknown to even the most cinephile of film scholars. And yet, he may actually be 'the only professional, independent Laotian film director', as he describes himself, working in Laos today (Som 1999). The term 'professional' is the appropriate qualifier since he studied filmmaking in Czechoslovakia, at the famed Faculty of Film and Television, Academy of Arts and Music, at Charles University in Prague from 1977, graduating in 1986 after having completed his graduation film, *Country of a Million Elephants*, a 16mm film, broadcast on Czech television, as well as a thesis (in Czech) on Laotian and Southeast Asian cinema. When he returned to Laos in 1987, he worked for Lao National Television as a director and cameraman, producing what he called 'tourist political' pieces about Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of Laos. He considered it to be an unrewarding experience because, with his training, he wanted to use his skills to make something of better quality; this experience lasted barely two months when he began working for the newly established Lao State Cinematography Company (LSCC), where he met other Lao filmmakers who had studied cinema in Russia, Bulgaria, Hungary, India, and Czechoslovakia. With the LSCC, he was able to shoot two 35mm films: a color film on the Communist Party Conference, held in Vientiane, and the second one, a black-and-white film, *Boa Deng* (Red Lotus), which is one of only two feature length films shot since the Communist take-over in 1975. The other one, *Gun Voice from the Plain of Jars*, a 35mm color production, on the 'brave soldiers of the Second Battalion of the Lao People's Army', was never released because it failed to pass censorship.

The filmmaker describes *Red Lotus* as:

a revolutionary love story set in a rural village in Laos on the eve of the fall of the United States-backed royalist government. Boa Deng, played by actress Somchith Vongsam Ang (who is now my wife), falls for a boy from her village named Khammanh, but in part due to the machinations of her stepfather, a government spy, his house is raided and he has to leave to fight for the Pathet Lao. In his absence, Boa Deng's parents press her to marry a rich man in the village, but she refuses. Her love is eventually vindicated when Khammah leads a Communist attack on the village and kills the stepfather, reuniting the two.

(Som 1999)

Very little has been written about Som Ock Southiponh's film, in part, because of the difficulty of locating a copy of it. Only rather succinct reviews, or more precisely, blurbs of the movie, have appeared in the press after *Red Lotus* was screened at various international film festivals: Moscow in 1989; Fukuoka, Japan in 1994; Phnom Penh in 1997 (where it won third prize); and in Hanoi in 1998. To get a better idea of movie's critical reception, I provide one Laotian and one American view of the movie. The Director of the Lao National Film Archive and Video Center, Bounchao Phichit (2001), has this to say about *Red Lotus* in his chapter on 'Lao Cinema,' in David Hanan's now classic book, *Film in South East Asia: View from the Region*:

Red Lotus is set in 1972, before the establishment of the Lao PDR [Lao People's Democratic Republic]. The film tells the story of a family torn apart by domestic violence, the strife of civil war, poverty, and the increasing conflict between traditional customs and contemporary values. It offered the audience an opportunity to see inside a Laotian village family life (including a traditional Lao wedding, and traditional New Year celebrations) during the historic early 1970s, the period immediately prior to the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. This black and white 35mm film participated in many international festivals . . .

(Phichit 2001: 88–90)

The Lao critic views cinema as a transparent window into Laotian history and culture, an unknown and exotic world for most moviegoers. And not surprisingly, an American critic like Derek Elley (1994), writing in *Variety*, concurs:

Reportedly one of only three Laotian movies preserved of the dozen made to date, 'Red Lotus' is no masterpiece but is a fascinating glimpse of a culture and cinematography almost unknown outside its borders. This 1988 production, which received its U.S. preem at the Hawaii fest, recalls Vietnamese pix of the period and deserves exposure at other Asian-specific events.

For Elley, the only redeeming quality of *Red Lotus* seems to be its sole existence as a cinematic artifact from a nation not known for its cinematography. What is also troubling is the suggestion that the film only deserves to be screened 'at other Asian-specific events.' This would-be critic adds condescendingly:

Though performances generally steer clear of broad caricature, scripting is only functional, with the best sequences those in which dialogue is at a minimum. Still, helmer Som-ok Southiphone shows a basic grasp of camera style, and editing is OK. In the title role, Somchit shows some screen presence as the strong but compliant heroine.

(Elley 1994)

For a Hollywood reporter, who is the 'senior film critic at *Variety*' and whose linguistic competence is rather limited, to have to read subtitles must have been simply too much work and simply dreadful, revealing at the same time his classic Hollywood view of cinema as pure entertainment. But to write that 'scripting is only functional' is to misunderstand the complex and thick storyline and ignore the constraints placed on both the filmmaker and the scriptwriter by the Communist State. Let us begin our analysis with the title of the film. Boa Deng is the name of the 'strong and [not-so] compliant heroine.' It is a rather common Laotian name. The character is meant to stand for the many ordinary, impoverished Lao women who resisted arranged marriage, the lure of capitalism and its corrupting ways, and chose to defend Lao traditions and way of life. But she is also not aestheticized as an armed patriot, as well-meaning militant Western directors like Joris Ivens, Marceline Loridan, and Jean Pierre Sergent, so beautifully portrayed her, in their 1970 film, *Le Peuple et ses fusils*. Nor is she portrayed in the kind of propagandist revolutionary posture like the one that can be found in the Lao National Museum. Throughout the film, her characterization is much more nuanced.

The screenplay is, in fact, an adaptation of a play *Hom Kin Bouadeng* (Flagrant Red Lotus) and a short-story written by Dara Kanlaya (who was also the editor of the film) that was performed on the stage in 1985. Kanlaya wrote a story in the 1960s

about an incident she had heard as a child, of a girl who had been raped by her stepfather and could not tell her mother about it. When the girl finds herself pregnant, she kills herself. To this was added the girl's love for a boy who was not rich enough to satisfy her ambitious mother. The boy leaves to fight at the front, and another richer young man falls in love with the girl and tries to help her out of her predicament. But knowing her stepfather to be a spy and fearing that if she accuses him he will create trouble for her boyfriend, she refuses to take this course. Then the boyfriend's death is reported and all hope is lost.

(Diamond 2005: 44–45)

The Ministry of Information and Culture did not endorse such a tragic vision and dramatic ending and demanded that changes be made. In both the play and the film, the boyfriend is wounded but not killed; in the film, viewers do not know whether the girl was raped – the filmmaker uses ellipses very effectively – or had only suffered an attempted attack (as the heroine in a socialist drama must be pure); and the villainous stepfather is punished. This version received praise from both the army and government. As journalist and theater critic Catherine Diamond (2005: 44–45) put it:

In order to write about the heroine realistically, Kanlaya researched the lives of the women in villages who supported the troops involved in the struggle for liberation. The main idea she wanted to communicate with her protagonist was that Red Lotus had to struggle every step of the way, that she continually had to fight to succeed. Over forty people were involved in the production, which played to audiences in the thousands.

What needs to be underlined is the fact that both the writer and the filmmaker had to negotiate with representatives of the state and compromise in order for the story to pass government censorship and the script be approved. Critics have been quick to attach the label ‘Socialist-Realism’ because it is a socialist state-sponsored film. But should we also assume that the *Red Lotus* mimics a socialist-realist style, as Elley’s (1994) remark comparing it to ‘Vietnamese pix of the period’ makes evident.³ Although Vietnamese influence can certainly be detected beyond the scriptwriting, it would be perhaps more fruitful to identify the ways it departs from Vietnamese Socialist Realism. So even though it appear to combines a love-story with a particular kind of ‘revolutionary fervor’ Vietnamese style, Som Ock Southiponh succeeds in representing political commitment not as some kind of didactic, edifying lesson for all viewers to accept. He follows a much less didactic path and constructs, first and foremost, a film narrative that is a fictional work of art. *Red Lotus* is thus not simply an ideological exposé; it is, I contend, the first Laotian auteur film that is also concerned with film form.

The first sequence of the film, in fact, supports my contention and undermines the force of the more conventional, socialist realist sequences, with its deep focus on traditional village life that contrasts with the modern, and of course, corrupt, ways of urban dwellers who slavishly follow Western customs and styles – the night club scenes of Laotian dancing to a French *chanson* and English rock music may betray what might be regarded as the backwardness of Socialist realism as a film style. That is not to say that *Red Lotus* is not politically or ideologically correct. It certainly imposes a socialist vision of the civil war that tore Laos and its inhabitants apart, and is not neutral in the way it endorses the actions of the Pathet Lao army.

But *Red Lotus* is much more than a propaganda film, as young diasporic Laotian–Americans tend to view it. Right after the title credit, which viewers realize is made of an elaborate silk weave, moviegoers peer into puzzling,

fragmentary shots of filmmaking, Laotian style. Although the film narrative appears to begin with a quaint sequence depicting rural life, with traditional ox-driven carts driven by Laotian villagers, it actually begins with images of filmmaking and the film apparatus, a credit sequence that lasts barely a minute, and is accompanied by the haunting, original score by composer Douangmysay Lykaya: the traditional film clap is replaced by a beautiful and complex Laotian silk weave that reveals a close-up, head shot of Somchith Vongsam Ang, the actress who plays Boa Deng, having her hair combed. Intercut with white credit titles on a black background are other enigmatic shots: a close-up shot of the wheels of a wheelchair; a medium shot of the actress's hair being combed by another woman (who plays the role of the hairstylist), the entire scene illuminated by a gaffer or key grip who cuts across the frame and alternately casts the scene in light and darkness, revealing the essence of a 'low budget' production, the actress is applying her own make-up, without the help of a makeup artist; another shot of the cameraman/director of photography pulled on the wheelchair by two assistants, which implies that tracks are not being laid out to shoot tracking shots; a brief shot of the film crew; and, finally, a shot of a man, busy working on a manual editing table, who appears to be lost in a forest of film negative, and who at the last second, casts his gaze toward the spectator.

What are we to make of this peculiar one-minute sequence? Is it simply a disguised homage to the actors and members of the film crew? Or is it operating a bit like Godard and Gorin's opening credit sequence in their 1972 Maoist-period film, *Tout va bien*, which is a *mise-en-abîme* of, and meditation on, the medium of cinema? If that is indeed the case, Som Ock Southiponh succeeded in alerting viewers that woven into the Socialist-Realist film-strip are more delicate and precious threads that tell the untold stories of the resilience, valor, and solidarity of the Lao people. This scene, cast in light and shadow, echoes an incredibly beautiful shot of Boa Deng, working on a traditional loom. Is this not, in a judicious and self-reflexive fashion, a way of foregrounding the work of the Lao filmmaker as artist-artisan while, at the same time, reminding Laotian viewers of their own artistic tradition, and particularly, the traditional silk-weavers who are still busy at work even though they were once shunned by the communist regime? With the renovation policy of the mid-1980s, that was more amenable to entrepreneurship and tourism, weaving as an art was once again promoted.

Like filmmaking, the process of weaving elaborate, hand-woven silks requires time and patience. The setting up of a loom by hand can take a few weeks for a complicated pattern, and the weaving of a complex pattern can take up to six months. The patience of Som Ock Southiponh, the artist-filmmaker, has certainly been tested during the past two decades. In spite of the relative critical success of *Red Lotus*, he has not been able to shoot a second feature film since 1988. He and his wife opened a very successful bakery in the hope of raising enough money to start the first private production company in Vientiane. Five years of hard work paid off; Lao-Inter Arts, Inc. was founded

in 1994. Southiponh was able to direct another short documentary, *The Lao Lamvong*, about the most famous Laotian traditional dance. He also wrote and completed a 120-page script for a drama film about friendship, tentatively titled *Given Time* (Kala Vela), but was not successful in securing funds for this project. And it is not because he has been apathetic. Som Ock Southiponh was among seventeen filmmakers from all over the world to have been invited to participate in the inaugural Atelier du Festival [de Cannes] in 2005, a ten-day workshop that took place during the famed Festival. The workshop provided access to international financing opportunities, so that he and his fellow filmmakers could meet with producers, distributors, and international support fund managers who could potentially be interested in their projects. Unfortunately for Som Ock Southiponh, no foreign investors expressed interest in his project. Is the Laotian market for such independent films simply too small? He believes it to be so, and because there is more state funding for film projects of this kind, Som Ock Southiponh (1999) adds, 'The only thing we can hope for is that through co-production, meaning 100 per cent foreign financing and 100 per cent Laotian talent, Laotian cinema can keep, at least momentarily, its artisans active until better days arrive.'

It is now time to take stock of the factors that have inhibited the emergence of a 'domestic Laotian cinema culture, one that is independent and that captures the essence of Laos as a country, its people, and its deep-rooted culture and arts' (Som 1999). First, government subsidies are almost non-existent. Only one or two films a year will get financial backing, and they are usually devoted to record 'government conferences or state celebrations.' Second, as I have tried to suggest by examining Som Ock Southiponh's *Red Lotus*, an indigenous Lao cinema barely exists and may run the danger of being displaced by a cinema that may be regarded as Lao simply because it features Lao subjects. *Nerakhoon* (The Betrayal; 2007) and *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* (Good Morning, Luang Prabang; 2008) are perhaps the two most famous examples in recent years, and to which I can only refer here. Is the work of diasporic Lao filmmakers and videographers part of Lao national production? What about co-productions like *Sabaidee Luang Prabang*, billed as 'the movie that we all have been waiting for out of Laos [sic]' ('Sabaidee' 2008)? *Sabaidee Luang Prabang*, a commercial, cross-border romance that uses the formulaic Hollywood boy-meets-girl film script, resembles a collection of 'tourist vignettes.' And yes, it has already broken box-office records in Laos. In a mere seven-day period, it pulled 300 million kip in Vientiane, and was expected to reach 400 million when it opened in Southern provinces. Attendance has been said to be very good: 500 people on average in a screening at the ITECC cinema theater, with five screenings a day. In Thailand, it was also a runaway success, shown in 700 cinemas. But being a box-office hit does not signify that it meets our (rather generous) criteria for being a thoughtful, auteur film. For the Thai blogger, Wutthipan (2008), 'this is the first real Lao movie in 33 years.' He hopes that 'this will be a launching pad for a cultural revival.' *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* is a Lao/Thai movie starring Bangkok-based

Australian–Lao, Ananda Everingham and Lao beauty queen Khamly Philavong. And this is the kind of movie that is being endorsed by the Laotian government. It is certainly not the same kind of Laotian cinema ‘revival’ as the one imagined by Laotian filmmaker Som Ock Southiponh. Because of the undeniable commercial success of *Sabaidee Luang Prabang*, a sequel to it is being shot as we speak. And ‘The plan is to make a trilogy with the same actress playing different characters with different Thai leading men’ (Wise Kwai 2009).⁴

And finally, the most powerful reason why Laotian cinema ‘will remain a dream in the heads of a few Laotian filmmakers’ (Som Ock Southiponh 1999) is the competition from Thai television, which appeals to large segments of the Lao people. According to theater scholar and journalist Catherine Diamond, ‘Today it is Thai television that claims large audiences, not only through Thai drama serials but also by serving as the main conduit for western programmes’ (2005: 50, endnote 16). Thai television broadcasts ten channels to Laos’s three. In addition, Laos has experienced a big boom in video rentals and cheap illegal copies. Some Lao collectively buy a VCR to watch comedies, love stories, music-dance videos, Chinese martial arts dramas, and European war films; but pornography keeps them in business. In villages many people have satellite television that helps them tune in to the rest of the world via Thai television, since Lao and Thai languages are similar enough for Lao to understand. Glen Lewis writes, ‘In 1994, [the Thai] Shinawatra’s IBC group was involved in developing television in Laos, until the Lao PDR government decreed the experiment undesirable as it was circulating content “detrimental to the Lao way of life”’ (cited in Diamond, 2005: 50, endnote 16). In fact, as Diamond (2005) put it:

In May 2004, the Laos Ministry of Information and Culture put into force a ban on Thai television programmes being shown in public places such as bars and restaurants, in order to prevent Thailand’s ‘cultural domination’. The ban does not affect viewing Thai television shows in private homes.

(2005: 51, endnote 52)

Conclusion

As we have seen, there are many factors that have conspired against a truly independent Laotian cinema. We have examined a few examples that seem to suggest that Laotian cinema will continue to face a rather uncertain and bleak future. The fact that no domestic private production companies have been able to raise enough money to finance the new feature-length film from the most distinguished Laotian filmmaker in the person of Som Ock Southiponh does not bode well for the future. Moreover, the lack of exhibition venues, with only one movie theater with two screens in the capital city of Vientiane, and those mainly devoted to a commercial cinema that is partial to coffer-filling

films like *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* and its derivative sequels, will not improve the situation in the short term. And more importantly, the competition from Thai television and transnational satellite broadcasting will continue to hinder the development of an indigenous Laotian cinema. Although new research on the impact of satellite television on the Lao viewing communities still needs to be done in a more sustained fashion, it is certain that Thai television exerts an incredible pull on Laotian audience. But they are cautionary tales.

I want to close with another revealing cultural cross-border incident between Laos and Thailand. In February 2007, 'Lao government knocks Thai soap off the air,' headlined *The Nation* of 28 February 2007. At the center of the controversy was a Thai soap opera, *Phleng Rak Song Fang Kong* (Love Song on the Banks of the Mekong), a love story between a young Thai man and a Laotian woman, played by 'Lao-Bulgarian actress Alexandra Bounxouay' in the role of 'the beautiful Champa,' the latest episode in this sensitive question over national representation. This time the Laotian authorities were particularly upset by several aspects of the portrayal of Laotian traditional customs, which they saw as being represented inaccurately and in a negative light in this daytime drama. The Lao officials 'were not comfortable with the fact that Champa was an 'illegitimate child' in the series, as her mother had no husband' ('Lao Govt' 2007). According to an official at the Lao Embassy in Bangkok, 'It's against Lao culture to have a child outside of marriage. Thais might be okay with it, but not Lao.' Moreover, according to the report, 'Champa plays a tourist guide who becomes romantically involved with a young Thai man. The relationship develops quickly. Apparently, a little too quickly', so much so that the official believes 'It's misleading that a Lao woman could be such an easy woman.' To compound to the problem, 'The dialogue used in the series is also a dialect that no Lao community uses, as many Thai stars, including Sukolwat Kanaros are unable to speak Lao properly and fluently, he said.' 'So if you cannot speak Lao, you shouldn't pretend you can and then speak in such an ugly accent,' said the official. According to the report, 'Another scene considered humiliating to Laos occurs when Champa throws a white frangipani – the national flower of Laos – into the dustbin.' The incensed official insisted that 'You might get angry with your boyfriend who hands you the flower, but the national flower should not be thrown away in that manner. Why didn't the producer use a rose or something else, rather than our national flower?' The Thai authorities must have convinced the television producers to be more culturally sensitive to their poorer neighbor. They probably did not want history to repeat itself. One remembers that 'A false newspaper report that Thai soap opera star Suvanant Kongying had insulted the Cambodian people sparked riots that led to the destruction and looting of the Thai Embassy here as well as dozens of Thai-owned businesses, hotels and factories' (Paddock 2003). The Thai government did not want another such incident to occur. Television and daytime drama can be said to have played an inordinate role in the devastation of Thai interests in Cambodia. Economic stakes are today higher because Lao PDR has now the capacity to provide much electricity to Thailand.

Can an independent, low-budget, and unfashionable Laotian cinema re-emerge in our time? Perhaps it can, but only if private financial self-interest and public economic considerations are placed aside, a conjuncture that only an independent artistic visionary and hard-working artisan/auteur like Som Ock Southiponh can imagine. And rather than compromising his cinematic ethos to popular taste and state directives, Southiponh has devoted himself to a cinematic form that does not necessarily shun popular success, but has certainly divested itself of the kind of transparent, illusionistic cinema that constitutes the main fare for audiences all over the world. Southiponh still believes that he can engage the world by working patiently through ideas and by crafting an original cinematic art that is both 'modest' and 'unpopular,' that is to say, quintessentially 'Lao.' Let us hope that he succeeds.

Notes

- 1 I have relied on Thai newspaper accounts of this controversy. More research needs to be done to present the Laotian perspective, which may be difficult to get beyond this cursory report because very little about this quarrel was reported in Laotian dailies like *The Vientiane Times*.
- 2 Soopsip reported that 'More than Bt3 million has been invested in the new edition' and that '57 copies of the film Mak Tae Loke Talueng (Lucky Loser) costing more than 2 million baht, were destroyed by GTH Company at an event witnessed by co-producer BBTB Production Company and Kantana Film Labs' (cited in Wise Kwai 2006).
- 3 The Variety critic is actually not too far off. Diamond (2005: 44–45) writes that 'The four-act, two-hour play emerged from a special six-month workshop conducted by a Russian-trained writer from Hanoi who came to Vientiane to assist in the development of Lao theatre. Not only were all the writers involved novice playwrights but the actors, too, were first-time performers'.
- 4 When actor 'Pe' Arak Amornsupasiri was initially cast in Sabaidee Luang Prabang 2, the gossip press hounded him with questions about how his girlfriend Koy Ratchawin felt about him going to Laos to work on a romance. Pe said that Koy should not be worried because 'Thai girls are much more beautiful' (Wise Kwai 2009).

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4 Screening the crisis of monetary masculinity in Rithy Panh's *One Night After the War* and *Burnt Theatre*¹

Boreth Ly

Introduction: Rithy Panh and his films

Cambodia is known for its ancient stone temples of Angkor and not for its national cinema. And if the world knows about film produced in Cambodia, it is probably attributed to King Norodom Sihanouk.² King Sihanouk produced, directed, and starred in many of his own films, and he purportedly subjected many foreign diplomats to viewings of his films during their visits to Cambodia in the 1960s and 1970s. If King Sihanouk's films can be considered to be representative of Cambodian national cinema, then Rithy Panh's films represent a transnational Cambodian cinema.

Rithy Panh is a Cambodian-French filmmaker who was born in Phnom Penh in 1964. He survived the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) and in 1980, he escaped to the refugee camps in Thailand. He eventually immigrated to France (Blum-Reid 2003). In 1985, he enrolled in a film school in France and started to make films about his experiences in the refugee camps situated on the border between Cambodia and Thailand. Panh is known internationally for his documentary films, such as *Land of the Wandering Souls* (2001), *S-21 The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), and *The People of Angkor* (2003) (see Norindr 2006). In addition, he is also known for features films such as *One Night After the War* (1998), *Rice People* (2003), *Burnt Theatre* (2006), and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (2008; *The Sea Wall*). In 2002, he founded the Bophana Audio Visual Resource Center in Phnom Penh City. One of its missions is to recover and to preserve Cambodian memories, culture, and identity captured on film before the Khmer genocide period (1975–1979) that had been virtually lost during the war. The film archive is accessible to people of all nationalities and the documents are cataloged in three languages: Khmer, French, and English.³

In this chapter I will single out and analyze two films by Rithy Panh, *One Night After the War* (1998) and *Burnt Theatre* (2005), that I believe profoundly capture the crisis of traditional notions of masculinity in contemporary Cambodian society precipitated by the deepening penetration of neoliberal capitalism.

Of money and masculinity: a fictional film within a fictional film

One Night After the War was released in 1998 and screened abroad and in private venues in Cambodia during the same year. It was one of the first films to address the legacy of trauma and memory in the post-Khmer Rouge genocide period. The film narrates the tragic death of Savannah, a 28-year-old ex-soldier who falls in love with a 19-year-old 'bar girl' (prostitute) named Srei Peouv. The story is told from the perspective of Srei Peouv, who is working as a waitress, and who had a daughter, Bophana, with Savannah. Srei Peouv interrupts and interrogates the retrospective narrative of the film in a voiceover whenever social injustice comes to the fore in the story; she is a victim of oppression in this patriarchal society.

We are told in the beginning that the film is set in August 1992, and that the 'King Father' (King Norodom Sihanouk), the patriarch of the nation, has just returned to Cambodia after years of living in exile. On that night curfew is lifted and nightlife returns to the streets of Phnom Penh. In brief, the film takes place in a period after the collapse of Pol Pot's communist regime (1975 to 1979). It is during this re-emergent capitalist period that our traumatized and poverty-stricken ex-soldier, Savannah, along with his two best friends, Maly, and Phal, arrives in Phnom Penh on an old train, one night after the war.

The film begins with a long aerial shot of a dilapidated train carrying farmers, food stock, and ex-soldiers, moving slowly across a landscape dotted with rice paddies and palm trees before finally penetrating the metropolis. This old train is a phallic symbol of modernity and technological progress, imported to Southeast Asia during the colonial era (Del Testa 2005; see also Edwards 2008).

Let us return to the story of Savannah and Srei Peouv. They meet for the first time at the cinema. He does not have enough money to purchase a movie ticket that costs 2,000 riels, so Srei Peouv offers to pay for him. Subsequently, we, the audience, watch Savannah as he consumes a locally made Cambodian film in the movie theater. The scene we are privy to captures three men, accompanied by prostitutes, drinking on a private boat:

Wealthy Man: Sav, Veun, Please sit down.

Sav: How did you buy this paradise?

Veun: It's like being in Europe! Where did you find her? She's beautiful!

Wealthy Man: In Cambodia, money is power!

The film clip ends with the wealthy man flaunting his money and masculinity by stuffing dollar bills down a prostitute's bra. We are not told the title of the film shown within the film but it is clear that this image of money and power represents contemporary local Cambodian notions of masculinity and sexual prowess. It would be tempting to interpret this film clip as belonging to a locally produced film, even though it is in actual fact a fictional film made by one of

Rithy Panh's assistants.⁴ Nevertheless, it comprises a decadently capitalist, masculinist image, one diametrically opposed to the poverty-stricken, sexually deprived, and traumatized ex-soldier, who is now inspired to emulate this filmic image of masculinity and power. In the face of this image, Savannah is not only poor, he is also emasculated by the fact that even his movie ticket has to be paid for by a woman and a prostitute at that. He can never afford to have sex with her because we know that Srei Peouv only sleeps with wealthy men.

I argue that Rithy Panh's fictional films, *One Night After the War* (1998) and *Burnt Theatre* (2005), address the crisis of what I called 'monetary masculinity' in contemporary Cambodian society. It is this emasculation of traditional notions of masculinity that is arguably a major underlying cause of violence against women in contemporary Cambodian society, as we shall see. Moreover, in these two films, Panh explores how transnational and global investments in the Cambodian economy in recent years have destabilized the traditional political economy of gender roles in Cambodia (Derks 2006; 2008). Shifting economic gender roles destabilize (emasculate) traditional Cambodian notions of masculinity, which are defined by symbolic association with military power. In the new global and transnational era, wealthy businessmen are the new and ideal form of masculinity threatening traditional notions of military manliness. The new symbol of masculinity is synonymous with money and power, a kind of virility that I call 'monetary masculinity.' In addition to supporting his immediate family members, a wealthy businessman can also practice polygamy, fund mistresses, and pay for prostitutes. Wealth is a symbolic form of sexual virility and prowess, replacing traditional notions of masculinity that focus on physicality: being tough, hard working, virile, and dominant in a sexual relationship. In brief, material and symbolic capital encapsulates the crisis of masculinity in contemporary Cambodian society.

I begin my discussion of the crisis of monetary masculinity by tracing the archetype of masculinity in traditional Cambodian arts and literature and how this particular theme is played out in *One Night After the War* and *Burnt Theatre*. I then examine how this newly emerged model of monetary masculinity marginalizes traditional notions of masculinity in Cambodian culture, furthering the effeminate characterization of the present monarch and thus the geopolitical body of the Kingdom of Cambodia. I conclude with the argument that, although both Cambodian men and women suffer from this crisis of monetary masculinity, it is women who pay the heavier price for this sense of gender and sexual inadequacy among Cambodian men.

Becoming Hanu(man): the rape scene in *One Night After the War*

The narrator of *One Night After the War* informs us that Savannah has been traumatized by the violence he witnessed during the years he spent as a soldier, and that his entire family had been killed by the brutal Pol Pot regime.

Savannah became a soldier when he was very young, and he identifies with military notions of masculinity and power. He is, however, dirt poor. Although he conforms to traditional models of masculinity in terms of profession and his use of the body, he is emasculated by his political and economic circumstances. He lacks 'monetary masculinity.' It is this societal pressure to be financially successful in the post-war era that eventually contributes to Savannah's tragic death at the end of the film.

Pre-modern Cambodian culture was a military culture, and idealization of this military culture still prevails in contemporary Cambodia. One of the ideal (and traditional) images of masculinity in Cambodian culture is that of a powerful soldier (a general or colonel) who can enforce as well as break the laws according to his motives and whims. This ideal masculinity harkens back to Hanuman, a character from the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Indian epic poem, the *Ramayana*. The earliest written Khmer version of the Indian-derived epic poem is called the *Ramakerti*, which dates to circa the sixteenth century and is written in Middle Khmer.⁵ The verse text was used for recitation to accompany a dance drama. One particular episode from the *Ramakerti* or the *Reamker* was invented in mainland Southeast Asia (it is seen in both Cambodia and Thailand): the episode of 'Hanuman and Savanmacha.' The short episode is about the Monkey King, Hanuman, who was a general in Preah Ream (Rama)'s army. Hanuman and his monkey soldiers helped construct a causeway to the island of Lanka to rescue Preah Ream's wife, Neang Sida. However, one of the daughters of the demon king, Preah Reab, the mermaid Savanmacha, instructed sea creatures to obstruct this endeavor. Hanuman was called upon to solve the problem; he won Savanmacha over by seducing her. At first she rejected his sexual advances, but she gave in at the end.

The 'Hanuman and Savanmacha' episode of the *Reamker* is narrated on a mural painting situated on the interior of the ordination hall of the nineteenth-century Buddhist temple of Wat Bo, in Siem Reap, as well as on the murals at the Silver Pagoda, dated to the early twentieth century (Giteau 2004). The Silver Pagoda is located inside the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh (Nepote and Gamonet 2000; San 2007). In addition, the episode forms part of the standard repertoire in Khmer classical dance performance (Schapiro and Thompson 1999). In most classical dance performances, Hanuman holds a phallic dagger that symbolizes his virility and masculinity. He uses this dagger to conquer the feisty Savanmacha. In addition, monkeys are considered to be wild and sexually charged animals in the *Ramakerti*. There is an expression in the Khmer language used to insult the nouveaux riche: *Markudt Svay*, which literally translates into English as 'crowned monkey' (Pou 1992). In other words, one may put a diamond crown on an ape but it would have no effect on his social status because he remains a wild thing. Monkeys are thus characterized in Cambodian culture as untamed, sexually charged animals that are usually associated with masculine sexual prowess, a type of masculinity closely associated with men in the military. In fact, many soldiers in Cambodia and

Thailand have images of Hanuman tattooed on their bodies because they believe that Hanuman has the power to protect them from bullets and to make them invisible to their enemy (Keo 2009). Moreover, as explained by Proeung Chhieng, who was one of the first few male dancers to perform the role of Hanuman,

During the *Reamker* we see a great many scenes of monkeys, but for us Khmers, the most important monkey is Hanuman. Hanuman is the faithful devoted servant of his master Prince Rama who is willing to sacrifice himself for noble causes. But Hanuman is also an example to us all, he is an intelligent, resourceful commander. Any nations led by Hanuman could not fail to defeat its enemies.⁶

The seductive dance between Hanuman and Savanmacha from the *Reamker* mirrors the social dances between heterosexual couples during Cambodian weddings and other occasions where the *ramvong* (literally ‘dance in a circle’ in Khmer) sets the stage for erotic and seductive interactions between young and old couples in Cambodian society.⁷ It is probable that the Cambodian *ramvong* is derived from a similar dance in Laos called the *lamvong* (Korat 2003). However, in the Laotian context, particularly in Luang Prabang, both old and young couples not only dance but also participate in what Shirin Neshat (Morin and Farmer 2009), an Iranian-American artist, has called ‘the Game of Desire.’ In Laos, the *lamvong* is a genre of song (and dance) with erotic lyrics. For instance, a man would sing ‘You, with the curvy waist and soft breasts, I’ve come to beg for you,’ and his female partner would reply: ‘Open my skirt! So you can see the window to paradise! There you can see the God’s mouth in the sky!’ (Morin and Farmer 2009). In short, these dances provide a setting and mood for the art of courting between heterosexual couples.

It is important to note that in Cambodian classical court dance, all male characters are danced by women, with only one exception: Hanuman is performed by a male dancer. Panh makes explicit references to Hanuman as the masculine archetype in Cambodian classical arts in his film, *One Night After the War*. Three specific scenes from *One Night After the War* resonate with and parallel to the ‘Hanuman and Savanmacha’ episode. The first scene revolves around the second encounter between Savannah and Srei Poeuv at a dance club called *Tonle Sap* (The Great Lake). Savannah spends the evening drinking Angkor beer and staring lugubriously at Srei Poeuv as she dances the *ramvong* with one patron after another. Finally, Savannah approaches Srei Poeuv during one of her breaks and asks her to dance with him. She flatly refuses because she has to entertain her clients. He takes her away from one of her male clients and subsequently persuades her to dance with him. What follows is probably one of the most sensuous and elegant *ramvong* dances ever captured on camera. The hard and yet supple hand gestures and movements of Savannah’s sturdy body represent the ideal male body in Cambodian culture. We see him sway behind Srei Peouv’s soft, graceful, and curvaceous

Figure 4.1 Savannah and Srei Poeuv dance the *Ramvong*.

Source: *One Night After the War* (1998). Photo reproduced with permission of Rithy Panh.

body. The entire scene is illuminated by the shimmering gold evening gown she wears, echoing the bright tungsten light bulbs illuminating the dance floor of the nightclub. The two beautiful bodies move gracefully and harmoniously around each other, like the rotations of the moon around the sun. They sometimes overlap each other's circle and sometimes mirror each other, calling to mind the round-shaped movie lens of the camera.

Savannah's and Srei Peouv's gendered body movements reflect the binary gendered character personalities in traditional Cambodian society (Ledgerwood 1996). The two diametrically opposed character personalities are *charek srei* (female character) and *charek pros* (male character). The ideal male body is *reng peng*, 'hard and firm' versus the female body, *tuon pluong*, 'gentle and docile' (Phong 2008). Moreover, the woman's gendered body movements enable her to look her partner in the eyes as she dances. In fact, we see Srei Peouv gazing into Savannah's calm and seductive eyes twice during this short dance interval (Figure 4.1).

Savannah's initial seductive dance overture to Srei Poeuv mirrors that of the erotic dance between Hanuman and Savanmacha in the *Reamker*. Moreover, the name of the dance club, *Tonle Sap*, has an aquatic reference that lends itself fortuitously and aptly to the erotic dance between Hanuman and Savanmacha and the two main characters in the film. This seductive dance sustains Savannah's erotic mood throughout the evening, which culminates in his raping Srei Peouv one night after she gets off work. Prior to the rape, in the second scene that resonates with and parallels the 'Hanuman and Savanmacha' episode, Savannah takes Srei Peouv back to his uncle's art studio,

Figure 4.2 Savannah takes his Hanuman mask off and rapes Srei Peouv.

Source: *One Night After the War* (1998). Photo reproduced with permission of Rithy Panh.

and we see her fiddling with one of the *pinpeat* musical instruments like an innocent girl playing with a toy. Savannah disappears into the dark studio, and emerges from the darkness wearing the mask of Hanuman. By wearing this mask he literally takes on the role of the virile and masculine monkey general, and is possessed by the potent spirit of this character. He takes off the mask and rapes Srei Peouv (Figure 4.2).⁸

As I have mentioned earlier, in Cambodian court dance, the only role performed by a male dancer is the role of Hanuman; female dancers take on other male roles.⁹ Thus one can interpret the manliness embodied by the character of Hanuman as an embodiment of the *ur* masculinity in the traditional society of Cambodia. Subsequently, after the rape, as Srei Peouv hurries away, Savannah chases after her, gives her all the cash he has in his pocket, and begs her to stay the night. In disgust, she spits on his money and walks away angrily. Clearly, he could not afford to pay for sex with her, so he raped her.

The next scene portrays Savannah engaged in a kickboxing match, one of the most masculine sports in Cambodian culture (see Kitiarsa 2008). He wants to make money to compensate for his lack of monetary manliness. Later on in the film, he apologizes to Srei Peouv and begs her to forgive him for forcing himself on her. However, unbeknownst to him, she has already fallen in love with him.

The third scene that echoes the '*Hanuman and Savanmacha*' episode revolves around the couple's rendezvous on a lake located outside Phnom Penh City. Savannah takes Srei Peouv out on a picnic; he uses the money he won from the kickboxing match to buy her a lavish meal. We see Savannah as he

swims to Srei Peouv, who is seated on a raft situated on the edge of the water like a mermaid. She begins to cry:

Savannah: Why are you crying?

Srei Peouv: I am so happy. No one's ever loved me like you. It's the first time . . . that I really feel loved.

Savannah, embodying traditional Cambodian notions of masculinity and manliness, has, in part, won Srei Peouv over. She has stopped working as a 'bar girl.' However, unable to afford better, they have to live in an abandoned old train which is comparable to the dilapidated train that snaked its way into the city at the beginning of the film, except that the train is now static (impotent) and Savannah is entirely broke. He fails to make enough money to support Srei Peouv, so she has no option but to return to her old profession. The film ends with Savannah participating in the robbery of a Chinese jewelry store, accompanied by his friend, Phal, who ends up betraying him. As the police chase them in the streets, Phal shoots and kills Savannah to cover up his own participation in the crime. Savannah dies tragically in the arms of Srei Peouv.

Savannah's death is brought about by his desire to prove his 'monetary masculinity.' His failure to be a 'ricewinner' symbolizes emasculation for a man in contemporary Cambodian society. This emasculation echoes the narrator's words at the beginning of the film when she informs us that Maly, another one of Savannah's best friends, refused to return to his village after the war; he had been away for so long that his wife had to sell all their land to feed their children. She eventually married another, a man who was financially potent.

Burnt Theatre (2006)

We see the issue of masculinity in crisis featured again in Panh's 2006 docu-drama, *Burnt Theatre*. The title of the film refers to the Bassac Theater designed by Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann in 1966. The National Theater survived the Khmer Rouge era but was burnt down in a fire on 11 February 1994. This burnt theater sets the stage for Panh's film. *Burnt Theatre* is a memorial and homage to the history of this National Theater; the date of the fire is marked on a half-burnt calendar and is uttered and repeated by one of the actors in the film. Many stories are told within the film but I would like to single out one that is relevant to the topic at hand: the lack of capital as a form of castration for traditional heterosexual men in contemporary Cambodian society.

One of the overarching themes in *Burnt Theatre* relates to how global capital investment has slowly eroded traditional Cambodian arts and cultural values. The film interrogates, moreover, the impact that global investment has on the lives and living conditions of traditional artists and actors in contemporary

Cambodia. A case in point is the story of Hoeun and Doeun, two aging actors. Doeun is a dramatic actor who performed in Shakespeare's plays as well as the lead role in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. In order to make a living, however, Doeun has resorted to acting in *karaoke* videos. Likewise, Hoeun is a multitalented actor, poet, and an experienced shadow-puppet master. The following dialogue between the two actors captures poignantly the crisis of 'monetary masculinity':

Doeun: What is the matter? What's on your mind?

Hoeun: I miss home! It has been four or five years since I last returned. My children won't recognize me. I am ashamed to face my relatives and neighbors in my village, especially my wife. Poor woman, I have never earned enough money to help her out. She raised our children on her own. I can barely support myself.

Doeun: This is simply a problem of discipline. You can save up the little that you earn and over time you will have enough savings. You have lots of talent: you can make leather puppets, you can compose and recite poetry, and you can sing.

Hoeun: You must understand that I am like a fisherman. I caught lots of fishes, but there is no market to sell them. They ended up rotting away and wasted. I have been trying desperately to sustain my love and my illusion in the arts.

Doeun: I thought my life has been miserable, but your life sounds more difficult and frustrating. I can hardly find a gig these days. Luckily, I appear in *karaoke* videos once in a while to make some money. I am aging and the markets are looking for younger actors. Soon, I will be abandoned in a parking lot like an old car.

Hoeun: Why did I continue to sustain a life in a poverty-stricken profession in the arts? Most of my friends who joined the army have become generals and colonels. Their lives seem very successful. I can never be successful. As if the spirits of the arts are holding me back. The spirits have put a curse on me to be eternally married to the arts.¹⁰

Clearly, the market-driven metropolis of Phnom Penh has contributed to the displacement of these two male characters' individual and cultural identities, and the devaluation of Cambodia's traditional arts.

In the shadow of the mother: a story within stories

Not surprisingly, Panh uses traditional arts such as shadow play to challenge the neoliberal impact of global capitalism on traditional Cambodian values and arts. For example, in one of the narrative strands in *Burnt Theatre*, a traditional Cambodian shadow play is performed. The source of light that illuminates the screen comes from an oil lamp that casts shadows to suggest a village setting. It tells the story of a young boy who herds buffalo while his mother weaves

under their traditional house on stilts. The boy tells his mother that he cannot bear to see his family members suffer from working so hard; he wants to quit going to school in order to earn money to help his family out. The mother consoles her son by telling him that she works hard to earn a living from weaving: it took her one week to complete one silk skirt, which provided funds to support him and pay for his schooling. In addition, the mother's poverty means that she has no wealth to bequeath him. The only precious thing she could give him is an education to enable him to be independent. She urges him towards education so that he can avoid being ignorant and poor. The story ends with the boy taking his mother's advice to heart and returning to school.

Panh has deliberately chosen to tell the stories of village life through shadow play, an art form that relies on light and puppets to cast shadows on the screen. It is a traditional art that aesthetically approximates the imported modern medium of cinema. Within the shadow play, it is the son who feels obligated to shoulder the financial burden of supporting the family when the father is absent. Until the son can do so, however, it is the mother who must sustain the family in the absence of the phallic figure. She weaves silk skirts and sells them to support her family. Interestingly, the skill of weaving and its association with women echoes what Sigmund Freud writes in his essay on 'Femininity':

We should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement of femininity and vagina. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing to grow at maturity the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together. If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of a lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as an *idée fixe*, I am, of course defenseless.

(Freud 1961: 164)

According to Freud, a woman invented weaving by plaiting the pubic hair and threads to cover her lack of a penis. While Freud's insight sheds light on gendered cultural constructions intertwining weaving and the unconscious, I find it useful to extend Freud's interpretation to the symbolic association between weaving, capital, and the vagina. Thus a woman's skill in weaving threads into cloth, as an extension of her pubic hair that is used to conceal her genitals, becomes both a symbolic and practical skill for her. In the context of Panh's film, the gendering of weaving as a feminine task creates a fraught relationship with the forms of capital discussed above. Here it is the womb (mother) that helps to sustain and to protect the family. Extending this argument, it is the daughters in the family who inherit the mother's weaving skills and relation to the market.

Let us now return to the lack of 'monetary masculinity' that prevents Hoeun from returning to see his wife and children in the village. Clearly, he longs to see his family in the village but is too financially impotent (broke) to face his wife and children. A subtle and poignant scene from *Burnt Theatre* powerfully captures this emotional predicament. Doeun, the aging and poor *karaoke* star, calls the radio station and puts in a request for an old Khmer pop song by Sin Sisamouth titled, *Thnom Snae* (Tender Love). He dedicates his request to Hoeun's wife and three children back in the village. As the music starts, the camera shifts and focuses on Hoeun, who is engaged in putting the finishing touches to a mural painting. The scene he is rendering is that of a peaceful village amidst a forest; he is giving the finishing touches to a group of grey monkeys. These monkeys are reminiscent of Hanuman, the monkey general from the *Reamker*, an archetype of traditional masculinity in Cambodian culture. As the radio plays the requested classic pop song, the two men sing the poetic lyrics, accompanied by the music coming from a cell phone. The pastoral landscape and village scene depicted on the mural serves as a backdrop. Moreover, the painted village sets up a poignant, idealized view of traditional Cambodian village life and arts that these two poverty-stricken, poetically imaginative men are trying desperately to hold onto. Ingeniously, Panh uses mural paintings and shadow plays as characters unto themselves; visually, they tell stories about vanishing traditional values and cultural identities, and the need to preserve them, all within the modern medium of cinema.

The two scenes captured in the shadow play and the serenade described above, set the tone of the overarching narrative of the film and illustrate powerfully how global capitalism has contributed to the erosion and eradication of traditional arts and values in contemporary Cambodia. Panh underscores how the deterioration of traditional cultural values affects an individual's notions of gender and sexuality.

As an artist and a poet, Hoeun has cultural capital but no monetary capital. He can only serenade his wife and children with a song from afar. The film ends with three competing and conflicting sounds. The first is made by Hoeun, who, out of frustration, chops down a cornfield that he has planted in the plot of land at the center of the burnt theater. This is a highly symbolic act of self-castration as well as a metaphor for the compromising of traditional Cambodian culture and identity by global capital. The second sound, which comes from the music and performance of a folk dance coming from the theatre troupe, reminds us of village life. The third comes from the sound of jackhammers echoing from across a distance (constructing a new resort hotel and casino), suggesting that global investment and real-estate development not only threaten to destroy traditional arts and culture, but will soon supplant this scene of modernity in ruin. We are left with an image of Hoeun, who has tears streaming down his cheeks as smoke rises from the burnt theater.

Unlike the old and dilapidated train that we see at the beginning of *One Night After the War*, which was a colonial import to Cambodia, the half-burnt National Theater is an edifice of the post-independence period, an era of nation-

building that also represents modernism in Cambodian art and architecture (Ross and Collins 2006). The burnt theater is thus a symbol of modernity in ruin and a statement about the failure of a nationalist project. A new era has emerged in Cambodia: the age of transnationalism and global investment. We see more skyscrapers, such as the Canadian Bank and Korean-sponsored buildings, dotting the cityscape of Phnom Penh year after year. Such buildings are mostly designed by foreign architects and thus have no signs of Cambodian national identity attached to them. They embody generic 'global architecture' that promises to transform Phnom Penh into a fantastic and futuristic city without national roots. In short, the gender diversity that characterizes the global postmodern has symbolically altered the masculinity generally associated with modernism (Brennan 2006).

Gender and masculinities: the geopolitical body of the nation

In review, in traditional Cambodian society, masculinity is usually characterized by men having strong bodies and their being virile as well as sexually dominant; this is a type of masculinity dictated by the work of an agrarian culture. Traditional notions of masculinity are additionally associated with military power. The traditional role of a man in Cambodian society is to till the land, fight battles when necessary, and provide food for his family.

The same transnational and global investment that penetrated the Cambodian economy brought with it changes in the definition of gender roles. According to Annuska Derks (2006), many Cambodian women are moving to the city to work in factories, and they send money back to their respective villages to support their families. Without doubt, these economic changes and gender-role reversals have contributed to the symbolic castration of traditional Cambodian men. Subsequently, there has been a major shift from traditional notions of masculinity to masculinities. I concur with Robert Connell who suggests that 'masculinities' is a far more useful term to characterize this gender shift because it encapsulates 'both the diversity and potential fluidity of the process involved in men being men' (Pease and Pringle 2001: 2; see also Clark 2004). Moreover, transnational men, such as Rithy Panh, are characterized by Stuart Hall as being 'post-feminist men.' They have been educated abroad and exposed to gender values different from those in traditional Cambodian society. According to Hall, this new gender and political regime creates a new image of masculinities:

It produced the new man before anyone was ever convinced he even existed. Advertising produced the image of the post-feminist man. Some of us cannot find him, but he is certainly there in the advertising. I do not know whether anybody is living with him currently but he's there, out there in the advertising.

(Hall 1997: 31–32)

Stuart Hall would be happy to know that this ideal 'post-feminist man' (I would put it in the plural, 'post-feminist men') that he describes above does exist outside the realm of advertisement. Rithy Panh is one of them. In fact, many Southeast Asian-born men (of all sexual orientations) of Panh's generation (he was born in 1964) or younger are 'post-feminist men.' An alternative term for 'post-feminist men' is 'queer.' The term 'queer' is defined concisely here as a lifestyle and culture that are inclusive of non-normative notions of gender and sexuality (Jagose 1990). For instance, 'queer' could include heterosexual women and men as well as citizens in the transgender community. In brief, these young, (trans)national male urbanites have been educated abroad, and thus have been shaped by a 'queer' aesthetic sensibility and political values. Moreover, they have adopted a 'queer' lifestyle. It is important to make clear here that being 'queer' does not mean one is a homosexual: homosexuality refers to one's sexual orientation and 'queer' simply refers to one's lifestyle and gender politics.

Furthermore, Norodom Sihamoni, the current King of Cambodia is 'queer.' He is a handsome and youthful-looking, unmarried 58-year-old man who was trained as a ballet dancer and is rumored to be a homosexual. Three related and politically subtle statements further confirm King Norodom Sihamoni's homosexuality and 'queer' identity. On 20 February 2004, the King Father Norodom Sihanouk made a rather odd political public statement. Apparently, the 81-year-old King Father saw images of gay marriages in San Francisco and decided to make a public announcement that same-sex marriage should be allowed in Cambodia. This public announcement came shortly before the King Father's abdication, which was in turn, followed by the ascension and coronation of his unmarried son on 29 October 2004. When reporters asked why King Sihamoni was still single, the King Father purportedly said, 'King Sihamoni loves women as his sisters' ('Cambodian King' 2004).

Traditionally, the king is an embodiment of virility. He needs to be virile so that he is able to procreate, producing male and female heirs to carry on the dynasty. Cambodian kings were known to have many concubines. Courtly masculinity, however, has been replaced by a homosexual king whose first love is ballet and not procreation. It is the effeminate image of the current sovereign, coupled with the long-established iconography of the female body as an allegory of the nation, that shaped the feminine nature of the geopolitical kingdom of Cambodia.¹¹ Looming aggressively in the background are menacing military leaders who through corruption have acquired their shares of traditional and 'monetary masculinity.' Despite the fact that the first Gay Pride parade took place in Phnom Penh city in 2004,¹² Hun Sen, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, has openly disowned his adopted daughter for engaging in a lesbian relationship and has thus underscored these prevailing notions of monetary masculinity and power.¹³

The new era of global investment has destabilized gender roles and the labor force; it has, in turn, contributed to the emasculation of traditional men, and particularly villagers, in contemporary Cambodian society. The newfound

wealth of businessmen and military men in the city has also enabled them to afford a variety of sexual ménages. This destabilization of traditional gender roles has also caused a shift from a singular masculinity to multiple masculinities. While the pluralist definition of masculinities has been embraced by urban and transnational Cambodian male elites, it is a source of constant struggle, conflict, and crisis for traditional Cambodian men who are rooted in, but displaced from, their village cultures. As I have argued, the male characters in Panh's two films are embodiments of this very gender conflict and crisis.

Sadly, women pay the heavier price for this sense of gender inadequacy among Cambodian men. Women remain victims in this troubled patriarchal system. A case in point is the violence against women by women themselves. Many pop singers, beauty queens, and actresses in Cambodia, who were coerced into relationships with military and businessmen, have ended up having their faces and bodies painfully destroyed by acid thrown on them by the wives of powerful men (Kunthea and Lewis 2010). Tet Marina, for example, was a victim of an acid attack in December 1999 that disfigured her face and body for life; the well-known actress and beautiful classical dancer, Piseth Pilika, was assassinated in July 1998 (Edwards 2008: 228).

In brief, this proclivity to posit courtly culture as effeminate has, in effect, neutered the King. More important, the female body as an allegory of the geopolitics of the Kingdom of Cambodia is attributed to the rise of monetary masculinity that was brought about by neoliberalism. Moreover, this gender binary creates a complementary opposition: monetary masculinity versus feminine culture. In short, the female body is nothing but a commodity in this masculine market.

Of mothers and madness

I would like to return to the story of the mother who weaves silk skirts to support her family in the shadow play in *Burnt Theatre*. This mother shoulders the family's financial burden and provides moral support in the father's absence. In the rice farming communities of Cambodia, the father and mother are symbols of fertility: their union suggests sexual fecundity and procreation. This heterosexual coupling harkens back to an indigenous megalithic fertility practice, which was later supplanted by the union of the *linga* and *yoni* in Brahminism (or Hinduism).¹⁴ The concept of the phallic megalithic rock (stone *linga*) penetrating and impregnating the earth has long been accepted as a fertility rite in the rice culture of Southeast Asia (see Choulean 2000). In fact, some spirit houses dedicated to the spirits of the land comprise of father and mother spirits. Moreover, labor is gendered: the father tills the land and performs all the masculine duties. The absence of the father and the phallus is detrimental to the well-being of both crops and family. When the father is absent, the mother takes over the responsibilities, and when the mother becomes incapacitated, it is the daughter who takes on the role of the mother.

Madness incapacitates many mothers in Panh's films. A case in point is the mad mother in Panh's 1999 film, *Neak Sre* (Rice People). *Neak Sre* is based on a 1966 novel, *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (No Harvest But a Thorn) by a Malaysian writer, Shahnon Ahmad. The Malay story takes place in Malaysia, but Panh changes the original time and setting of the story to the post-Khmer-genocide period in Cambodia. *Neak Sre* tells the story of a couple who are rice farmers. They have seven daughters, but they have no son to help out with the farming. The film shows poignantly how farmers have to endure and struggle with nature, mirroring the harsh living conditions in many rice-farming communities in Cambodia. The father, Pouev, is the patriarch. One day he steps on a poisonous thorn and dies from the ensuing infection. The mother, Om, has to carry on with the farming as well as look after her seven young daughters. The obligation and responsibility eventually drives her to alcoholism and madness.¹⁵ She becomes incapacitated. The villagers decide to lock her up inside a cage made of bamboo. Naturally, it is the oldest daughter, Sakha, who shoulders the responsibilities of raising her six siblings, taking care of her mentally ill mother, and tilling the land. Rithy Panh shares his perspective on the legacy of trauma, memory, and madness that lingers on among Cambodian mothers who are living in both Cambodia and its diasporas in the post-genocide period:

If you can't grieve, the violence continues. The Cambodian mother of a model family, well integrated in France, cut off her child's head just as the Khmer Rouge killers had chopped off her father's. Similar cases have occurred in Cambodia. At Preah Sihanouk hospital in Phnom Penh, the only department that provides psychiatric treatment takes patients from all over the country. Sometime there are 250 of them waiting in the corridor. You only have to see how many [are] depressive and destitute to realize that something must be done. There is a massive collective wound.

(Panh 1999: 31)

We also see the theme of the mad mother in *One Night After the War*. A scene from the film shows Srei Poeuv's nightmare and how she is forever haunted by her father's death. The father was a farmer but was compelled to join the army. She was merely a young girl when the army brought her father's dead body back to the village. Srei Peouv's mother was so traumatized by the death of her husband and his subsequent absence from the family that she became mad. She became self-destructive, leaving her children with no choice but to put a chain on one of her ankles and lock her up. We see the mad mother chained to one of the pillars in her hut. Again, the daughter must shoulder the family's financial burdens. In *One Night After the War*, Srei Peouv works as a 'bar girl' in Phnom Penh City so that she can send money home to support her mad mother and her siblings, who live in the village.

Conclusion: ‘*Srei Taxi*’ (Taxi Girl)

I would like to conclude this chapter by looking at the last and perhaps most profound question posed by the narrator–waitress, along with the last image of Srei Peouv in *One Night After the War*. The tragic love story between Savannah and Srei Peouv is narrated retrospectively by Srei Peouv who is now working as a waitress. It is Srei Peouv in the role of a waitress who provides viewers with an ‘eyewitness’ account of the events that transpired in her former life as a ‘bar girl.’ However, the narrator not only provides us with an ‘eyewitness’ account of the events that took place; she is also an interrogator who interrupts her own narrative of the film in the voiceover that commentates on the violence and the corruption in Cambodian society. She herself is a victim of the same violence and corruption. For instance, the waitress poses this profound question at the end of the film:

Waitress: We were born with the war. It destroyed everything in its wake. We carried hope inside us . . . like a mother carries her child. We fed her with our dreams . . . and our blood. Now there’s no fear left in me. There’s just luck, good or bad. But I have nowhere to go. Can you maybe tell me . . . Where to live in peace?

The above question is followed by a flashback scene that focuses on an image of Srei Poeuv in her uniform of gold lamé riding on the back of a motor taxi. No voiceover is heard, only the theme song playing softly in the background, as we see a magnificently slow-moving image of Srei Poeuv that echoes the glaring night lights of the city as she rode away (Figure 4.3). Yes, she was on her way to work at a nightclub. Without doubt, the image echoes the derogatory Khmer phrase used to describe a prostitute, *srei taxi* or ‘taxi girl.’¹⁶ Wealthy male clients ride and rent her by the hour, like a taxi.

The film ends with a frustrated and desolate Srei Poeuv. As viewers, we are inclined to think that her job as waitress is better than when she was a prostitute. However, her situation has improved very little because she is now a single mother. She shoulders the burden of supporting her daughter, Bophana, as well as her mad mother in the village. It is puzzling as to why Panh chose to end his film with this poignant, sublime, and sorrowful image of Srei Poeuv on the back of a motorcycle taxi. I would like to offer a semiotic reading of this very last image in the film as an allegory of the Kingdom of Cambodia. As I have mentioned earlier, the female body has long been portrayed as an allegory of the geopolitics of the Cambodian nation. Unlike traditional Cambodian mothers who depended on their weaving skills to make a living, Srei Poeuv relied on her body. In fact, she works in the ‘service’ profession as a waitress and a prostitute. In the 1990s, a new capitalist regime was established after the fall of Pol Pot’s communist regime. Srei Poeuv was compelled to sell her body in the city because the traditional phallus has failed her and her mother. Clearly, this newly capitalist regime contributed to

Figure 4.3 Srei Poeuv rides a motorcycle taxi to work.

Source: *One Night After the War* (1998). Photo reproduced with permission of Rithy Panh.

a shift from weaving, psychoanalytically associated with shame and female genitalia, to that of literally selling her body (vagina) for a living. In short, one can interpret the poignant image of a beautifully dressed taxi girl, coupled with the critique and questions raised by the waitress at the end of Panh's film, as an embodiment of the national image of Cambodia in the post-genocide period. A nation that has struggled to survive amidst corruption and is dependent on support from NGOs and foreign investment is comparable to the 'taxi girl,' who depends on the kindness of strangers (both foreign and local) for her daily survival.

Rithy Panh's *One Night After the War* and *Burnt Theatre* capture powerfully the shifting social and economic climates in Cambodia and how these changes have destabilized traditional Cambodian notions of gender roles. I have argued that gender turbulence has contributed to a crisis of masculinity in traditional Cambodian society. More significantly, this rupture of traditional notions of masculinity ultimately affects both men and women in Cambodia. While we see positive aspects of this destabilization of gender roles, namely a shift from masculinity to masculinities among transnational and urbanite Cambodian men, it is also devastating to male characters like Savannah and Hoeun, who are castrated and marginalized by 'monetary masculinity,' which is measured and dictated by a man's income and wealth. It is not surprising therefore that we see these two male characters in Panh's films invoking, embodying, painting, and returning persistently to their archetypal male lineage, Hanuman, the military general in the *Reamker*.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is dedicated to the memory of my most beloved friend, Ingrid Muan (1964–2005).
- 2 For a history of cinema in Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s, see Ly and Muan (2001).
- 3 The Bophana Center website is available online at: www.bophana.org (accessed 15 May 2010).
- 4 E-mail exchanges with Rithy Panh dated 12 November 2009.
- 5 Pou (1992) has written an excellent analysis on the Khmer reception of and attitude towards monkeys in Khmer literature and culture, particularly in the *Ramakerti*.
- 6 See the following youtube links: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z592se0ERQs&feature=related (accessed 9 October 2010) and www.youtube.com/watch?v=skA43ucuNMw&feature=related (accessed 9 October 2010). Lok Kru Chhieng was trained at the age of seven to dance the role of Hanuman. See www.angkor dance.org/summer-2010-master-dancers.html (accessed 9 October 2010).
- 7 It is possible that Cambodian *Ram wong* dance harkens back to the Hindu *garbha* dance (literally ‘dance of the womb’). See Narayanan (2003).
- 8 Interestingly, a former court dancer, Em Teay, who danced the role of a giant in the *Reamker*, stated in an interview that she survived the Khmer Rouge genocide because she was possessed and protected by the invincible spirit of the giant’s character that she embodied and performed before the Khmer Rouge era. See Sally Ingleton’s film, *The Tenth Dancer* (Singing Nomad Production, 1994).
- 9 There is an all-male dance troupe that performs classical repertoire such as the *Reamker* but they are not part of the courtly tradition that is housed at the Palace in Phnom Penh. See Phim and Thompson (1999).
- 10 The above translation of the dialogue spoken in Khmer is mine.
- 11 The female body as an allegory of Cambodia is a symbolic representation forged during the French Protectorate period in Cambodia. See Edwards (2000).
- 12 See www.camaramericanamanabi.com/travel/exciting-gay-travel-to-cambodia.html (accessed 16 April 2011).
- 13 See www.reuters.com/article/2007/10/31/us-cambodia-lesbian-idUSBKK1141562007103 (accessed 16 April 2011).
- 14 Paul Mus (1933) was the first scholar to propose this idea.
- 15 Clearly, the theme of the mad mother in Rithy Panh’s films is complex and requires more systematic theoretical and culturally specific analysis. It is, however, outside the scope of this chapter to provide such an in-depth analysis and treatment of this subject.
- 16 The term ‘taxi girl’ is derived directly or indirectly from ‘taxi dancer.’ ‘Taxi’ is an abbreviation of ‘taximeter cab’; ‘taximeter’ comes from a Latin word for ‘compute’ (taxo) plus a Greek word for ‘measure’ (metron). The taximeter and hence the taxi are fairly recent, urban developments. The word ‘taxi-girl’ is defined as ‘young female taxi-dancer.’ See Cressey (1932) and West (2006).

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5 When memories collide

Revisiting war in Vietnam and the diaspora

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In 2004, almost thirty years after the civil war between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam, the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party passed legislation that addressed the significant economic and cultural influence of an estimated 3 million diasporic Vietnamese. Resolution 36 calls upon all ‘Party organizations, State agencies at central and local levels, the Vietnam Fatherland Front and mass organizations’ to ‘urge’ diasporic Vietnamese to contribute to the liberalization of the country’s economy with their skills, financial assets, and ties to educational institutions, corporations, international agencies and governments abroad. Interestingly, the resolution also represents diasporic Vietnamese communities as part of the nation and the state as their ambassador, a representation that is particularly fraught given that these communities largely comprise people who fled South Vietnam after its defeat by the North (see Embassy of Vietnam 2004a).

The Vietnamese term for these diasporic subjects is *Việt Kiều*, which means ‘Overseas Vietnamese.’ In its choice of linguistic terminology and its positioning of itself as the agent ‘responsible’ for the settlement and well-being of diasporic people, the state selectively chose to elide the still bitter history of the civil war. The government welcomes back those ‘Overseas Vietnamese’ who are willing to support the neoliberalization of the country without raising troubling questions about the political system or post-civil war education and employment selection procedures that continue to discriminate against Vietnamese nationals who fought and worked for the former Republic (see Embassy of Vietnam 2004b). Despite its seemingly neutral translation, *Việt Kiều* often is used derogatorily and carries with it the baggage of civil war and imperial history – local Vietnamese’s resentment toward those who were able to flee the devastated country and who are now citizens and residents of more prosperous, usually Western, countries.

Diasporic Vietnamese contribute a sizeable part to Vietnam’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) through annually increasing remittances, which reached an estimated \$6.8 billion or 11 per cent of GDP in 2008 (Small 2010: 1; see International Fund for Agriculture and Development 2008). This estimate is based on money sent through official channels such as banks and money wire services; the actual sum could be two or even three times as much. It is

not surprising then that the government has begun an official policy that recognizes this extensive source of capital from diasporic Vietnamese, three-quarters of whom fled the country en masse after 1975. The state's position toward diasporic Vietnamese is part of a larger policy of economic liberalization that began in the mid 1980s after the failure of the expansion of collectivization into the South, the fall of the communist bloc, and the gradual opening of the domestic economy to the West and international trade and monetary organizations.

Diaspora carries with it multiple affiliations and identities, to both the homeland and to the new country, subject to the possibilities and hostilities of both locations (Naficy 2001: 14). In their overlapping and contradictory ties to the histories and communities of more than one nation, diasporic communities challenge the homogenous time of Andersonian imagination and the progressive teleology of assimilationist and nationalist narratives (see Clifford 1994). As Brent Hayes Edwards argues in his theorization of black internationalism, we can usefully think about diaspora not as 'an easy recourse to origins', but as a discourse of difference among the dispersed populations, of 'a complex past of forced migrations and racialization' (2003: 12–13).

As the current Vietnamese state rushes to embrace globalization, neoliberalism has become the policy of choice – appropriating the logic of flexible capital and labor to selectively welcome back diasporic subjects for their educational, economic and social assets free of the burden of history. But diasporic Vietnamese communities largely comprise people who once lived in the Republic of Vietnam, and the return of the stateless threatens to disrupt the homogenous time and space of the current Vietnamese state's imaginings of the nation. The neoliberal goals of Resolution 36 and the establishment of the Committee on Overseas Vietnamese in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seek to sidestep inherently contradictory notions of national belonging, unavoidably bringing to light the excesses of the diaspora that cannot be reconciled within a nationalist framework. The state's attempts to appropriate the diaspora for neoliberal development is particularly disturbing given the suppression of history by the current government in Vietnam – its refusal to acknowledge past war atrocities unless it serves its nationalist agenda, such as the Huế massacre of 1968; the seizure of land used by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands to reward those who supported the Hanoi government; the post-war re-education and imprisonment of thousands of those who fought for the South; the forced relocation of Southerners to New Economic Zones; the continuing practice of discriminating against them and their families in employment and education selection processes; and the exclusion of their histories from public spaces such as military cemeteries, museums and monuments (Nguyễn-Võ 2005: 159–60; see Schwenkel 2004; 2008).

Films made by and about diasporic Vietnamese offer a site for the analysis of the intersection of national identity, diasporic identity and post-war reconciliation. If, as Henri Lefebvre argues, film is intrinsically a montage of fragmented images, the medium can offer a useful platform for considering

questions of fragmented histories (1991). I offer a comparative reading of two documentaries, Duki Dror's *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* (2005) and Đoan Hoàng's *Oh, Saigon* (2007), to analyze how these issues are circulating within transnational circuits. Neither contemporary Vietnamese national nor diasporic cinemas can be understood within a national framework alone, but must be read as transnational texts that engage with each other, complicate national categorization and defy conventional classifications of Southeast Asian cinema and Western cinema as separate genres. My analysis focuses on how diasporic subjects narrate their memories of the civil war, and how those memories intersect with race, gender and national belonging. I argue that these works challenge the neoliberal, teleological construction of history as a progression from war to reconciliation, bringing back the ghosts that continue to haunt post-war Vietnamese society and its diasporic communities.

Dror's film *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* critiques nationalist historiographies by reframing diasporic displacement as a site of alternative affiliations. The film uses close-up shots and archival footage to foreground the fragmentation of history and dissonance felt by diasporic subjects in the 'home' and the 'new' countries. The two main protagonists – an Israel-born, ethnically Vietnamese woman and her father – go to Vietnam to reclaim the family lands, which were confiscated by the state and redistributed as part of a post-1975 land reform program to reward those who supported the North during the civil war. The father's recognition of his fractured history and the daughter's devastating realization that she is not 'Vietnamese' reveal the impossibility of reconciliation between diasporic and national parties whose histories split and cannot converge under the auspices of neoliberal imperatives. In the interests of promoting tourism and economic partnerships, the Vietnamese state has endorsed a discourse of reconciliation and forgiveness between Vietnamese national and diasporic subjects. That discourse falls apart on the ground, as seen in the father's exclusion from the new political order and the daughter's mourning of social ties that were broken as a consequence of war and displacement, and that cannot be recuperated.

Hoàng's *Oh, Saigon* portrays the diasporic journey as one particularly driven by the daughter's desire to heal her parents' wounds of war. Whereas *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* portrays dispossession as an alternative to historical time and space, *Oh, Saigon* is a search for reconciliation as the antidote to loss. There are two plots that use family reconciliation as a metaphor for national reconciliation – between parents and daughter, and between brother and brother. The documentary moves back and forth between Hoàng's exploration of why her parents did not take her half-sister with them as they fled Saigon, and her learning about her father's past and his communist, older brother. As the first plot unfolds, the mother explains the tragedy by drawing on the diasporic narrative of the U.S. 'abandonment' of South Vietnam. The second plot focuses on the effects of civil war and displacement on the patriarchal figures: the director's father Nam, a former major in the South Vietnamese Air Force, and his older brother Hải, who had fought for the

National Liberation Forces. Hoàng's discovery that her family includes communists becomes a metaphor for diasporic Vietnamese's excavation of a still contentious past. Long kept unspoken and buried by their displaced parents, this past carries into the present the uneasy and gendered tensions between the diaspora and the nation.

Transnational Vietnamese cinema and the return of the stateless

Film is an arena in which diasporic subjects are inserting themselves into the nation. Although some films, such as Dror's and Hoàng's, have never been screened in Vietnam due to their politics, they are part of the current circulation and construction of what can be called transnational Vietnamese cinema. Thousands of diasporic Vietnamese are living and working in Vietnam for short- and long-term periods, and thousands of Vietnamese are going abroad for education and employment. The same cross-movements are taking place in the filmmaking industry, making it anachronistic to think about it only within a national framework. Once dominated by war-time, nationalist narratives, the film industry has developed into a transnational, multi-genre and multi-style cultural realm.¹ This sea change can be attributed to a number of significant, interconnected factors: the state's declined status in the sector as the only player; its embrace of privatization; the influx of media, capital and labor from abroad; the increased presence of multinational co-production financing; and the emergence of production companies owned by local and diasporic filmmakers in the country and the diaspora.

The Vietnamese state had funded all production, distribution and releases of major motion pictures up until 1989 (Ngô 1998: 93). However, the unwritten rule was that the funding went to Hanoi-based directors. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, a crop of Saigon-based directors turned out inexpensive productions shot on video cameras for as low as \$10,000. These 'instant noodle' films were hugely popular, appealing to audiences who craved entertainment without overtly didactic content tied to socialist nation-building and citizenry (Ngô 1998: 93).² Viewing such films as morally decadent and anxious to maintain the use of cultural production as a tool of national and international image-making, the state reinstated subsidies for a select number of directors. This stream of funding supported the production of twenty to twenty-five films annually up until five years ago, according to one well-known producer in Saigon.³ Veteran director Đặng Nhật Minh gives a lower count – ten to fifteen films annually.⁴ The Department of Cinema now only partially funds five or six films. However, the practice remains of selecting directors who are Hanoi-based. These films are of the *phim nghệ thuật* (art film) genre, and are made primarily for international consumption – particularly the film festival circuits in Asia, the U.S. and Europe and the university circuits in the U.S.⁵ In deciding its priorities, the Department of Cinema prefers films that promote an image of Vietnam as a modern, democratic society built on a

history of revolutionary resistance to foreign domination or films that present romantic and exotic images of the country. Films such as Ngô Quang Hải's *Chuyện Của Pao* (2006) (Story of Pao) or Phạm Nhuê Giang's *Thung Lũng Hoàng Văng* (2002) (The Deserted Valley) draw upon the internationalization of the discourse of multiculturalism to portray the liberal democratization of Vietnamese society, even as they showcase Vietnam's ethnic minorities as the Other.

As it did during wartime, the Communist Party-dominated state sees film as a tool to use in the service of the nation. The Department of Cinema gave Đỗ Minh Tuấn an unprecedented \$900,000 to make *Ký ức Điện Biên* (2004) (Memories of Điện Biên) to revive memories of the Việt Minh-led victory; the film barely made a dint at the box office. More recently, Đặng Nhật Minh, the most powerful director in the industry, received 11 billion VNĐ (\$687,500) to make *Đừng Đốt* (2009) (Don't Burn). With echoes of gendered Orientalist romance tales, the story recounts a former American intelligence officer's thirty-year obsession with the diaries of a female doctor who had left her comfortable bourgeois life to serve the North during the civil war and who died after being shot by an American soldier. Vietnamese President Nguyễn Minh Triết told the story to U.S. President George W. Bush, during the latter's visit to Vietnam in 2006, as a lesson on setting aside the past to build diplomatic and economic relations for the future benefit of both countries (see Võ 2008). The film has not appealed much to audiences in Vietnam and in the diaspora, but has been particularly resonant for American veterans and others who opposed the war.

A Viet Wave has emerged as the post-war generation of Vietnamese, both in the 'homeland' and in the diaspora, is eager to create its own version of pop culture and globalized modernity, the equal of those that have developed out of Asian metropolises. The two centers of filmmaking in Vietnam – Hanoi and Saigon – are developing distinctly different styles and representations of national and diasporic identities. This accords with the larger context of the country's rapid integration into the global economy, wherein local, state and foreign investors, cultural producers and classes are vying for their stake in the privatization of national industries, agricultural lands and urban modernization projects. As Martin Lefebvre reminds us, the relationship between films and imaginings of the nation have been tied since the invention of cinema as a technology (2006: xi–xxxi).

Whereas Hanoi still prefers art films as the genre of choice, Saigon-based directors also offer slapstick comedies, romantic comedies, thrillers, gangster films and action films. The other distinguishing mark between the two centers is the prominence of diasporic filmmakers and producers in the South, many of whom fled the country with their families as children and have returned with highly trained skills and the social and industry connections to raise capital for their projects. A rising star in Hanoi is the local Bùi Thạc Chuyên, whose most recent film, *Chơi Vời* (2009) (Adrift), drew international attention at the Cannes Film Festival with its suggestion of lesbian desire as well as its

questioning of social norms about marriage – two unconventional thematic concerns. The film also features an unusual soundtrack, a postmodernist exoticization of North Vietnamese folk music. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam chose it as one of nine films to submit for the 2010 Luang Prabang Film Festival. Another much sought-after name is diasporic Vietnamese Charlie Nguyễn, whose most recent film *Đế Mai Tính* (2010) (*Fool for Love*; literally Think About it Tomorrow) set new records at the box office in Vietnam this past summer. In a country where the average theater screening is two to three weeks and the top sales period is the Lunar New Year, the film ran for a dozen weeks. It opened to sold-out audiences in California in September, due in no small part to media attention in Vietnam and marketing by the Vietnamese American-owned distributor Wave Releasing in the U.S. After its successful premiere in what insiders call the ‘Golden Triangle’ of Vietnamese American communities in Southern California, Northern California and Texas, the film opened in Seattle and on the East Coast. The gay sidekick character, played by Vietnamese actor Thái Hòa, charmed audiences in Vietnam and in the diaspora, and Vietnamese American audiences beamed with pride seeing Dustin Nguyễn star as the lead male. Having played one of the secondary characters in the 1980s American hit show *21 Jump Street*, Dustin Nguyễn is still the only Vietnamese American man who has ever had a significant role in Hollywood. *Fool for Love* is a romantic comedy about a female, lounge singer who feels torn between a ballroom clerk and a wealthy mogul. This heteronormative love story can be read for an analysis of the neoliberal commodification of gender, class, race and sexuality, and the beginnings of a new star system in the Vietnamese film industry. The film is shot with a red camera, featuring MTV style scenes of mansion pool parties and sports cars. Such films are appealing to local Vietnamese audiences familiar with global images of pop culture, not only those from Hollywood and MTV via cable television and pirated DVDs, but also from Asian metropolises. For diasporic audiences, these films create ties of community and represent ethnic Vietnamese as the primary actors rather than sidekicks who will never have their time in the limelight. The multiplication of film genres and styles being created by Hanoi-based, Saigon-based, locally raised and diasporic directors does not necessarily critique neoliberalism or challenge problematic conventions of race, class, gender and sexuality; at the same time, these films are usurping the Vietnamese state’s monopoly on the construction of viewing experiences and national and diasporic identities.

Archival eruptions: Vietnam, Israel and the U.S.

Duki Dror’s *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* brings together the discordant histories of nations and displaced communities, and reminds us of the complex, multinational geo-politics of the cold war. While the U.S. was increasing its armed forces in South Vietnam, Israel was buttressing its borders in the Middle East with military and financial assistance from the U.S., the full display

of which came to fruition during the 1967 Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The hot spots of cold war maneuvering in the Middle East and Southeast Asia would converge in 1977, when an Israeli cargo ship rescued a boat of sixty-six Vietnamese refugees. Likening their plight to that of Jews during the Second World War, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin welcomed them: 'We have never forgotten the lot of our people, persecuted, humiliated, ultimately physically destroyed. Therefore, it was natural that my first act as Prime Minister was to give those people a haven in the Land of Israel' (quoted in Afeef 2009: 6). While it was forcing Palestinians to become refugees, the Israeli state was accepting refugees created by their American allies elsewhere. In this ironic twist of cold war politics, Vietnamese constituted the first non-Jewish, non-Palestinian refugees in Israel, and Israel was the first country to grant them asylum. *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* excavates the little-known history of the approximately 300 Vietnamese who came to Israel.

The film's use of archival footage and cultural intermediaries highlights the marginalized status of those Vietnamese who would be known as 'boat people', a people drifting between borders with no certain destination. The opening scene recycles archival news footage of 197 Vietnamese refugees arriving in Israel in 1979, being greeted by their predecessors. The montage continues with footage of an Israeli instructor explaining Hanukkah to the arrivals, who look baffled and disoriented as they sit through a lesson in national identity formation. These footage shots are soon revealed to comprise a television documentary being watched by the Nguyen family and their friends two decades later. At the time of the viewing, the second generation – which is the generation of Vaan Nguyen, who was born in Israel – is watching the arrival of the parents' generation to Israel and into the normative practices of Israeli culture. This triangulation of viewing – the news broadcast, the television rebroadcast and the Nguyen family as they are being filmed for another documentary – stages the excavation of state documentation of a public event and the process of revisiting that history with the immigrant not only as a documented Other, but as a speaking subject.

The opening sequence of scenes establishes the overlapping histories of the first generation, Vietnam-born immigrants and the second generation, Israel-born, and foreshadows their different experiences of 'return' in the second half of the film. The director initially gives prominence to the perspective of the second generation, who are intermediaries between the displaced refugee/immigrant and the Israel-born and international viewers. The presence of the intermediary is particularly felt in the film's use of the voiceover and commentary by Vaan and her sister, Hoa/Vered, the youngest of the five daughters. In a scene that brings together the intersection of language and displacement, Hoa watches her father and two of his friends speaking Vietnamese. The viewer first enters the scene from the perspective of Hoa, who is separated from the men by a couch. She talks to the person behind the camera, saying they speak too quickly for her to understand; the film reinforces the viewer's impression of their 'foreign' language through the inaudible recording of their

conversation. The Israel-born Hoa is the ‘translator’ who mediates between the camera/viewer and the first generation Vietnamese in Israel.

The film’s privileging of the intermediary recalls the use of the ‘native informant’ prevalent in Western anthropological studies of ‘primitive’ societies (see Clifford 1988; Spivak 1988). However, it would be too easy to interpret Dror’s use of the intermediary as another reproduction of colonialist structures of power and the appropriation of the voice of the Other. The most obvious reason to complicate such a reading is the film’s exploration of the racism faced by the Nguyen family living in Israel and the film’s inclusion of the father Hoimai’s journal, which he reads in voiceover to explain his forced separation from his siblings and his escape from Vietnam. The film’s use of Vaan’s and Hoimai’s writings as material for the voiceover constructs a multi-generational, diasporic history that is an alternative to the nationalist histories of Israel and Vietnam. These sources of diasporic history do not offer a progressive narrative of diasporic subject formation and easy return to the nation. The film’s use of the intermediary implicates both the Israeli state’s marginalization of a minority population and the Vietnamese state’s repression of a defeated population.

In its excavation of the little known history of Vietnamese refugees in Israel, *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* asks us to contemplate the relationship between the international geopolitics of war and domestic racism. Since its founding, Israel has had a two-tiered immigration process that prefers Jewish immigrants and that has resulted in a racialized society that systematically discriminates against non-Jewish immigrants, despite its avowed adherence to Western liberal democracy (see Afeef 2009). Hoimai alludes to this discrimination when he explains that, in their search to find a burial plot for their prematurely born twins, he and his wife were turned away by Jewish and Christian cemeteries, but obtained permission from a Muslim cemetery. In another scene, the primary-school-aged Hoa walks with her Arabic friend Jamillah as we hear in voiceover Vaan’s journal entry about growing up and being taunted for having ‘slanted eyes’, being called names of countries, hating her parents and ‘the elitist Jewish society’, of struggling with feeling ‘ungrateful’ toward ‘family, state, community of any kind’, feeling ‘the loneliness of a foreigner growing up in the desert.’ Dror highlights the geopolitics of displacement by juxtaposing the scene of Hoa and Jamillah in the schoolyard with black-and-white footage of newly arrived Vietnamese refugees receiving a geography lesson on Israel’s precarious location in an Arabic region. Like the Jewish state, the girls are surrounded by hostile parties. While the girls are talking to each other about growing up bilingual, we hear boys yelling taunts at them, calling Hoa ‘Japanese’ and telling Jamillah to ‘go home’. The camera films the girls in close-up, and we do not see the boys until the end of the scene, which concludes with the camera offering glimpses of the other parts of the playground and an Asian boy crying in anguish against one of the other boys. These close-ups emphasize the girls’ vulnerability and question the omniscience of the

Cartesian perspective. The enclosed space of the frames echoes the sense of isolation that the girls feel as they are being racialized and bullied by their male peers. Unlike the all-knowing observer of classical, Western visual theory, the viewer – like and unlike the girls – does not have complete ontological access to the suppressed histories of exclusion underlying this gendered process of racism that all the children are learning.

The immigrant's subjection to the daily subtleties of racism and Vaan's anger speak to what Jodi Kim calls the 'social death' that refugees of war face (2009: 856–857). In her analysis of films about the transnational, transracial and gendered adoption of Asian babies by Americans, Kim argues that a necessary condition for the production of 'orphaned' children is the imperial violence of U.S. geopolitics in Asia, which destabilizes and destroys the local economic, social and political structures. Thus, 'humanitarian' campaigns such as the adoption of war babies are intricately dependent on the forced severing of ties between the biological mother who feels compelled to give up her child for adoption and the child who experiences what Kim calls a 'social death', the condition of being cut off from the familial and communal relationships of the biological mother. I find Kim's argument useful in thinking about the geopolitical violence that compels people to be separated from the 'home' country and marginalized in the 'new' country, and that haunts any attempts at reconciliation or convergence of future histories. In *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen*, the family feels the displacement that comes from being subjected to racism in Israel and the 'social death' that is a legacy of the parents' flight from Vietnam. They were expelled from the history of one nation and have not been fully admitted into the history of another. Their evacuation from history is seen all the more keenly in the second half of the film, which narrates Hoimai's return to Vietnam twenty-five years after he escaped.

Instead of using archival footage to construct a cause-and-effect narrative that explains the family's displacement, the director foregrounds the ruptures to suggest an alternative space of affiliation among marginalized subjects. The film is particularly attentive to the erased and foreclosed events and lives that cannot be represented and reconstructed due to the violence of war. Closely cropped, black-and-white footage of a man singing 'Vietnam, Vietnam,' the unofficial national anthem of the former Republic of Vietnam, accompanies the audio track for the film's introduction of present-day Vietnam to the viewer. The extreme close-up and the long take are prominent later as well during scenes of Hoimai attempting to reclaim his family's lands. In his distinction between the montage and the long take, Gilles Deleuze associates the former with classical, linear narration and the latter with the denaturalization of such 'evident' memory-making (Deleuze 1985/2007: 26–27). The insertion of the black-and-white footage between scenes of Hoimai leaving Israel and his arrival in Vietnam resurrects the past death of South Vietnam without offering clear connections. The old ghosts embodied in the audio-visual interrupt rather than explain the narrative of the journey. What we see are fragments of

national and diasporic histories brought together with gaps and silences that cannot be explained or fully comprehended – the decontextualized history of the singing of the song, the history of the father's return, the history of the defeated Republic of Vietnam, the history of the present Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The film's recuperation of archival footage of the last days of the Republic of Vietnam remembers its 'death' and creates space for its ghostly presence in the historiography of the current Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Drawing on the motif of travel, the film cuts back and forth between black-and-white images of South Vietnamese fleeing their cities and scenes of Hoimai revisiting his hometown in the Central Region, a place the U.S. nearly bombed into extinction during the war. The gaps in Hoimai's history between his flight and his return are the time and place of the refugee, a time and place that do not figure in the current historiography of Vietnam. This assemblage of discordant worlds becomes more and more apparent with a montage of scenes that speaks of chaos and broken lineages rather than the coherence of teleological histories: archival footage of National Liberation Front fighters shooting American aircraft; Hoimai driving a motorbike during his return; Hoimai writing and reading in voiceover a journal entry about fleeing his war-torn village and taking on the identity of a drowned Southern Vietnamese soldier. To stitch together these disparate images of a fractured history, Dror uses a moving camera – the same technique seen in the archival footage – to film Hoimai driving his motorcycle and school children biking home. These scenes of travel, however, do not circle into one another, tying together the past and the present to create a clear teleology of movement and time. The present-day sequence comprises medium and close-up shots rather than wide-angle images that convey the heroism of revolutionary nationalism favored by the state.

While the moving camera destabilizes the conventional suturing together of interrupted spaces and times, the close-up shot highlights the impossibility of their reconciliation. Despite his brother's counsel against reclaiming land that they left long ago, Hoimai seeks out the current owner of his deceased father's former house, Chú Kỳ. An 'Honorable War Hero', Chú Kỳ received the plot as part of the state's post-war land redistribution program to reward those who had supported the North. Hoimai had told his daughter Vaan that he had to leave the land after the mayor who replaced his father threatened to kill him. Hoimai and Chú Kỳ's claims to ownership of the land rest on different systems of legitimacy – the former insists on family lineage whereas the latter asserts the authority of the state:

K: What have you decided to do, what do you want to ask?

H: I would like to ask the reason you acquired this land, and to transfer it back to my family, to give it back so that my children may know their roots.

K: That's not how it is. The government has the right to grant it to someone else. What was your father's name?

H: My father? His name was Nguyễn Khắc Minh.

K: Nguyễn Khắc Minh.

H: Back then, he was a village head.

K: What was he?

H: Head of a village.

K: Head of a village. Why did he live here?

H: At that time, he couldn't live in Ôn Nghĩa. The village was under the control of the North; he was on the Southern side.

K: Have you met with Mr. Chau?

H: Not yet.

K: He will explain fully the transfer . . . I have all the paperwork, all of the (Communist) committee's paperwork (original pause).⁶

Concluding with a close shot of Hoimai in profile, speechless, the scene largely comprises close and tightly cropped shots that contain the men in their own spaces, exclusive of the other person. While we see and hear one person, we hear the other person speaking from outside the frame. The visual and audio exclusion of one from the frame of the other accentuates the split history between the speaking subjects. While archival footage does not provide a clear historical backdrop for the present 'return', this scene shows that the absolute teleological narrative of the masculine state is also one born out of that fractured history and that it must be legitimized with each questioning of its authority.

In contrast to the spatial and temporal unity of nationalist historiographies, *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* creates what Michael Chanan calls 'an expanded space' created by discontinuities (2007: 106). Urged on by his daughter Vaan's desire to reclaim the family rural land, Hoimai goes back to Ôn Nghĩa village with her and his male relatives. After being invited into the house by the new owner, Hoimai tells him of his goal. This more sympathetic owner tells him the former villagers had left long ago, and have been replaced by new villagers. The conversation unfolds through a series of reverse-angle, point-of-view shots, which alternate between cuts and pans of individuals and mostly groups of two or three people. The sequence comprises the following people: Vaan sitting at the dining table, in profile, facing right; Hoimai sitting at the table, in profile, facing left; the owner sitting to Hoimai's right; a unidentified male villager sitting to the owner's right; a woman in her forties and a younger woman to her far left, both sitting against the wall behind the men; and Hoimai's male relatives. While the camera includes Hoimai and the new owner in the same frame, we see Vaan sitting across the table, framed in close-up, by herself. This visual separation of Vaan from the other people in the scene captures her feelings of alienation and discomfort in the space of her ancestral land, which in its pastoral surface of wind-blown rice fields and mountains is layered with the losses of war and flight. Frustrated by what she senses is a hopeless mission, Vaan suggests her father ask how much it would

cost to buy back the land or if the new owner would agree to exchanging it for land elsewhere. She speaks in Hebrew, provoking laughter from the male villager. The father proposes exchanging land, but like him, the new owner insists 'home' is where he is. Shortly after that, Vaan leaves the table, walking out to the left of the camera frame. But rather than returning to one of the speaking subjects, the camera cuts to the above mentioned young woman, likely a member of the household; her face is the last image we see inside the house. Like the image of Hoimai at the end of the scene inside Chú Kỳ's house, we see a subject who does not have a position at the table. Through these reverse-angle, point-of-view shots, the film expands the conversation beyond what is being represented through the verbal, and foregrounds alternative perspectives and possible forms of affiliation, which in this scene takes on the figure of the feminine. By constantly shifting its focus, the film destabilizes the notion of a singular history, and reminds us of the subjects who occupy the margins, whose presence is constitutive of the narrative.

To offer a confident teleology, national historiographies must create truths by repressing conflicting narratives. Reflecting on the visit to the village, Vaan tells the camera of her imagining 'myself roaming these fields, running in the fields as a child', and lamenting the impossibility of having lived it. Indeed, there is no room in contemporary Vietnamese nationalist historiography for the losses endured by supporters of the former Republic of Vietnam and their families. This is most subtly executed by the mayor, Anh Tư, whom Hoimai claims had held a gun to his head and told him to leave the village. When Hoimai accidentally sees him, Anh Tư is standing on a narrow paved road, which is higher than the dirt ground on which the former stands. Anh Tư remains on the elevated ground during their conversation, and the camera captures the spatial and symbolic disparity in the two men's positions by shooting Hoimai at eye level and Anh Tư slightly from below, to convey the perspective of the dispossessed returnee. When Hoimai asks the mayor if he remembers putting a gun to his head, Anh Tư deflects the question by insisting on their communal kinship and instructing Hoimai on how to remember the past:

Home is the crown of the roots. You cannot leave it regardless of how successful you are, how much you have. You have to remember the place where your paternal grandfather was born, where your father was born, where you were born. You should always remember your home.

In his lesson on fidelity to one's roots, the mayor evokes patriarchal lineage as the signifier of land ownership and history making. However, as seen in Chú Kỳ's claim, the state has superseded the former family as the legitimating institution of home and belonging; patriarchy is not a naturally occurring genealogy, but one that must be re-inscribed with meaning by each new historiography of the nation.

Evacuation into exile

While Duki Dror's *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* stitches together discordant histories to show the impossibility of their convergence, Doan Hoàng's *Oh, Saigon* strives toward a suturing that can give form to the work of reconciliation. The opening montage sets up this desire to find a coherent narrative, draws lines of descent despite their destruction by war and displacement, and extends the ties of history within the nation outward to the diaspora. Reminiscent of a common motif seen in films made during the Republic of Vietnam era, *Oh, Saigon* opens with an audio track of the Southern favorite 'Sài Gòn ơi'. These older films often featured a song about love, a lament in homage to the war dead, or a waiting for a husband or son's return; Hoàng's use of 'Sài Gòn ơi' evokes a lost way of life, an homage to South Vietnamese history. The audio track sets the pace for the montage, which changes with each metrical progression and follows the convention of establishing shot giving way to medium and close-up shots. After a brief black-and-white, archival footage showing the hustle and bustle of downtown 1960s Saigon shot in wide angle, we see market scenes of the pre-war era shot in color that lead to a scene of boat vendors shot three or four decades later. The lack of distinction between the earlier footage and the more recent ones gives the illusion of a linear, stable history in which little has changed. One has to be attentive to notice the markers of time. In one of the shots of an outdoors market, the camera pans in close-up across six calendars featuring Natalie Wood, a Chinese star and other glamorous actresses of the 1960s, images of the seduction of global regimes of pop culture, commodity goods and imperial powers in the history of South Vietnam. But the line between history and its recycled double can be blurry, as seen in the presence of American 1950s and 1960s model cars and Italian Vespas, which have been refurbished by the hundreds and become trendy again in contemporary Saigon. While the opening montage of accumulated time offers the promise of a linear narrative of national identity and formation, the illusion quickly breaks down amidst images of chaos.

Interrupting American and North Vietnamese meta-narratives that predominantly portray the civil war either as a cold war chapter or an anti-imperial war of national liberation, Hoàng revisits the 'Fall of Saigon' as not just an endpoint, but as a shared event in divergent histories. The playful tune of 'Sài Gòn ơi' becomes ironic as we see scenes of panic and death. Anticipating the aerial images that will come later, the montage of present-day Saigon ends with a close-up shot of a group of boys looking over their right shoulder at a flying object, and cuts to a 1970s news clip of American jets sweeping across the sky and dropping bombs on Vietnam. What follows are images of the last days of the civil war: unidentified Vietnamese soldiers dead on the battlefield, their bodies mangled and heaped onto one another; a white, male American journalist reporting from the field; helicopters overwhelmed with people taking off from the rooftop of the U.S. Embassy. With this ubiquitous image

of 30 April 1975, which has come to symbolize what the U.S. mainstream calls the ‘Fall of Saigon’ and diasporic Vietnamese know as ‘Black April’, ‘Day of National Loss’ and ‘Day of National Anger’, the song ‘Sài Gòn ơi’ ends and the director’s voiceover begins. Hoàng uses this technique to tie the last days of the civil war, what she calls ‘the moment my family fell apart’, to the continuation of that history in the U.S. The montage ends with archival footage of civilians desperately fleeing; North Vietnamese tanks crashing through the gates of the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace; youths wielding handguns to enforce the new communist order; an aerial shot of a camp set up to receive South Vietnamese refugees in the U.S.; and close-ups of refugees arriving. These cross-cut shots and shifts in time and space present the North’s takeover of the South and the flight of South Vietnamese as simultaneous events within a linear narrative that broke apart in the chaos of war. By re-examining the ashes out of which the diaspora emerged and which form the substance of its relationship to present-day Vietnam, *Oh, Saigon* seeks to find possibilities for familial reconciliation despite geopolitical and ideological conflicts that did not end with the war, but continue to haunt the nation and the diaspora.

The film’s reconstruction of these lives and histories continually comes up against gendered and nationalist silences and conflicting memories that disrupt its search for coherent narratives and post-war reconciliation. To show the effects of war on Vietnamese who fled the country, Hoàng brings together unofficial sources from the ground-up: home videos, family photographs and interviews with family members in the U.S. and in Vietnam. We hear the silences that haunt the telling of South Vietnamese history and the fraught relationships between the diaspora and the new nation: shame, racism, cultural alienation and the dramatic downturn in the socio-economic status of the dispossessed.⁷ Hoàng foregrounds her parents’ loss of privilege and status by introducing her mother, Ann, as a former Saigonese socialite who became a seamstress in Louisville, Kentucky, and the maternal figure who resisted assimilation by making sure her children would continue to speak Vietnamese, eat Vietnamese food and maintain Vietnamese customs at home. Nam, Đoan’s father, attaches his sense of identity to his former public duty as a military officer. He speaks of his loss of socio-economic status, as a former major in the Republic of Vietnam Air Force whose work now entails refueling and washing American air force planes in Kentucky. Unlike Ann, he feels little connection to anyone beyond his nuclear family, and he speaks of the pressures of assimilation to give up what little he has left of his history. In her study of immigration and labor, Yen Le Espiritu argues that because the majority of heterosexual Southeast Asian American households must rely on two incomes and the men have less employment opportunities than the women due to the gendering of racialization and work, the wife gains more agency and the husband feels doubly displaced both outside and inside the home (1997). In the case of Đoan’s parents, Nam’s education and military credentials, which the U.S.-backed Republic of Vietnam endowed with prestige and honor, have

little value in the American domestic context. I argue that this sudden and dramatic loss in his socio-economic status contributed to his internalization of the defeat of South Vietnam as a personal failure, what he describes as a life 'without meaning' (*vô dụng*), and his withdrawal from both society and family. In that absence, Ann became the head of the family and took on the roles of both father and mother.⁸ The end of the Vietnam War propelled millions of South Vietnamese to flee the country, and in that flight they lost not only land and material possessions, but an entire network of social, political and economic relationships that gave meaning to their way of life and their work. The current Vietnamese state encourages both national and diasporic subjects to work together for the country's future. The logic of capital, however, depends on an accumulation of labor, economic assets and network relationships; when war and displacement suddenly cut those ties, the continuity of history is not available for an easy trajectory forward to reconciliation.

The post-war destruction that the first generation must endure is not theirs alone to bear, but also suffuses the lives of the second generation. As Espiritu argues in her study of American newspaper coverage of the figure of the Vietnamese refugee, one of the reasons the U.S. government purposefully dispersed the new arrivals throughout the country was to lessen the local communities' resistance to them. As it replaced the images of bombings and massacres, American humanitarian discourse propagated the idea that refugees should be eternally grateful to the country that took them in (Espiritu 2006). Therefore, the children of war learned to cope with domestic racism – the home front side of U.S. imperialism – by keeping quiet. Nhật, Đoàn's brother, recalls feeling out of place and not talking much as a child growing up in Middle America: 'I definitely felt proud about my heritage and my roots, but you don't go up to everyone and say, "I'm Vietnamese."' We first see him playing golf, and later interviewed by his sister against a green wall with few props other than an office desk and chair, both backdrops devoid of 'ethnic color'. He was reluctant to participate in the documentary, and besides this interview and a few shots of him upon his first return to Vietnam with Đoàn and their mother, we do not see him again. His reticence parallels that of his father, while Hoàng's directorial work can be read as an inheritance of her mother's assumption of a more public role as head of the household. I read the men and women's post-war adaptations to the fracturing of history and their displacements as gendered strategies of survival. U.S. cultural stereotypes of Asian/American men have a long genealogy that portrays them as emasculated; I read Nam and Nhật's reticence as both a distancing of themselves from these racial and sexual stereotypes and as a 'social death' that the refugee must endure when severed from the nation of birth.

These trajectories of gendered adaptation and remembering form the drama of the film, becoming allegories for suppressed histories that had to be erased for the new family to form and for post-war survival to be possible. Mimicking the process of slowly finding pieces of a broken history with each stage of an

excavation, the film later introduces three other protagonists whom the director comes to know as she digs into her parents' past and her own. One of these characters is Vãn, Đoan's half-sister with whom the parents have an estranged relationship. During the last panic-stricken hours of the impending defeat of Saigon by the North, the U.S. evacuated its military and civilian personnel and tens of thousands of South Vietnamese affiliated with the Republic by plane, ship and helicopter. Nam and his family were among those who managed to flee at the last second. For unknown reasons, Vãn was not with them, and Hoàng's attempts two decades later to find out by interviewing her parents and her half-sister only offer fragmented stories that cannot be pieced together. Nam explains how he persuaded a U.S. Embassy guard to let him and his family climb over the compound walls and how they made it onto the last helicopter out. Ann recalls being pregnant with her youngest daughter at the time, and feeling overwhelmed by the bombings and seeing death everywhere.⁹ Nhật also speaks of the bombings, saying they had to seek shelter in a ditch. Vãn recalls the complete despair of being left behind without family and friends. None of the stories offers answers as to why the family fled without her. Vãn later made two attempts to escape from the country by boat. The first effort failed, and the Vietnamese government imprisoned her. During her second attempt, Thai pirates robbed and rammed the boat she was on, killing most of the people and picking up Vãn. In recalling that story, she obliquely mentions that Thai pirates often kill the men and rape the women; when Đoan asks her something that we do not hear in the audio track, Vãn tells her not to ask in too much depth. Vãn joined the family in Kentucky six years later, but eventually moved to California – blaming the parents for abandoning her. The silences in the family members' recollections are emblematic of the suppression of memories that are too painful to recall, and of the suppression of memories that have no place in national history – neither in the U.S. nor in present-day Vietnam. In the context of U.S. historiography, to acknowledge such loss would disrupt the narrative of American Exceptionalism that portrays U.S. involvement in Asia as acts of benevolence rather than imperial violence that caused the displacement and severing of family ties that must be borne by people like Vãn, her parents and siblings. In the context of contemporary Vietnamese historiography, to recognize the history of the diaspora is to acknowledge ongoing resistance to the state and its version of the civil war as a war only of anti-imperial resistance that ended with what the Northern leadership called the 'Liberation of Saigon'.

Oh, Saigon shows the inadequacy of nationalist narratives to represent losses that cannot be recuperated, losses that neoliberal narratives of reconciliation erase. In recalling their flight out without Vãn – that moment of rupture in family and national histories – Nam and Ann reiterate common diasporic Vietnamese discourses. He explains that he had little choice but to leave the country for his family's sake, otherwise he would have to face imprisonment or commit suicide. Ann describes Vãn's being left behind as a '*tai nạn*', which translates in English as 'disaster' or 'misfortune'. She explains the magnitude

of her pain by making an analogy between the mother-daughter separation and the U.S.'s abandonment of South Vietnam. The parents' uses of these discourses to narrate their family tragedies underscore inseparable relationships between the private and the public, and the geo-political violence that informs the silences in all of the family narratives about why Văn had to endure post-war imprisonment and violence alone.

In addition to this tragedy, the film explores another fracture – the tensions between Nam and his older brother Hải, who fought for the Việt Minh. Their youngest brother, Dũng, fought for the Reserves in South Vietnam, but shot his trigger finger so that he could be discharged. While Nam and Hải each still strongly hold to the Southern and Northern positions on the civil war, one anti-communist and the other anti-imperialist, Dũng tells Đoan he did not have allegiance to either and did not want to participate in the war. She only learned about both uncles during her first return to Vietnam, when she also discovered that half of her family had died during the war, including an aunt whose grave she visits. Reflecting on the family stories and tragedies she unearths, Đoan says in voiceover, 'I wasn't crying just for my aunt. I didn't know her. I was crying for my father. I hadn't understood what he had lost in Vietnam.' I read Đoan's discovery of her dead aunt's grave as revealing of nationalist histories, which tell mainly of the exploits of men and erase the struggles of the women. In finding affinity with her dead, unknown aunt, Đoan points to the feminine as an alternative to nationalist historiography, a theme also present in *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen*.

As the film concludes, it is clear that a family reunion is not a political reconciliation. Three decades after his escape, Nam visits Vietnam because his older brother's health is failing. The return does not provide political resolution, as seen in the lack of narrative development in the sequence about the two brothers who fought on opposite sides of the war. We only see short scenes of them embracing at Đoan's urging, accepting each other as brothers and celebrating with the extended family the Lunar New Year, a most significant time when family differences are set aside. In her article on the thirtieth commemoration of 30 April 1975, in Orange County, California, home to the largest diasporic Vietnamese population in the world, Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Huong examines the ethics of remembrance and the ideological work of mourning one's history and suppressing the histories of others. Cautioning against using the dead to construct simplified histories and to justify contemporary regimes of neoliberal exploitation, Nguyễn-Võ argues, 'A single version of history means a single version of ourselves condemned to retrace dead-ended paths of accomplished moments that would truly have passed, allowing others to consume our history for their own ends, as though we have all died' (2005: 172). Both official American and Vietnamese histories represent the war in simplified, Manichean terms – a war between democracy and communism in the former case and a war between domestic defense and foreign aggression in the latter. The work of excavation that *Oh, Saigon* engages in exposes the multiple, complicated layers of allegiances and

unknown histories that do not fit into either narrative. The dead are not just dead, but provide histories that we tell or disavow at our risk, histories that can become magnified or fall out depending on whether they provide ready proof of a straightforward anti-communist or anti-imperialist position.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter with a review of the current Vietnamese government's change of policy toward diasporic Vietnamese, who are no longer the enemy but a significant source of economic and human resource investment. The film industry in Vietnam is one of the economic and cultural sectors that has been most visibly transformed this past decade by the presence and influx of labor, capital and ideas from the diaspora and other overseas populations. Despite the neoliberal celebration of a borderless world, national identity continues to play a significant role in global economic competition and the maintenance of political regimes. To illustrate how film is a site of contested national formations in Vietnam and the diaspora, I compare two documentary films about diasporic Vietnamese in Israel and in the U.S. and their returns to Vietnam – Duki Dror's *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* and Đoàn Hoàng's *Oh, Saigon*. I argue that these films challenge official Vietnamese discourses of reconciliation by exposing the histories that continue to be suppressed by the current government and that need to be acknowledged to prevent the appropriation of the dead to justify contemporary regimes of neoliberal excess. Both films point to complicated and unrepresentable histories in their explorations of stories that do not fit American mainstream narratives of anti-communism or contemporary Vietnamese national narratives of anti-imperialism. By destabilizing the notion of a singular history, these films remind us of the subjects who occupy the margins, whose presence can lead us to expansive forms of remembrance and affiliation.

Notes

- 1 Scholarship on Vietnamese cinema largely takes as its starting point films produced under the aegis of the communist state, the former Democratic Republic of Vietnam, due to available publications in present-day Vietnam in the archives and in the bookstores. The cinema industry in the former Republic of Vietnam, also known as South Vietnam, developed differently. Copies of films that survive from that era can be found in video stores in places such as Little Saigon in Orange County, California, but not in Vietnam. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to include that material, which offers much for future research.
- 2 Nguyễn Như Khuê, producer and co-owner of the Saigon-based production company HK Film, confirms this. Conversation in Saigon, Vietnam, 15 July 2010.
- 3 This estimate is according to Nguyễn Trinh Hoan, director of productions and co-owner of the Saigon-based production company HK Film. Conversation in Saigon, Vietnam, 13 July 2010.
- 4 Talk, The Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences, Los Angeles, California, 10 November 2010.

- 5 For example, the New York-based non-profit Institute for Vietnamese Culture & Education has established itself as a liaison for Vietnamese films touring the U.S. A recent event brought Đặng Nhật Minh's *Don't Burn* (2009) to Brown University, Wesleyan University, Smith College, College of the Holy Cross, Yale University, Harvard University, University of Washington, Temple University, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, George Mason University, New York University, Cornell University and Texas Tech University.
- 6 All translations of the Vietnamese dialogue in this chapter are my own. At times, the film's subtitles provide incorrect translations of the Vietnamese dialogue.
- 7 To distinguish between the director and the character, I use her last name 'Hoàng' to refer to the former and 'Đoan' to refer to the latter.
- 8 Conversation with Đoan Hoàng, Los Angeles, California, 25 January 2010.
- 9 Đoan Hoàng's younger sister refused to participate in the documentary because she was wary of the camera as a recording device. We see an image of her as a child in one of the photographs included in the film. Conversation with Đoan Hoàng, Los Angeles, California, 25 January 2010.

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6 Malay(sian) patriotic films as racial crisis and intervention

David C. L. Lim

‘REMEMBER! WE ARE MALAYS! AND MALAYS ARE US! We are here to redeem the honour and dignity of the Malay race!’

Bayu, in *Embun* (2002)

Like much of the rest of Southeast Asia, Malaysia has multiple cinemas producing films that cater to niche local audiences. Of these, including the new independent movement, mainstream Malay cinema remains by far the largest and the most popular. It has an unmatched base of approximately 300,000 cinemagoers (Lim 2007), comprising mostly of Malay youths from non-urban and/or lower-income backgrounds under the age of thirty-five. The figure does not include the several hundred thousand more Malay viewers who would watch the films as and when they are repeated on free terrestrial television or via satellite at almost no cost. The majority of non-Malay Malaysians do not habitually watch Malay films or follow developments in mainstream Malay cinema.

A subset of Malay cinema, Malay patriotic films target the same combined paying and non-paying Malay viewers. The genre is so called because it is deemed to speak of loyalty and love for the nation, as of the duty and honour of sacrificing the personal, even one’s life, for a larger cause. The belief or hopeful expectation of the state in Malaysia, and Malays(ians) who regard or promote Malay films of the genre as crucial for nation building, is that consumption of filmic patriotism may rouse the target Malay viewers to experience and perform approximate acts of love and sacrifice. Approximate acts here refer not simply to general acts of patriotism, as I will demonstrate, but more specifically to exclusionary, racial patriotism towards the trinity of the Malay *bangsa* (race/ethnicity), *agama* (Islam as the constitutional religion of the Malay race) and *negara* (land/nation conceived as belonging first and foremost to the Malays).

Contextually, the Malays make up slightly more than half the population, while the Chinese, Indians and indigenous people represent the largest minority groups. This describes only West Malaysia, as opposed to East Malaysia where, as Hiroyuki Yamamoto examines in another chapter, racial consciousness is

nowhere as pronounced. In West Malaysia, race is almost always conflated with ethnicity in popular discourse and half-grasped in the essentialist sense as somehow objectively measurable and more important than other categories of difference like class and gender (see Lim 2005; 2008). It is also systemically laboured by the Malay-dominated state insofar as 'the category and its assumptions are employed to effect and rationalize social arrangements of power and exploitation, violence and expropriation' (Goldberg 2004: 213). At work, in other words, are both racialism and racism. By racialism I mean the belief that members of different races share 'certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they did not share with members of any other race' (Appiah 1996: 54). And by racism I mean beliefs, acts, expressions and attitudes that exclude those characterized as other 'from elevation into the realm of protection, privilege, property, or profit. Racism, in other words, is about exclusion through devaluation, intrinsic or instrumental, timeless or time-bound' (Goldberg 2004: 214).

For the state – or anyone for that matter – to expect Malay films of the patriotic genre to directly intervene in society by rousing their target Malay viewers into experiencing and acting upon heightened love for their race/religion/land would seem naive in this age of increasing consumer cynicism towards commercial and political marketing. Nonetheless, as I argue in this chapter, despite the apparent tall order, Malay patriotic films work quite successfully as ideological machines that promote the overriding prioritization of the Malay race as a necessary good, even as they seek to entertain. Among other ways, they do their ideological work by contributing to an expanding universe of Malay racial texts consisting of images, ideas, concepts, narratives and the like. Continually reproduced and circulated daily across mediums (newspapers, novels, history textbooks, etc.) and domains (public, political, education, etc.), these racial texts bear the power of discourse to shape popular (mis)understandings about the nation and its multi-ethnic population, hierarchizing them according to the principle of Malay pre-eminence. They flood popular imagination, ensuring that the ideology they iterate are neither forgotten nor ignored. They aid, in short, in what Jacques Rancière calls 'the distribution of the sensible', an act of power that 'produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made or done' (2004: 85).

Although Malay patriotic films work in tandem with other racial texts to promote a particular racial agenda, we will see that they have not been entirely successful in holding all Malays under their sway or in totalizing the socio-political field in such a way as to render unthinkable other more egalitarian or cosmopolitan ways of relating to the supposed racial other. Both the genre of Malay patriotic film and the racial patriotism it promotes are in fact in crisis today as a result of their declining popularity. Malay patriotic films have mostly failed to attract high numbers of paying Malay viewers, adding to the fear on

the ground that the Malays today are indeed in crisis because, among other reasons, as the racial logic goes, their love for the race has weakened, as purportedly evidenced by their unpatriotic unwillingness to support the noble efforts of Malay filmmakers who produce patriotic films.

Similarly, in the broader context, support is waning for the pro-Malay ideology embedded in Malay patriotic films and championed by the state dominated by the United Malays' National Organisation (UMNO), the ruling right-wing Malay political party, whose support of Malay cinema is key to keeping the latter afloat. Just as the failure of Malay patriotic films at the box office is constructed in the Malay media as a problem afflicting both cinema and race, so too has UMNO rationalized the rejection of its racial ideology as a crisis affecting not only the party but also the fate of the entire Malay race. As we shall see, the crisis facing both Malay cinema and UMNO, both representing the old racial order, is further compounded by the rise of a new transethnic order in Malaysian cinema and society, which threatens to render the old obsolete.

In the subsequent discussion, I examine the foregoing issues arising from the conjunction of cinema, race, society and the state in contemporary Malaysia, beginning with a contextualization of Malay patriotic films, two of which I pay closer attention to and use them to illustrate the racial character, duties and narratives of the genre. The two films are *Leftenan Adnan* (Lieutenant Adnan; 2000) and *Embun* (literally, dew, also the heroine's first name), while the remaining three are *Bukit Kepong* (Kepong Hill; 1981), *Paloh* (name of a village; 2003) and *1957: Hati Malaya* (1957: Heart of Malaya; 2007). I subsequently examine why the films, despite being successful iterations of the ideology of Malay racial patriotism, failed at the box office, and how that failure is paralleled by declining support for the racial ideology championed by UMNO in the larger context of the nation. I conclude with a reflection on Malaysia's struggle for a post-racial cinema and society and the likelihood of their realization in the wake of the 'political tsunami' of 2008 general elections, which threw UMNO into crisis mode.

Patriotism and racial crisis in Malay patriotic films

'Patriotism' and 'nationalism' as they are commonsensically understood today are relatively new words, arriving only in the wake of the invention of the modern nation in the eighteenth century. The cognate 'patriot', though, has a much longer genealogy. Preceding the modern nation and traceable to the Roman Republic, if not to Ancient Greece (Poole 2007: 129), the 'patriot' in original usage was not so much tied to a specific geo-locale as it was to a 'particular "way-of-being" in the world – as an active, and often radically participatory form of citizenship rooted in a concern for the good of one's own' *patria* (city or republic) (Dietz 2002: 211). This original meaning of the term had eroded by the time patriotism re-entered political rhetoric and blurred into nationalism in the then emerging discourse of the nation.

Today, although patriotism and nationalism evoke more or less the same meanings, in Malaysia, 'patriotism' tends to carry an elevated sense of honour and integrity on the part of the patriot without at the same time diminishing the nationalist. Nationalism may have been the starkest political shame of the previous century elsewhere but in Malaysia it continues to be generally regarded, alongside patriotism, as a virtue, the racial variant of which is actively promoted by the state through its many agencies. Films recognized by the state in Malaysia as 'patriotic' include the four selected for screening at the *Kembara Filem Patriotik*, a state-organized roving festival of Malay patriotic films held across the nation in 2007 with the double objective of instilling patriotism and promoting local Malay films. The four are *Bukit Kepong* (Kepong Hill; 1981), *Leftenan Adnan* (Lieutenant Adnan; 2000), *Embun* (2002) and *Paloh* (2003). These, together with the subsequent release, *1957: Hati Malaya* (1957: Heart of Malaya; 2007), make up the handful of Malay films of the genre produced to date.¹ All five are Malay/national-language films set in Malaysia's pre-independent past, featuring historical personages and events constructed as key to the nation's founding. All are recognized by the state as belonging to Malaysia's national cinema. These 'national' films do not foreground, as one might expect, the nation's multi-ethnic reality, situating it instead at the periphery, if it figures at all. Like Malay films of other genres, they are fundamentally 'made by Malays for the Malays' (Hatta 1997: 209). The cast, production crew and target viewers are overwhelmingly Malay, while the films mainly project 'Malay values and customs' and deal with 'the life and struggle of the Malays.'

Although produced for mainstream (Malay) viewers, Malay patriotic films are significantly more sombre or serious in tone, content and intent than most Malay films across genres (horror, comedy, drama, musical, thriller, melodrama and so on). More than Malay films of other genres, they are expected by the state and other stakeholders to shoulder the responsibility of upholding and promoting the 'good' image of the Malays, all in the spirit encapsulated by the popular Malay slogan, *Filem kita, wajah kita* (Our films are our image; they reflect who we are as a race/people/nation).

Taking into account the racial character and duties invested in Malay patriotic films, it is perhaps unsurprising that the latter should represent the Malays and their racial past in glorious and heroic terms. *Bukit Kepong*, for instance, celebrates the bravery of a group of Malay policemen who, although far outnumbered, valiantly risk their lives to defend their base station from communist attack. *Leftenan Adnan* produces the good image of the Malays by reconstructing the life of the historical army officer, Lieutenant Adnan Saidi, who bravely risks everything in fighting the Japanese army in order to liberate his people. *Embun* tells the story of its namesake, a precocious seventeen-year-old Malay girl, whose indomitable anti-colonial spirit and morally upright heroic bravery are held as exemplary and worthy of emulation by the Malays. *1957: Hati Malaya* revolves around five young Malaysians rediscovering the sacrifices made predominantly by the Malays in their struggles for *merdeka*

(independence) which was finally granted in 1957. *Paloh*, although Malay-centric in many ways, is the only film of the five to stand out by problematizing Malay(sian) history through its narrative. *Paloh* revolves around Ahmad, a Malay man who, in subsequently joining the Communists, challenges the popular racial stereotype in Malaysia that conflates 'communist' and 'Chinese'.

What is striking about the self-sacrificing acts of patriotism portrayed in these films and the glory they are seen to bring to the race is that they emerge from and are entirely dependent on the singular narrative of the Malay race being in crisis, whether it be threat of physical annihilation or loss of racial dignity and pre-eminence in the hands of other races. Crisis is the condition of possibility for the emergence of acts defined as patriotic, which explains why each of the five films is set in some of the most tumultuous times in Malaysian history. *Leftenan Adnan*, *Embun* and *Paloh* unfold during the Japanese occupation of Malaya (1942–45), a period of untold hardship and suffering for the populace. *Bukit Kepong* is set during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), a time when the military arm of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) waged a guerrilla war against the British and their local agents. Lastly, *1957: Hati Malaya* revisits the tumultuous years before independence, which it constructs as the days when the Malays almost lost their land to Chinese and Indian immigrants. Collectively these films amplify the same image of the Malays besieged from multiple directions.

As an illustration of what I have just outlined, first consider a defining scene in *Leftenan Adnan*, in which the lieutenant takes up almost four minutes of screen time in setting straight the reality for the Malays to his subordinates in the Malay Regiment. Standing tall, in uniform, before his troops seated on the ground and with a serious look on his face, Adnan impresses upon them that no one, including the British, could or should be counted upon to 'protect us [Malays], our race, our descendants, and our homeland' from the Japanese. It is ultimately the Malays themselves who need to rise and defend 'our own country'. But, 'Who are we Malays to stand on our own two feet?' comes the cynical retort from Ayob, Adnan's friend and subordinate. 'Who are we to seek freedom and independence?' To this Adnan responds sternly, 'So you want our race to continue being humiliated?' He then launches into a narrative about the greatness of the Malays as empire builders in the past (before they were colonized with the fall of the Malacca Sultanate in 1511). He reminds his subordinates that 'other races not only recognize Malay strengths and greatness they are also afraid of them because they know the Malays are capable of jolting the world with their power.' Adnan concludes his speech with the immortal line: 'REMEMBER! The Malay race. A free and independent race. The Malays were the ones who invented the expression, "*biar putih tulang, jangan putih mata*"' (better to die with honour than to live with tearful regret). Thus roused, a troop member shouts out, 'Long live the Malay Army!' which the others repeat three times in unison.

The singular muscular emphasis on the Malay race, being cast as under siege and needing to rise up in the name and for the glory of the race, is not unique

to *Leftenan Adnan*, which won Best Film at the 15th Malaysian Film Fest in 2002. In varying ways and degrees, the Malay battle cry is iterated also in the other patriotic films. It is borne witness by the valiant refusal of the outnumbered Malay policemen in *Bukit Kepong* to surrender to the communists/Chinese. It is found in *1957: Hati Malaya*, the nation's first independence film which constructs Malaysian independence as germinating from the Malays triumphantly uniting against colonial Britain's Malayan Union proposal. The proposal was seen as heralding the end of the special status of the Malays because it offered equal citizenship to non-Malay immigrants (Ariffin 2009). The Malay cry is echoed also in *Embun*, an early tone-setting scene from which I want to now sketch before examining what it signifies beyond the immediate filmic context.

The scene in *Embun*, which in spirit parallels the one we just saw in *Leftenan Adnan*, opens with a group of Malay villagers marching in protest against the Japanese oppression of the Malays. Led by Embun's elder brother, Bayu (literally, breeze), a radical Malay nationalist, the procession consisting of men and women carrying banners shout in unison, alternating between demanding that the Japanese invaders free Malaya and shouting in Arabic that 'GOD IS GREAT!' (*ALLAHU AKHBAR*). Moments into the march, Bayu pauses, turns around to face the group members and, with a fiercely proud and determined warrior look, rallies them: 'REMEMBER! WE ARE MALAYS! AND MALAYS ARE US! We are here to redeem the honour and dignity of the Malay race!' Raising his arm to punch the air, Bayu roars 'GOD IS GREAT!' which the charged crowd then repeats three times. Within moments, a convoy of Japanese troops arrives and a confrontation ensues between the two sides, one that anticipates great calamity and heroic acts by Bayu, Embun and others.

From patriotism to racism

In image, sound and narrative, Malay patriotic films assert a muscular Malay identity and articulate a series of racial messages intended to emotionally rouse racial patriotism: the Malays are Malays first and always; they are a proud race whose past greatness is inscribed in history; they are indigenous to and the rightful owners of *Tanah Melayu* (land of the Malays) now known as Malaysia; only Malays can be counted upon to defend the Malays; and the Malays will be undone if they do not unite to keep the race secure. No doubt, the films' uncritical acceptance of Malay as a distinct race with well-defined boundaries belies its colonial invention and the intense class-inflected contestations taking place then (and now) between self-identified Malays in defining who were more/less Malay (Milner 1995, 2008; Reid 2001). The films also obscure the migrant roots of the Malays, how at much the same time as the waves of immigration from China and India into Malaya were taking place, 'there was a corresponding increase in the movement of people who were subsequently called Malays to and within the frontier regions of the Peninsula

and the less densely populated parts of Outer Island Indonesia' (Kahn 2006: 39). In the state of Johor in the late nineteenth century, for instance, four out of five Malays were migrants from Java (Ting 2009: 47).

Still, considering that the local populace was historically at the mercy of the occupying Japanese forces, Bayu might arguably not be unjustified in mobilizing race (or anything else) to repel the oppressors. At any rate, race *was* historically the rallying cry of the early Malay nationalists such as Ibrahim Yaacob and Ishak Haji Muhammad, whose political awakening was significantly catalyzed by the Japanese during the occupation. This remains true even if *Embun* takes creative breaks from historical accuracy in other areas (Khoo 2006). The case for Adnan would seem even easier to justify. He is a leader who bravely goes beyond rhetoric by leading his men to fight the Japanese in the battlefield at a time when British troops are retreating to safety. In view of his heroic deed, does it matter if he cries Malay to rally his men, irrespective of whether the historical Adnan Saidi actually did so?

While there is nothing wrong about making a commemorative film about a war hero like Adnan, there is certainly something to be said about the racial and heroic modes in which history is cast in Malay patriotic films, as in Malaysian history textbooks. Writing about the latter, historian Paul H. Kratoska (2007) observes that the official Malaysian history is heavily skewed towards the interests of the Malay ruling party, UMNO. It omits basic information about the British, the non-Malays and even the Malays in order to invent a past that legitimates the claim to Malay hegemony as a matter of birthright. This invented history is further cast in outmoded heroic terms, ignoring the reality of any history, including Malaysian, which consists of ordinary people performing ordinary activities most of the time. 'Some of these ordinary people do exceptional things, but turning them into superhuman figures is a disservice to them and to the country' (2007: 243). Kratoska highlights yet another problem with heroism:

Heroism is often associated with single-minded dedication to achieving goals, and people who compromise and accept imperfect outcomes are rarely hailed as heroes. The basic lesson of history is that ordinary people need to find ways of living and prospering together without the intervention of heroes riding magnificent white stallions. When such men or women appear, carnage often follows in their wake and the damage can last for many generations.

(2007: 243)

Kratoska's wariness of heroism finds parallel in the misgivings of scholars of ethical philosophy towards patriotism. Far from a natural and morally appropriate expression, patriotism has often proven to be irrational. It demands that we choose a compatriot over a non-compatriot if both come to us in need of help for no other reason than he is our compatriot, operating effectively like a 'type of group egoism, a morally arbitrary partiality incompatible with the

requirements of universal justice and common human solidarity' (Primoratz and Pavković 2007: 1). Paul Gomberg (2002) even argues provocatively that 'patriotism is like racism' insofar as both involve the belief in the specialness, if not superiority, of one's own nation/compatriots/race, which invariably leads to the discrimination of and conflict with the excluded 'other'. Stephen Nathanson (2002) counters that patriotism need not collapse into racism and that a 'moderate' form of patriotic/racial loyalty is sustainable.

I agree in principle with Nathanson that 'moderate racial loyalists [who] have special affection for their own racial group' and who 'devote special efforts to achieving its well-being' do not necessarily go on to disregard the 'moral constraints that limit the actions that may be done to advance their own group's well-being' (2002: 115). Hence, for instance, Malays who give preferential treatment to their racial compatriots and do what they can to advance and protect the welfare of their race would *not*, by Nathanson's definition of 'moderation', agree to or support discrimination against the minorities in Malaysia even though the latter are, while co-citizens, not Malays. The problem with this argument, first of all, is that it affirms and builds on 'race' as a valid category instead of revealing it as a modern invention that emerged more or less coterminously with the 'nation', one that 'pretends to universality in undertaking to draw otherwise disparate social subjects together into a cohesive unit in terms of which common interests are either found or fabricated' (Goldberg 1993: 4). The other problem with moderate patriotism is that it quickly unravels when put in a context like Malaysia, where racial patriotism tends to swell into racial chauvinism, as has been borne out by a series of incidents blotting Malaysian history.

For non-Malay minorities who are not the addressees of the Malay hail, as for Malays who neither subscribe to essentialist notions of race nor identify with race as the overdeterminer of being, Bayu's cry in *Embung* will likely trigger traumatic memories of Malay nationalism articulated at the pitch of racial chauvinism. It invokes a series of high-profile cases of racial intimidation and violence perpetrated by leaders, members, intermediaries and sympathizers of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). UMNO, a right-wing Malay political party, is the proponent and champion of the ideology of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy), the spirit of which permeates all Malay patriotic films, arguably save *Paloh*. *Ketuanan Melayu*, as Helen Ting explains, is a 'historical fiction' (2009: 40) that asserts the ownership claim of the Malays on Malaya/Malaysia despite the documented understanding between the early independence leaders that the 'special position of the Malays' was a temporary protective measure to assist the Malays socio-economically rather than a measure that acknowledges timeless Malay supremacy.

Based on this fiction taken as truth, 'patriotic' UMNO Malays have regularly warned the non-Malays not to challenge the supremacy of Malays (and Islam, by constitutional extension) as 'the Malays were willing to bathe in blood to defend their privileges' (Yusof 2002). The party has been implicated in the

racially-motivated Kampung Medan incident in 2001 where a number of Indians were attacked and killed by a group of Malays (Ambikaipaker 2008). It has been implicated also in the paradigmatic event of 13 May 1969, officially memorialized as spontaneous racial clashes between Malays and Chinese but counterposed by others as premeditated violence organized by UMNO leaders (Slimming 1969; Kua 2008). The May 13 incident was subsequently employed by UMNO as justification for the introduction of a series of pro-Malay national policies, the controversial implementation of which and the conceited attitudes they engendered have been credited for widening the divide between Malays and non-Malays.²

That the Malay racial cry, articulated by characters like Bayu, should bring UMNO to mind at all is ironic considering that the early Malay nationalist movement represented in *Embun* had nothing to do with UMNO. The film makes clear that Bayu and his villagers are members or supporters of the historical Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM: Young Malay Union), the country's first party of leftist Malay nationalists. What it remains silent about, however, is that the KMM, founded in 1938, not only predated UMNO but was also entirely left-leaning. UMNO, from its establishment in 1946, has been conservatively right-wing (Roff 1974; Muhammad 1992; Mustapha 2005; Rustam 2008). Although both KMM and UMNO shared the premise that Malaya was fundamentally the country of the Malays, and saw the Chinese and Indians as immigrants as well as a threat to Malay dominance, there were crucial differences between them. KMM consisted of Malay intellectuals from the subject class who struggled for the Malay masses sidelined by colonial policies, while UMNO leaders were mostly aristocratic elites who fought to preserve the traditional power structures. At the time when the short-lived KMM and its post-war incarnation as Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM: Malayan Malay Nationalist Party) took on a radically anti-colonial stance and demanded independence, UMNO was still fighting in the narrow context of Malay preservation. Furthermore, the left strand of Malay nationalism represented by parties like KMM and PKMM had evolved to become accommodative towards the non-Malays in ways surpassing UMNO (Mustapha 2005: 342).

Embun's strategic silence on the distinctions between the two opposing strands of Malay nationalism results in the emergence of a skewed story, one in which the contributions of the pioneering left are appropriated by the right which thereafter writes itself into history as the heroic proto-agent to whom the people owe a debt of gratitude. This makes *Embun* and patriotic films like it particularly useful as training material to propagate similar ideologically aligned notions of truth by state agencies, including Biro Tata Negara (BTN: National Civics Bureau), a state apparatus, one of whose official functions is to 'increase patriotism towards the nation and the government', as stated on its website. Better funded than Malaysian Parliament, the bureau runs citizenship courses made compulsory for civil servants, university students on public scholarships and students of Islamic Studies. In reality, as has long been exposed by former trainees and staff and concerned Malaysians, the bureau

operates as UMNO's propagandist arm set up, as put in no uncertain terms by influential activist, Raja Petra Kamarudin (2009), 'to brainwash Malays and ensure that they understand and subscribe to the concept of *ketuanan Melayu*.' To achieve its goal, BTN has been reported to have deliberately incited distrust and hatred towards the non-Malays, especially the Chinese. Trainees were taught, for instance, that the 'the era of Malay power in their own land is coming to an end' (Azly 2009: 280), that 'the Chinese are lording over the country' (Aidila 2009), and that 'the Malays must awaken to defend the supremacy of the Malays in their own land' (Azly 2009: 281).

BTN's indoctrination programme, which includes the screening of Malay patriotic films in a darkened room to stir racial patriotism in Malay trainees and to remind the non-Malays of their subordinate status, is part of a wider effort by proponents of Malay dominance to reproduce and circulate truth-claims about the race and the racialized nation that legitimate the ideology they espouse. The Malay press, including *Utusan Malaysia*, represents another controversial site where the pedagogic function is active, as is the modern Malay novel for both adults and teens (Hooker 2000; Lim 2008). The history textbook used in Malaysia provides yet another example, as we saw earlier. Cheah Boon Kheng notes that national history taught in Malaysian schools from British rule until the immediate post-independence period in the 1960s was 'pluralistic and accommodated every ethnic group' (2003: 230). Malaysian history was only revised and given a strong Malay bias after the May 13 racial violence, simultaneously relegating the contributions of the non-Malays to the periphery of history (see also Ting 2009).

Flopping patriotism and the threefold crisis of Malay cinema

Read in the intertextual context sketched above, Malay patriotic films such as *Embun* would emerge as triumphant iterations of the ideology of Malay dominance. They give sympathetic form to the ideology, lending themselves to repeated screenings as a vehicle to propagate the same. However, if they are a success in this way, they are also half empty if ticket sales, essentially audience reception, are taken as the yardstick. Despite the media hype surrounding its first release, *Embun* could barely pull in the paying crowd its makers sought to educate, resulting in it being a box-office flop; made at RM3.4 million, it took in less than a million. In fact, of the five patriotic films produced to date, only *Bukit Kepong* managed to recoup production costs; made at RM1.2 million, it collected RM1.7 million at the box office. *Leftenan Adnan* lost money, even if it did reportedly increase by tenfold the number of applications to join the Malaysian army in the year after its first release ('Karier' 2002); it took in RM1.08 million, falling short of the RM1.5 million investment. *1957: Hati Malaya* was made at RM3 million but generated only a little over RM300,000 in ticket sales. *Paloh* yielded the worst returns; it earned back a mere RM140,000 out of an investment of over RM4 million.

Adding salt to the wound, all five patriotic films were soundly beaten at the box office by Malay films with much less gravity, such as *Cicak Man* (Gecko Man; 2006) and *Jangan Pandang Belakang* (Don't Look Behind; 2007), respectively belonging to the superhero-action and horror genres.

Why have these patriotic films failed to draw in its target Malay viewers? Director of *1957*, Shuhaimi Baba, identifies the prevailing prejudice of Malaysian viewers towards films of the genre as a key cause (Wanda 2007). Malaysian viewers, especially the younger generation, according to Shuhaimi, tend to shun locally produced patriotic films because they assume such films were dry as documentary and lacking excitement. Director of *Paloh*, Adman Salleh, argues on his part that 'the lack of historically based patriotic films has contributed to the underwhelming audience reception to new releases of similar films' (Wanda 2007). Adman faults this on the country's educational system, suggesting, without irony, that 'We should make history a compulsory subject in schools so that our children will know their history. Once they know their history, they will want to watch and appreciate historically based patriotic films.'

Whatever the causes, including the quality of the films themselves, the failure of these films to attract mass audiences is clearly a problem, not just financially but also, more importantly, because films of the genre are libidinally invested by the state, filmmakers and other stakeholders with the lofty goal of inspiring patriotism of the racial kind. Patriotic films are a mode of intervention, or as Shuhaimi Baba puts it, a 'social responsibility' which local filmmakers ought to fulfil by continuing to produce films of the genre and the state ought to support by providing full grants (Wanda 2007). Even though audience appetite for patriotic films is low and new projects risk losing money, the duty to keep producing films of the genre should be kept steadfast, emphasizes another commentator ('Patriotikkan' 2007). Without a steady release of new patriotic films, there is worry that 'the young generation will increasingly feel less love for the nation' (Norwani 2005). Simplistic as this view may be, it nonetheless illustrates a popular construction of film as an object whose absence or non-continual production is held as capable of leading the nation into decline.

The underwhelming response to Malay patriotic films is not an independent phenomenon but is part of a larger threefold crisis facing Malay cinema. To non-Malays and a sizeable number of urbanized middle-class and English-speaking Malays, contemporary Malay films are generally regarded as 'vapid, perhaps a bit shallow', conforming to 'the norms of society (i.e., the norms as perceived by the government)' (Lee 2007), and oblivious to the 'cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity that is a feature of plural Malaysian society' (McKay 2007). The fault does not rest solely on the filmmakers or on viewers who expect filmmakers to provide what detractors regard as facile entertainment; it lies also in the constraining structural conditions in which mainstream Malay cinema operates. Commercial Malay filmmakers are largely dependent on state support and/or funding to survive and are therefore most vulnerable to state censorship and moral policing. As a result of the need to

satisfy the rules and whims of state officials, their films tend suffer in some way, ranging from illogical plots to unrealistic representations. At any rate, negative estimation of Malay cinema, however wounding to the parties concerned, has more at stake than pride, for it represents the view of the untapped multitudes which Malay filmmakers and stakeholders need to bring into their fold, convert into fans and, in doing so, expand the audienceship of Malay cinema beyond its limited demographic. Audienceship expansion is necessary in an industry where recouping production costs is already an achievement in itself.

If the first and second parts of the crisis centre on credibility and limited audienceship, the third emerges out of the industry's frustrated desire to internationalize Malay/National cinema, to garner for it the coveted global acclaim in the same way that other Asian cinemas, such as Thai, Korean and Chinese cinemas, have acquired prestige in international film festivals.³ Despite continual attempts and extensive state support, international recognition continues to elude Malay cinema. It is an open secret that the failure to receive recognition has been particularly galling to mainstream Malay filmmakers at a time when a new generation of cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic Malaysian independent filmmakers, including many ethnic Chinese, has been sweeping awards at international film festivals despite minuscule production budgets and hardly any state support. Recent winners include Woo Ming Jin's feature, *The Elephant and the Sea* (2007, winner of Best Film at the 2008 Lisbon Village Film Festival); Tan Chui Mui's *Love Conquers All* (2006, multiple awards including festivals in Pusan, Hong Kong, Rotterdam and Fribourg); and the late Yasmin Ahmad's films, including *Sepet* (2004) and *Mukhsin* (2008), which garnered awards in Tokyo and Berlin. Their successes, coveted by mainstream Malay filmmakers who have failed to receive any significant international attention despite benefitting from state grants and support, have made them targets of envy. As Yasmin put it in an interview, 'They [mainstream Malay filmmakers] hate me: Ho Yuhang, Amir Muhammad and other new wave filmmakers. We don't hate them. Yes, we're embarrassed about their films but we don't hate them. If they make money from their films, good for them: Live and let live. But they're not the same. They get even more upset if our films were featured at international film festivals' (Hera 2006).

Racial crisis redoubled and paralleled

To recapitulate: I have examined the ways in which Malay patriotic films cast the Malay race in crisis, disseminate historical truth-claims about the Malays and Malaysia's founding, and intervene in society by attempting to rouse the target Malay audience to identify with the racial messages they contain. We also saw how, despite or perhaps because of the UMNO-aligned ideological duties they are invested with, four out of five patriotic films flopped at the box office. Now, considering that the Malay patriotic films are

part of Malay cinema, that Malay cinema is national cinema and that national cinema has practically become a Malay institution, it would clearly not be enhance of the Malay image championed by those who prioritize it above everything if even Malay viewers continue to reject Malay patriotic films and in doing so contribute to Malay/national cinema continuing to languish unrecognized. Malay cinema, as we saw, has already been overtaken by the cinemas of other Southeast Asian nations, as by a new breed of multi-ethnic Malaysian independent filmmakers, many of whose works depart radically from the monoracial and monolingual emphases of mainstream Malay films. As Khoo (2007) underscores, unlike mainstream Malay filmmakers, the new indie filmmakers are generally cosmopolitan in outlook. They are 'more likely to represent elements shared by as many Malaysians as possible across ethnic groups' (2007: 242) and are more 'able to transcend race in telling stories about characters from other ethnic groups' (2007: 241).

With so much at stake, why are Malay audiences *still* not rising to the occasion by spending 'time to take in the patriotic spirit poured into these local films we produce', an irate writer poses in the Malay press (Wanda 2007). Do they 'only want to be fed with exciting romances, tear-jerking stories of unrequited love, and comedies that only go so far as to induce laughter?' (Wanda 2007). If so, does it mean the Malay cry is losing its rallying power or that the Malays' racial patriotism has weakened? The situation is such that the crisis believed to be facing the Malays is effectively redoubled by the 'unpatriotic' attitudes of the Malays themselves: not only is the Malay race in crisis, the Malays don't even care (to support Malay cinema, thus redoubling the Malay crisis).

This redoubled crisis of Malay cinema/race is interestingly paralleled by the political crisis facing UMNO in recent times. Just as the Malay patriotic films that echo UMNO's ideology of Malay dominance have been losing business, so too has UMNO (and its alliance of mostly race-based political parties) been losing the support of the Malay and non-Malay electorate. UMNO suffered a major decline in support as a result of the ignominious sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as the then UMNO-based Deputy Prime Minister in 1998. But it was not until the 2008 elections that UMNO, after fifty years of absolute power and excesses, lost the prized two-thirds majority in Parliament. Chipping away at its support is the new Anwar Ibrahim-led multi-ethnic coalition of Pakatan Rakyat (PR: the People's Alliance) made up of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR: the People's Justice Party), Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS: Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and Democratic Action Party (DAP). The 'political tsunami' of PR's win credibly challenges UMNO's *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay/UMNO dominance) with its people-centric vision of *ketuanan rakyat* (dominance of the people, irrespective of race and religion). As well, it signals the momentous return of the left as a force to be reckoned with, as it was in the past before it was outlawed and suppressed during the Malayan Emergency (Cheah 2006). PKR, which merged with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM: Malaysian People's

Party) in 1999, inherits from the latter the leftist genealogy that can be traced back to PKMM and KMM (Rustam 2008: 2), whose ideological difference with UMNO is erased in *Embun*, as we saw.

Just as the failure of Malay patriotic films at the box office is constructed in the Malay media as a problem afflicting cinema and race, so too has UMNO rationalized the Malays' rejection of its racial agenda as a crisis affecting not only the party but also the fate of the Malays as a whole. The rise of the transethnic PR and events following the 2008 elections have, as claimed by veteran UMNO leader Hishammuddin Hussein, plunged the Malays, its leaders and institutions into the crisis of being potentially displaced by the non-Malays (Hishammuddin 2009). Also, just as Malays who refuse to spend money to watch Malay films are faulted for the fate of Malay cinema, so too has blame for UMNO's declining support been apportioned by the party to the Malays, especially the young generation, a group often blamed for not knowing history or not loving the race enough to care if it is in crisis. Despite UMNO's attempts to win back Malay (and non-Malay) voters and counter the political force of PR in the wake of the 2008 general elections, it has yet to make any major headway. The stakes are high, for UMNO could lose the simple majority it requires to form a government in the next general elections if PR continues to erode its support base. In short, UMNO has come into the same situation as Malay cinema where 'Not only is the Malay race in crisis (because UMNO is in crisis), the Malays don't even care (to return to and strengthen UMNO as the putative protector of Malay interests).'

That the old race-centric ways of doing things no longer seem to be working as well today as they did in the past has prompted the more optimistic commentators on Malaysian film and society to view the displacement of the old monoracial order by the new multi/transethnic as a real possibility, if not as imminent. Hassan Abd Muthalib (2007), for instance, almost wishes for the speedy demise of the languishing mainstream Malay cinema and its replacement by the promising new 'Little Cinema' of the independent filmmakers, which he hopes will ultimately develop into Malaysia's 'real cinema': 'one that truly reflects the social reality and diversity of Malaysia.' Similarly, chatter on internet forums such as Malaysia Today show that many Malaysians are eagerly looking forward to the day when PR displaces UMNO (and its allies of mono-racial political parties in Barisan Nasional), ushering in a new era of governance that steers both the state and society away 'from the dispositions of homogenizing exclusion and exclusivity to the disposing towards heterogenizing openness and incorporation, social engagement and shaping to reflect the interests and conceptions of all' (Goldberg 2002: 242).

While, as a Malaysian, I am encouraged by these recent developments which may well turn out to be the beginnings of a long and winding road towards a post-racial Malaysia, I am also cautious about underestimating the resilience of the ideology of Malay dominance and the deep and diffused racializing effects it has had for over fifty years. Malay cinema will no doubt adapt

in conservative ways over time but it will likely remain monoracially Malay-centred, as presaged, for instance, by a recent editorial in the Malay press which defended the Malayness of Malay films. The editorial insists that 'in fact, the more 'local' [Malay] a Malay film is, the more it should appeal to international audiences, citing as evidence the global successes of monocultural films of filmmakers (essentially auteurs) like China's Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, Iran's Majid Majidi, and Korea's Jang Sun-woo ('Nilai' 2008). With continuing support from UMNO, so long as the party remains in power, Malay cinema will persist and Malay patriotic films will continue to be made. The sixth is reportedly already in production at the time of writing. Expected to cost RM10 million, *Pahlawan Mat Kilau* (The Warrior Mat Kilau) is a historical recreation of the life of Mat Kilau, the late nineteenth-century Malay hero and warrior whose uprising against British imperialism in the state of Pahang is legendary.

The persistence of the monoracial order of mainstream Malay cinema would no doubt detract from the development of a real/inclusive Malaysians cinema that transcends rather than glorifies race. Those who wish it were otherwise would also be aware of a related but graver concern: that, even if UMNO were to somehow lose power in the next elections, the existing structures of racism will still stand for generations before they are gradually dismantled, just as the party's members, supporters and intermediaries will still be around to rouse and keep the ideology alive by legal and extralegal means. Two years after the momentous 2008 general elections, it is clear that the multitudes still supporting the ideology are not about to forsake their patriotic duty to undo Malaysia's transethnic gains they view as a threat to the upright monoracial order they are committed to defend.

Evidence of this proliferates in the face of UMNO's 1Malaysia public campaign, the purported aim of which is to foster unity and mutual respect between ethnic communities. To cite but two examples: At a recent 1Malaysia seminar, a special aide to the Prime Minister, Nasir Safar, publicly derogated Indian and Chinese citizens of the country as *pendatang* (immigrants), adding that 'Indians came to Malaysia as beggars and Chinese especially the women came to sell their bodies' (Adib and Manimaran 2010). The aide then threatened to revoke the citizenship of non-Malays who demanded their rights be respected. In a related incident, Abdul Rauf Yusoh, a high-ranking UMNO official was alleged to have made racist remarks at an UMNO Club function in London (Shazwan 2010). In a letter to the press, a Malaysian student in London, who was present, recounts how he overheard the official defending Nasir Safar's racist tirade against the non-Malays (Ahmad 2010). Abdul Rauf has reportedly denied all charges, including referring to the non-Malays as *bangsa asing* (foreign/alien races) and urging his Malay audience 'not to let the foreign/alien races walk all over our heads' (Shazwan 2010). He clarified to the press that what he actually said during the meeting was that 'Malays must sustain power in order to gain respect from the Chinese and other

racism.’ He also explained that he did not openly support Nasir Safar because what he did ‘was not right, talking like that in public. If it was discussed behind a closed door session, it’s normal, but he said it outside . . . what he said was not right.’ What Abdul Rauf effectively means, in other words, is that racist articulations may be politically incorrect in public but they are acceptable and common in private.

The Malay patriotic films discussed in this chapter are in a sense the public face of the ideology which Abdul Rauf and others like him subscribe to and promote. The films are matter-of-factly racist in communicating the idea that racial difference is intrinsic and unchangeable, and that racial patriotism is a virtue instead of something to be wary about in a multicultural society like Malaysia. They are not racist in the way that the same racial idea would become when invoked and expanded upon behind closed doors. Nonetheless, they amply demonstrate that racialism and racism are ‘deeply connected conceptually and politically’ (Goldberg 2004: 216). ‘Race is the glove in which the titanic, the weighty, hand of racism fits. The cloth may be velvet but it is studded with spikes and soaked in blood.’

Notes

- 1 My counting of Malay patriotic films excludes the pre-Malaysia release titled *Sarjan Hassan* (1958), a black-and-white film made during the ‘golden era’ of Malay cinema (1955–65).
- 2 For a discussion on literary representations of ‘May 13’, see Lim (2010).
- 3 Although Malay films such as U-Wei Haji Saari’s *Perempuan, Isteri dan . . .* (1992; Wife, Woman and . . .) and *Kaki Bakar* (1995; The Arsonist) have been screened at international film festivals, they are few and far between. U-Wei is a rare Malay auteur whose controversial films radically set him apart from mainstream Malay filmmakers.

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7 ‘Our People’

Telemovies, *bangsa* and nationalism 3.0 in Sabah, Malaysia

Hiroyuki Yamamoto

A thousand miles across the South China Sea from West or Peninsular Malaysia, the state of Sabah in the East enjoys a thriving telemovie industry that exists independently from filmmaking on the Peninsular side. Sold in the markets in video-CD format rather than made for television, homegrown telemovies made in Malay and local languages and dealing with local issues have become a highly popular entertainment medium in urban and rural Sabah ever since *Orang Kita* (Our People), the first to be made, was released in 2002. *Orang Kita* was a runaway success in Sabah, where it was most popular. It sold an impressive 35,000 copies and triggered a whole series of new titles released over the years (Abu Bakar Ellah 2009). Approximately forty to fifty telemovies have been produced to date, thirty of which by Skyline/Skylaser Enterprise, Sabah’s biggest telemovie production company. Aside from *Orang Kita*, popular titles include *Orang Kita 2* (2006), *PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin* (Love Without Permission; 2005), and *PTI 2* (2008). The telemovie explosion in Sabah has also increased the popularity of local celebrities such as Abu Bakar Ellah, Mat Kongo and Ela Sabah who are almost household names in the state.

Sabah’s telemovies have relatively straightforward storylines. All are made on tight budgets and rely on small casts and limited equipment and technologies. In terms of production value, they are discernibly much less polished than telemovies made for terrestrial or cable television, including Malay telemovies aired on Malaysian channels. In *PTI*, for instance, viewers can even spot the cardioid microphone peeking out from the top of the screen to capture dialogues between characters; while in *Orang Kita*, toilet humour frowned upon by the highbrow is used liberally. Such production shortcomings do not, however, detract from the value of local telemovies as appreciated by at least a majority of the target audience, namely the general populace of Sabah, encompassing the indigenous groups (such as the Kadazandusun, Murut and Bajau), the Malay and Chinese, as well as (illegal and legal) immigrants, especially from the Philippines. Clearly, for these viewers, the attraction of Sabah’s telemovies does not rest solely on standard production values; other variables matter too, including their regard for participatory values, social integration, diversity, truth-telling and fairness (Mulgan 1990).

As we shall see, these aforementioned qualities derive primarily from the unique treatment of social alterity in Sabah and Sabah's telemovies. *Orang Kita*, *PTI*, Sabahan society and indeed East Malaysia are generally free from Peninsular strictures. Ethnicity, religion and nationality are for the most part a non-issue in the telemovies, as for the thirty-two officially recognized ethnic groups coexisting in Sabah. Sabahan identities are and have been historically fluid and shifting in ways unthinkable in the Peninsula where ethnic and religious boundaries are thick and policed. In Sabah, a Kadazan in one district could self-identify as a Dusun in the next district and a Murut in yet another. Similarly, a Malay(-Muslim) immigrant today could by volition switch identity to being a local Bajau without raising an eyebrow, let alone cause a politico-religious uproar on a national scale, as such a conversion would in the Peninsula.

It is often said that Sabah's fluid multiculturalism and non-racial openness to difference offer a model of interethnic harmony that West Malaysia would do well to emulate. Not mentioned as frequently is how these same qualities also put Sabah at a relative disadvantage when engaging the three *bangsa* from the Peninsula on the federal and political levels. *Bangsa* is a Malay term which is typically taken to signify ethnicity, race or people but is redefined in this chapter as a historically-shaped social, political and economic power-bloc which, although ethnic-centred, is not a status that all ethnic groups attain. Sabah, too, has some indigenous equivalent of *bangsa* in the typical sense of the term but it never developed into a social, political and economic power-bloc that the Malays, Chinese and Indians in West Malaysia have respectively become.

Threading the discussion through *Orang Kita* and *PTI* as anchor films, this chapter examines the evolution of Sabahan nationalist conceptions of 'our people' as attempts to create a *bangsa* that is able to engage the three *bangsa* from the Peninsula on equal political footing. It demonstrates how *Orang Kita* and *PTI* visualize what I describe as the third generation conception of 'our people', or 'nationalism 3.0' in short. Although nationalism 3.0 does not yet exist as an organized political movement, and may never in future, it is already present today on the ground in Sabah as a developing ideal and a sentiment that is gaining popularity. *Orang Kita* and *PTI* are testament to this, as to the interventionist role of film in Sabahan society.

***Orang Kita* and attitudes towards alterity in Sabah**

Shot in the Malay language, *Orang Kita* is a comedic drama revolving around Ampal, a country yokel who has never ventured beyond his *kampung* (village) in the interior of Sabah. Played by Abu Bakar Ellah, who is also the director, Ampal is a visually striking comic figure, not least because of the Penan upside-down bowl haircut he sports. He is a river fisherman in his *kampung*, where he finds it hard to make a living. He desires to move to Kota Kinabalu (KK), the capital of Sabah, and find work there, imagining the city as a locus of

opportunities beyond what a remote village could offer. Ampal's chance arrives when he crosses paths with and befriends Om, who frequently drives between KK and the interior parts of Sabah where he delivers fresh vegetables and other goods. Ampal asks Om (Mat Kongo) for help to get to the city and find a job there, and the latter agrees without hesitation or artifice, even though they barely know each other. That night, Ampal bids farewell to his girlfriend, Sulima (Ela Sabah), who tearfully insists on coming along but is finally placated by Ampal's promise to send for her once he has found a job in the city. The next morning Ampal goes to KK for the first time in Om's mini-lorry.

With the premise thus set, *Orang Kita* takes viewers through Ampal's and Om's comic journey and misadventures in the city, and the former's encounters with urban modernity. Having never experienced the situation, Ampal is amazed that everyone has to pay a fee to use the public toilets. He talks to the vending machine, thinking that it holds a real person inside whose job is to dispense canned drinks. He gawks at the elevator and escalator the first time he uses them. He is simultaneously curious and afraid when he sees a toy car driving itself near him, thinking it is animated by spirits. Ampal's child-like village naivety results in his being put in tight situations, such as when he and Om are left with the bill after a man in the city invites them for a meal but sneaks away after eating without paying. *Orang Kita* concludes when Ampal's love interest, Sulima, suddenly appears in the city with her father to ask him to return to the village, the implication being that Sulima's father, hitherto against Ampal marrying his daughter, has had a change of heart and now accepts him as a future son-in-law.

Orang Kita is sold without any subtitles but viewers who understand Malay would easily be able to follow the simple plot and enjoy the film on the universal level as a story about the search for a better life, the value of friendship and the like. Viewers who are able to follow the film in this way but are unfamiliar with Sabah's complex social fabric are, however, likely to overlook how *Orang Kita* signifies much more than might be apparent on the surface, particularly where identity markers like ethnicity, religion and nationality are concerned. For instance, Ampal, despite his Penan haircut, is not, as some viewers might imagine, Penan, the aboriginal people found not in Sabah but Sarawak (the other state in East Malaysia) and Brunei. From the signs provided by the film and from contextual knowledge, it is clear that he is a non-Muslim who belongs instead to the 'land people'.

'Land people' generally inhabit the interior districts of Sabah, although some live in the coastal districts as well. They traditionally engage in paddy and shifting cultivation methods and are mainly animists, with some proportion of them being Christians and Muslims (Roff 1974: 21–23). Historically, Dusun and Murut were names given to 'land people' by the Muslim feudal lords working within the Brunei sultanate, which once claimed suzerainty over Sabah. British administrators used the same labels as a means of classification after Sabah came under British rule in the 1880s. With the rise of the first wave

of nationalist sentiment in the 1950s, a group of 'land people', who were officially categorized as Dusuns, proclaimed themselves to be Kadazan. In 1961, this growing emotion among the 'land people' led to a resolution by state-wide Dusun leaders, stating that Dusuns should be called Kadazans. Murut leaders declared a similar resolution for Muruts to be called Kadazans. Thus the 'land people' officially came to be called Kadazans. When an identity crisis occurred in the 1980s, regarding whether 'land people' should be called Kadazans or Dusuns, the term Kadazan was officially changed to Kadazandusun in 1989 (Topin 1995). The question of whether the Muruts were a part of the Kadazandusun or a separate ethnic entity remained unresolved. Currently the official term for 'land people' in Sabah is Kadazandusun but some use the term Kadazandusun-Murut or simply 'KDM community'. Meanwhile, in the 1991 census, 'land people' were divided into several categories: Dusuns (16.6 per cent of 1.3 million people, the total population of Sabah), Kadazans (8.0 per cent), Muruts (3.8 per cent) and other indigenous groups. To avoid complexity, this chapter refers to these groups as 'land people'.

In contrast to the 'indigenous' Ampal whose character silently bears the historical burden of the 'land people', Om is a Muslim of 'sea people' background. 'Sea people' generally live in the coastal districts of Sabah, traditionally engaged in trade and fishery, and profess Islam (Roff 1974: 23–24). In the pre-colonial period, the former were subjects of the Muslim sultanates of Brunei and Sulu. When Sabah came under British rule in the 1880s, the state boundary for the colony of Sabah (then called North Borneo) was demarcated and both sultanates became detached from the colony. This led British administrators to believe that 'sea people' originated from outside of Sabah. The 'sea people', therefore, became the immigrant population in Sabah while the 'land people' were thought to be indigenous. 'Sea people' became classified in Sabah as Bajaus, Bruneis, Suluks and other ethnic groups. 'Sea people' with Malaysian citizenship were subsequently recognized as also indigenous to Sabah, and their 'native' status was recognized along with the 'land people'. Perception of indigenesness became confusing again when Sabah gained its independence in 1963, becoming a state in the Federation of Malaysia. Then, the 'land people' claimed to be indigenous people of Sabah, while the 'sea people' claimed they were indigenous to Malaysia where Malay Muslims are recognized to have the privilege of being 'native.' In the 1991 census, 'sea people' were counted as Bajaus (16.3 per cent), Malays (8.1 per cent), and other indigenous groups.

Because of their entangled histories, 'land people' and 'sea people' of Sabah are often thought to be mutual rivals. From this standpoint, Ampal and Om should not be mingling, let alone become good friends, were it not for the reality at grass-roots level that 'land people' and 'sea people' have never developed their communities exclusively of each other. The two groups in fact have long been dependent on each other in many aspects of their social life, as Ampal's and Om's relationship in *Orang Kita* intimates. In spite of their ethnic and religious differences – differences which are neither underlined

nor made an issue in the telemovie – the two characters become mates, constantly poking fun at each other in good humour. Driving Ampal to KK for the first time, for instance, Om makes a rest stop at a place overlooking Mount Kinabalu, Sabah's most famous tourist destination, which was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. Ampal's ignorance of Mount Kinabalu prompts Om to lecture the former, emphasising that every citizen of Sabah ought to be knowledgeable about the iconic mountain, unless they want to be laughed at by foreign tourists. This might seem like an insult to Ampal by those who hold that 'land people' are indigenous to Sabah and the 'sea people' are immigrants. However, in *Orang Kita*, Om's lecture is neither insulting in intent nor taken as an insult by Ampal. Throughout the film, Om and Ampal constantly jibe at each other without either party taking offence. When Om has to make an emergency stop on the way to KK so that he could relieve himself in the bush, Ampal cheekily fiddles with Om's mini lorry and gives Om a fright when he almost speeds off (despite not knowing how to drive) on his own, forcing Om to scramble after him before giving Ampal an earful. Subsequently, in the city, when Om buys *halal* (kosher) 'chicken rice' for both himself and Ampal, the latter half-feigns confusion to poke fun at Om, saying that he does not want to consume food meant for chicken.

In *Orang Kita*, as in Sabah, differences in ethnicity and religion rarely if ever lead to the creation of insurmountable barriers or give rise to tensions and animosity, as they have the potential to in Peninsular Malaysia. This remains true even after 1991 when the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Peninsula-based Malay-Muslim political party, brought its brand of racial and religious politics into Sabah. By no means does this imply that ethnic and religious tensions are entirely absent in Sabah. Indeed, as Fausto Barlocco contends, some Kadazans in Sabah bear an expressed disdain for the *Malazu* (Malay in Kadazan) whose monoracial TV dramas originating from the Peninsula are rejected and identified, 'often unconsciously', as propaganda that promotes 'a national culture based on Malay and Islamic values' (Barlocco 2009). None of this, however, detracts from the reality that ethnicity, religion and even the country of origin or nationality generally play a negligible role in Sabahan social life.

Sabahan society is generally open to difference in ways that go far beyond 'tolerance' practised between a majority of the Malays, Chinese and Indians in the Peninsula. This is certainly fortunate, considering that, in comparison to the Peninsula, Sabahan society is much more diverse, mixed and fluid as a result of higher numbers of marriages across ethnicity and religion, as well as migration from Kalimantan, Sulawesi and the Philippines. Leaving aside the slapstick humour, the conviviality and affection demonstrated between Ampal and Om despite their different backgrounds, for instance, suitably exemplifies the spirit of mutual acceptance that characterizes Sabah's social life. It is an acceptance that is neither affected nor forced but spontaneous and emphatic. Their symbolic bond could only strengthen, as suggested by *Orang Kita 2*. In the sequel, while travelling together with Ampal, Om is

mistaken for someone else and is arrested and jailed by the local police. Ampal stands by his friend and ends up waiting a long time before Om is released.

A subplot in *Orang Kita* involving Ampal and Sulima as cross-boundary lovers provides another illustration of what the typical West Malaysian psyche would regard as a problem of otherness but is literally a non-issue for a majority of Sabahans. In several scenes, Sulima wears *baju kurung*, while her father is seen in one wearing *kain sarung*, both being traditional outfits for Malay-Muslim women and men respectively. That they dress like Malay-Muslims does not in itself signify that they are Malay-Muslims as it is common in Sabah for both Muslims and non-Muslims to wear similar clothing. In one scene, Sulima's father (who earlier rejected Ampal as his daughter's suitor) confides in Sulima that he is growing old and wants to *bertaubat* by going clean and giving up the 'sinful' (black magic) work he had been doing. The term *bertaubat* in Malay can mean either 'to repent' or 'to be converted' into Islam, which, again, leaves the question of the father's religion unanswered. The next time Sulima's father appears, he wears a black *songkok* (male Muslim headgear), explaining to his daughter that he had just returned from *surau* (a small mosque). This confirms finally that Sulima's father is henceforth a Muslim, irrespective of whether he was previously a non-Muslim or a lapsed Muslim.

Assuming that Sulima, too, has always been a Muslim, or becomes one in practice like her father, then, Ampal too would have to convert to Islam by law before he could marry Sulima. In *Orang Kita*, however, the issue of religious conversion is not taken up at all simply because marriages across ethnicity and religion are commonplace in Sabah. It is not unusual for East Malaysians to have Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and animist relatives, sometimes staying under the same roof. As Sabahan journalist, Erna Mahyuni (2010), writes, the common reaction upon receiving news that someone is marrying a person from another religion or ethnicity is: "“Oh, your kids will be cute!” No heated discussion about traditions and religious differences because the unspoken assumption is that the couple will work them out.’ The hybrid fluidity of identities in Sabah can be unsettling to the typical West Malaysian psyche, which is accustomed to racially categorizing Malaysians as Malay, Chinese, Indian or ‘other races’. Erna notes, ‘I have met West Malaysians who get very agitated when I refuse to tell them either what religion I profess or what race I am. They don’t know what to do with me because they can’t categorise me.’

Bangsa and the first two waves of Sabahan nationalism

Sabah's unique openness to difference, as intimated by *Orang Kita*, is due in no small measure to the fact that clear-cut ethnic and religious boundaries were never developed in Sabah by the British colonial administration (Ongkili 1972: 1; Lee 1976: 14). Furthermore, when Sabah became part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, it was recognized as having special privileges and state

administrative independence. Sabah has control over its immigration system and anyone who is not from Sabah, regardless of whether the person is a Malaysian citizen or not, needs to obtain a work permit from the state to be employable in Sabah. This unique system explains how Sabah was able to remain relatively free from interference from the federal government in Peninsular Malaysia until recent decades. Sabah's independent trajectory is in radical contrast to West Malaysia which has evolved a system of *bangsa*. *Bangsa* is a Malay term commonly employed to denote ethnicity, race or people (Ariffin 1993: 14–21; Milner 1994: 50–54). In this discussion, however, I define and demonstrate *bangsa* as primarily a social, political and economic power-bloc which, although culture-centred, not all cultural groups are privileged to become.

This qualified notion of *bangsa* has its roots in Malaya, where its application today dominates the political imaginary in the Peninsula. During British rule, the multiethnicities in Malaya had to fit into one of the politically recognized *bangsa* (Malay, Chinese, Indian) if they were to be recognized as qualifying for certain rights. Marriages across these divides gradually reduced and over time the boundaries separating the *bangsa* became thicker. Subsequently there emerged movements among the people of Malaya to mobilize *bangsa* to uplift their own group status, which resulted in the emergence of *bangsa*-based political parties. The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) was formed in 1946, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in the same year, and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in 1949. These three parties formed an election coalition that won the federal council elections in 1955, two years before Malayan independence. Since then, the administration of Malaya and later Malaysia has been under the control of a coalition of ethnic parties, with UMNO, MCA, and MIC as its central core. Through this process, it could be said that the three ethnic groups came to be recognized by each other as qualified to form political parties and to send representatives to the federal government, and to discuss and make decisions on issues at the national level. Under this system, every *bangsa* is an ethnic group but not all ethnic groups constitute a *bangsa* each. Ethnic groups in Malaysia not recognized as *bangsa* include Orang Asli, Thais, Portuguese, Baba/Nyonya, and so on. They do not possess their own cultural institutions, unlike the three recognized major *bangsa*, each of which possesses its own state-recognized mother-tongue (actively used in newspapers, radio, TV, schools and so on), cultural holidays and political party.

The above-described *bangsa* system of West Malaysia is alien to Sabah first because, as signalled earlier, the British never installed it in the state; and second, because *bangsa*-based political parties from West Malaysia did not spread their wings to Sabah upon the formation of Malaysia. The British broadly categorized the people of Sabah as indigenous groups, coastal Muslims and the Chinese. The indigenous groups mostly comprised non-Muslims who shared similar cultural characteristics among themselves, such as language and beliefs. They did not have a single, unified collective identity; rather, they

identified themselves differently from district to district but they were generally called Dusuns by the Brunei Muslims, who had been ruling a part of the region before the British arrived. Dusun, which in Malay means 'the people of the orchard', was the official name the British gave the indigenous groups of Sabah when they ruled the region in the late nineteenth century. As outlined earlier, the Dusun subsequently became politicized and evolved into Kadazan and later Kadazandusun or Kadazandusun-Murut (KDM).

That the *bangsa* system is absent from Sabah might be seen as a blessing insofar as it prevented a potential repeat of the deep racial polarization caused by the entrenched system in the Peninsula. Its absence is, however, a major political disadvantage for the indigenous people of Sabah since, as previously underscored, attainment of *bangsa* status is necessary to engage the three *bangsa* of the Peninsula on equal terms at the federal level. This is particularly true from the 1980s onward, when Sabah could no longer expect large revenues from its timber industry. Changing political circumstances meant that Sabah could no longer afford to be concerned only with its internal affairs, forced as it has been since to review its position in the context of national Malaysian politics, and even its treatment towards immigrant populations from neighbouring countries, as we shall see in the subsequent discussion of the telemovie, *PTI*.

In response to such internal and external pressures, a group of 'land people' launched its first wave of Sabahan nationalism in the 1950s based on lineage or indigeneity (Roff 1974; Luping 1994: 97–105; Yamamoto 2002: 216–219). The prime movers were from Penampang, a west coast district of Sabah. Historically, the local people of Penampang were subjected to the Brunei sultanate and were called Dusun, which, although literally means 'people of the orchard', connotes yokels. They were also exposed to the English language, Christianity and the West earlier than most parts of Sabah by a Catholic missionary group settling in the area during the early stages of British colonization. The missionaries subsequently standardized the indigenous language of Sabah, which led to the development of Kadazan consciousness and nationalism. This, as signalled earlier, awakened the Dusun to push for a renaming and reunification of the indigenous people under the term Kadazan, the supposedly long-forgotten name for the 'land people' of Sabah then called Dusun, although the understanding of this was shared only among those in the Penampang and surrounding regions.

The first wave of Sabahan 'land people' nationalism was successful insofar as it managed to bring about a sense of self-reliance among the Kadazans, and to install the president of the Kadazan-based political party, the United National Kadazan Organisation (UNKO; later United National Pasok-Momogun Kadazan Organisation or UPKO), as Chief Minister of Sabah in 1963 when Malaysia was formed. The explosive growth of Kadazan nationalism, however, caused uncertainty among the mostly-Muslim 'sea people' who felt excluded from Sabahan state affairs. They also felt that Kadazan nationalism, which was interwoven with aspects of Christianity and the English language, promoted

an image of anti-Islam and anti-Malay language. As a result, although Kadazanism thrived initially, it soon faced strong opposition from Sabah as well as from the Malay-Muslims in Peninsular Malaysia. UPKO was dissolved following the party's loss in the state general elections of 1967, supplanted by the Muslim-based party, United Sabah National Organisation (USNO). Many 'land people' who identified themselves as Dusun, some of which converted to Islam, then joined USNO, siding with the 'sea people' to run the state. The Kadazans, as a distinctive political power, were no longer seen in the arena of state politics in Sabah, although many 'land people' took part in state administration.

A second tide of Sabahan nationalism to obtain *bangsa* status, again initiated by the 'land people', emerged in the 1980s when the people began criticizing the state government, arguing that Sabah's economic development had failed to benefit the common people of Sabah. Indigenous nationalists of the second tide aimed to uplift the position of Sabah in Malaysia and demanded that Sabah be treated as an equal partner with other states in the Federation of Malaysia (Luping 1994: 428–438; Yamamoto 2002: 219–222). Instead of basing their claims to rights based on lineage or indigeneity, they employed the concept of nationalism based on regionality. This was a move calculated to overcome the limitations of the first wave of nationalism in the 1950s which, in emphasizing Kadazanism, alienated the non-Kadazans. Led by a group of mostly-Christian 'land people' from Tambunan, an interior region of Sabah, the movement gradually gained momentum.¹ When the Tambunan group formed the Sabah United Party (PBS) in 1985, it attracted members from all corners of Sabah, including 'land people', 'sea people' and the Chinese. The multi-ethnic PBS often employed the slogan 'Sabah for Sabahan' in its struggle to unite Sabahans and to forge a common identity among them so that they could be recognized as a *bangsa*. Well supported by Sabahans, PBS won four successive state general elections from 1985 onwards.

At the same time that a pan-Sabahan identity was being forged, the Tambunan leadership, through the Kadazan Cultural Association, also pursued the goal of revitalizing Kadazan culture and identity. It resolved the naming dispute between 'land people' who saw themselves as either Kadazan or Dusun by renaming the people as Kadazandusun (KD), resulting in their relative reintegration. The successful revitalization of the Kadazandusun identity, however, served to weaken the integration between the 'land people' and other groups in Sabah, leading to the demise of the Sabahan state administration under PBS. It alienated the 'sea people' who saw the Tambunan leadership as being pro-Christianity, driving them to seek closer relations with Malay-Muslims in the Peninsula. Amidst conflict between the Sabah state government and the federal government, UMNO entered Sabah in 1991 and set up branches. A group of 'sea people' left PBS to join UMNO, while other splinters formed Chinese- and Kadazandusun-based parties. After staying on as the opposition, PBS was co-opted in 2003 into Barisan Nasional (BN), the national front led by UMNO. PBS remains multi-ethnic like other local

political parties in Sabah, but is regarded as a Kadazandusun party within the BN framework.

As a result of its struggles over the decades, the KDM community today has had some of its key cultural festivals marked as national holidays, as well as its own Kadazan newspapers and radio programmes. The KDM mother tongue is also now taught in schools in Sabah. These developments suggest that Kadazandusuns are making progress in their struggle to attain *bangsa* status, although the key point remains that they have yet to attain it insofar as they still lack full *bangsa* representation at the national level.

Nationalism 3.0 and *PTI*

Having sketched the evolution of indigenous identities and attitudes towards ethnic, religious and other similarities/differences in Sabah vis-à-vis the Peninsula, I want to now examine the ways in which Sabah's telemovies like *Orang Kita*, *PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin* and their sequels envision what I posit as an emergent third generation indigenous Sabahan nationalism, or Sabahan 'nationalism 3.0'. Nationalism 3.0 as I define it here does not yet exist as an organized political movement; nor is there any guarantee that it will. It exists at present as a developing ideal and a sentiment that is gaining popularity in Sabah, as I observed in my six years of fieldwork there.

This qualified emergent third generation of Sabahan nationalism is distinguishable from the first in that it eschews indigeneity as a precondition for inclusion in the construction of *bangsa* Sabah. It shares with the second generation the regional emphasis but adds a crucial twist. In 3.0, 'our people' is framed as an inclusive category that does not discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, religion, class or origin (whether one is a Sabah-born or foreign-born citizen, or a citizen or an immigrant). The only condition for inclusion in good faith, as intimated in *Orang Kita* and developed in *PTI*, is that one should enter and reside in Sabah legally, and, at the same time, recognize the rest of 'our people' in Sabah as partners in life, as exemplified, for instance, by Ampal's and Om's friendship.

Abu Bakar Ellah and Mat Kongo who play Ampal and Om in *Orang Kita* return in *PTI* to play different characters but remaining on one level the respective representatives of their 'people'. The former takes on the role of Angkon, one of the 'land people' living in Kudat in northern Sabah, while the latter plays Otok, a Muslim of 'sea people' background who has acquired Malaysian citizenship after living in Sabah for an extended period as an immigrant from a neighbouring country. *PTI*, though, is not so much about Angkon and Otok as it is about their respective daughter and nephew, Clarice and Den. Strangers who become friends and lovers, Clarice and Den enter into a relationship that cuts across class, ethnic, religion and state boundaries in a way that would raise eyebrows in West Malaysia. Clarice is a high-school teacher from a middle-class background, while Den is a labourer who sells vegetables and fruits at a market in Kudat. Clarice's father is non-Muslim,

which makes Clarice more likely to be non-Muslim, too, taking into account the norm for the majority of 'land people' in Sabah. Den, on the other hand, is a Muslim of 'sea people' background.

In line with the inclusive philosophy of the third wave of Sabahan nationalism, *PTI* makes no issue of ethnic, religious or even class difference, raising as its sole concern Den's status as a PTI, which in Malay denotes *pendatang tanpa izin* or 'illegal immigrant'.² A homographic pun on PTI as the acronym is commonly understood, the title of the telemovie, *PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin* (Love Without Permission) describes Clarice's and Den's relationship – one that is 'unauthorized' because Den has no legal standing to reside in Sabah, be it temporarily or permanently. From the ethical perspective of the film narrative, nothing, apart from Den's PTI status, stands in the way of Clarice and Den developing their relationship and perhaps even getting married some day, not even the fact that Clarice's hand in marriage has already been promised to someone else. *PTI* reveals in a subplot how, in order to unite their land and continue to work together, Clarice's father, Angkon, had in the distant past made a friendship pact with his now-deceased Muslim friend to have their children marry each other when they reach adulthood. As Angkon says to his friend in a flashback, 'a friend is a friend even if he is from another ethnicity and religion. This (way of life) is our inheritance from our forefathers.'

Years later, Angkon, faithful to the pact, invites his friend's son, Rudy, to get to know Clarice with the intention of seeing them married in the near future, unaware that Rudy is already engaged to Lydia, who is furthermore pregnant. That Clarice is non-Muslim while Rudy is Muslim is hardly a factor in Clarice's decision to not to marry Rudy. Rudy's status as a Muslim is in fact a potential solution to the unhappy love triangle. As Rudy proposes, he could fulfil his duty by marrying both Lydia and Clarice since he is allowed to have up to four wives in Islamic law. Clarice could not take up the offer simply because she finally realizes that her heart already belongs to Den. Her realization comes a little too late, however. As she returns to the remote island of Banggi from Kudat after conveying her decision to her family and Rudy, Den is already leaving the pier on a boat heading to his hometown in a neighbouring country. He is forced to leave Sabah by Otok, his uncle, who is concerned for Den's safety as the Malaysian authorities are in the midst of an operation to mass-arrest illegal immigrants in Sabah.

PTI ends 'unhappily' with the lovers thus separated, prevented from uniting despite transcending ethnicity, religion and class. Den simply could not be absorbed as 'our people' in the conception of Sabahan nationalism 3.0 that underlines *PTI* because he does not have the legal papers. Even Clarice tells him so directly in a scene where immigrants, even illegal ones, are defended and redignified, instead of stigmatized as they are likely to be in West Malaysia. Mistakenly assuming that Clarice would not marry him because of his PTI status, Den pleads, and I paraphrase, 'Do PTIs have no feelings? Are we not allowed to marry? Is it because PTIs are bad people, all thieves and robbers?'

Clarice responds to this not by placating Den but by insisting that the laws of the country are such that PTIs cannot be allowed in Sabah. Only years later, in *PTI2*, does Den return to Sabah after clearing the legal hurdles. *PTI2* revolves around Den's return, his discovery that Clarice has married a wealthy businessman and changed her name to Camila, and his attempts to rekindle their love.

To better understand why the third generation of Sabahan nationalism exemplified by *PTI* should insist that only legal immigrants be counted in its definition of 'our people', it is necessary to take into account the historical context and the urgency of the problem of illegal immigrants in Sabah today. Because of Sabah's porous boundaries and geographical proximity to the Philippines and Indonesia, movements of people from surrounding areas into the state continued even after Sabah became part of Malaysia in 1963. Broadly categorized as Filipinos and Indonesians, these immigrants include Bajau, Suluk and other 'sea people'. According to the 1991 census (Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 1991: Table 1.3), residents of Sabah include Indonesians (10.7 per cent) who rank as the second largest non-native ethnic group after the Chinese (15.2 per cent). Filipinos (1.6 per cent) constitute the third largest non-native ethnic group. These figures do not include foreigners who entered Sabah without the proper documents and those who entered legally but become illegal when they failed to renew their work permits. Because it is often difficult to distinguish by appearances only if a person is a citizen, a legal immigrant, or a PTI in Sabah, PTIs have largely been able to blend in and evade the authorities.

Sabah's PTI problem falls under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The Federal Special Task Force for Illegal Immigrants reported that 120,000 illegal immigrants were deported between 1990 and 1998. Out of these, 70 percent were from the Philippines, while the rest were from Indonesia. The task force estimated there were some 100,000 illegal immigrants remaining in Sabah when they completed their 1999 operation in the state, but the real figures remain unknown. The current estimated Sabah population is about 2.8 million while estimates of the number of illegal immigrant population range from 130,000 ('Only') and half a million to above 1 million (Sadiq 2005: 107).

The moral and political attitude of *PTI* and *Orang Kita* towards immigrants in general and PTIs in particular is markedly sanguine in the face of Sabah's PTI problem. The telemovies remain inclusive in ways qualified earlier, despite acknowledgement on the ground level that the problem has long gone out of control. Sadiq (2005: 108) notes in his study that almost one in three residents of Sabah is a foreigner (legal and illegal). In the coastal town of Sandakan, the residents are 'overwhelmingly Filipino, while Indonesians comprise the majority of residents in Tawau' (2005: 106).

What complicates the PTI problem in Sabah is that, as popularly believed by Sabahans, illegal immigration into the state is not a 'natural' phenomenon and is deliberately encouraged by certain sections within the Malaysian state

dominated by UMNO (Kitingan 2006). Hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim immigrants have been given Malaysian citizenship (which includes the right to vote) in order to alter Sabah's demographics and increase UMNO's vote banks. A result of this has been the shrinkage of the size of the KDM community. Constituting 49 percent of Sabah's population in the early twentieth century, Kadazandusuns were the majority ethnic group. 'They fell to 32 percent by the 1960 census, 29.9 percent by 1970, and then, to their alarm, by 1990 they had fallen to 19.6 percent' (Sadiq 2005: 108).

'Our People'

That *Orang Kita*, *PTI* and their sequels remain steadfastly inclusive in their shared conception of 'our people' at a time when the political map of Sabah is being altered by illegal immigration might perhaps be construed as insensitive to the plight of Sabah's indigenous people gradually coming to be outnumbered by foreigners. Worse, by advocating a conception of 'our people' that includes legal immigrants, the telemovies might be seen as being unwittingly complicit in what many Sabahans regard as UMNO's attempt to hijack Sabah by flooding the state with mostly Muslim immigrants and granting them citizenship at the expense of the mostly non-Muslim indigenous citizens, many of whom ironically do not even possess the documented proof of citizenship easily acquired by foreigners. Consider, however, an alternative interpretation of the telemovies' insistence on inclusivity over exclusivity. What if it is precisely *because* (rather than in spite) of the severity of the problem that the inclusive ideal becomes even more necessary and urgent? It bears underlining here that the telemovies do not pretend to offer direct solutions to the PTI problem, just as they do not deny that practical solutions ought to be found to tackle Sabah's PTI problem in all its dimensions. What it does offer, arguably, is an ideal, a long-term goal and a reminder to Sabahans not to forget and neglect the inherited inclusive spirit of 'our people' while attempting to resolve the immediate problem. Fixing the problem but losing the spirit that makes Sabah unique relative to West Malaysia would only ultimately amount to losing the war.

That *Orang Kita*, *PTI* and their sequels remain steadfastly inclusive despite everything may not be unintended by their makers, including Abu Bakar Ellah who plays Ampal and Angkon and directed and acted in these productions. Although appearing 'comical' in his Penan hairstyle which he sports on and off camera, Ellah is far from politically simple or naive, as demonstrated for instance by his contesting in the 2004 general elections as an independent candidate in the Kuamut state constituency deep in the interior of Sabah. Quoted as saying, 'Like in the movie, I am a humble man, a kampung [village] boy who wishes to make a change' ('Singer' 2004), Ellah stood against a candidate from Barisan Nasional, the race-centred coalition, and lost. He has since decided to quit politics and focus on his entertainment career ('Saya' 2005)

but his productions such as *Orang Kita* and *PTI* remain a testament to attempts by Sabahans to cast *bangsa* Sabah in the inclusive mould of 3.0.

Abu Bakar Ellah is a member of *Orang Sungai* or the 'river people', the community into which he was born in 1959, which puts him in good stead to filmically intervene in the construction of *bangsa* Sabah. 'River people' traditionally live along the Kinabatangan and other rivers on the eastern coast of Sabah. Linguistically, they are categorized as a sub-group of the Kadazandusuns but because the majority of them are Muslims, they are seen as an exception among the Kadazandusuns. As the name suggests, 'river people' are in an ideal position to mediate between 'land people' and 'sea people' (including foreigners); they have built-in advantages with regard to the momentum for dismantling and reshaping the dichotomies still existing between 'land people' and 'sea people'.

Abu Bakar Ellah's most pointed intervention in the direction of 3.0, which encapsulates the philosophy of *Orang Kita* and *PTI*, is the theme song from the former telemovie, which I want to now examine by way of concluding the discussion. A huge hit in Sabah, 'Orang kita' (Our people) was written by Abu Bakar Ellah who is, apart from being a well-known actor, also an accomplished popular singer with five albums released to date. Repeated multiple times in the running time, part of the song reads as follows:

<i>Makan pakai tangan</i>	To eat with fingers
<i>Suka makan belacan</i>	Enjoy the taste of <i>belacan</i> [shrimp paste]
<i>Jumpa ucap salam</i>	And to say <i>salam</i> [greeting] when they meet
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	That is
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people
<i>Pandai bikin tapai</i>	Good at making <i>tapai</i> [fermented rice]
<i>Suka ramai-ramai</i>	Getting together with a lot of people
<i>Kadang ampai-ampai</i>	Being relaxed and going with the flow
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	That is
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people
<i>Orang kita . . .</i>	Our people
<i>Jaga-jagalah budaya kita</i>	Uphold our culture
<i>Orang kita . . .</i>	Our people
<i>Jaga-jagalah budaya kita</i>	Uphold our culture

The song is reminder of the shared similarities between the different communities that effectively make up 'our people'. Eating with fingers is a common local practice, as is relishing *belacan* (shrimp paste), a typical sauce used in the Malay world, of which Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia are parts. *Salam* is a salutation used between Malay-Muslims in Peninsular Malaysia;

in Sabah, however, it is a common term used by ‘sea people’ and ‘land people’ regardless of their religion. *Tapai* is fermented rice and usually served as rice wine. In Sabah, *tapai* is commonly thought of as an alcoholic beverage and the traditional drink of the ‘land people’ who would on special occasions gather and drink *tapai* through the night with nuts as nibbles. The mention of *tapai* in the song would seem to exclude Muslims (for whom alcohol is forbidden) but consider the lyrics, which say ‘making *tapai*’ instead of ‘drinking *tapai*.’ The *tapai* mentioned here could only be fermented rice paste. The paste-type *tapai* is a snack commonly enjoyed by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Therefore, in a society like Sabah, where people from various backgrounds frequently gather and share, ‘upholding our culture’ (as mentioned in the song) does not mean distilling different cultural aspects but rather embracing the various aspects of life as it is practised in Sabah.

The next part of the song reads:

<i>Laksmana Hang Tuah</i>	Admiral Hang Tuah
<i>Paduka Mat Salleh</i>	Noble Mat Salleh
<i>Si Aki Antanom</i>	And great Antanom
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	They are
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people
<i>Orang kita . . .</i>	Our people
<i>Ingat-ingat asal-usulnya</i>	Remember the origins
<i>Orang kita . . .</i>	Our people
<i>Ingat-ingat asal-usulnya</i>	Remember the origins

In the above section, three important names are invoked as a way of ‘remember[ing] our origins.’ Mat Salleh is known as the leader of a series of rebellions in Sabah against the British from 1884 to 1900. He is the most prominent anti-colonialist figure in Sabahan history and has long been regarded as a Sabahan hero, although attempts have been made recently to reposition Mat Salleh as a hero of the ‘sea people’ or as a Muslim hero for Sabah. As if in response to this, the song invokes Antanom, another rebel leader who fought against British rule in 1915 in the interior district of Rundum.³ Antanom belongs to the Murut ethnic group and is known also for his unique hairstyle, which Abu Bakar Ellah models. By placing Mat Salleh and Antanom together, the song emphasizes inclusivity – that Sabah’s heroes come from various backgrounds.

Interestingly, the song also includes Hang Tuah, a well-known Malay admiral of the Malacca sultanate on the Peninsular side, as one of ‘our people.’ Hang Tuah could have been replaced by another hero from Sabah, for instance, Albert Kwok, who was the leader of the Kinabalu guerrilla group who fought against Japanese rule in Sabah in 1943 (Wong 2010: 89). Including a historical figure of Chinese background such as Kwok would create a more Sabah-centric image of the people. But it appears that Abu Bakar Ellah seeks to avoid

restricting ‘our people’ solely to those originating from East Malaysia and the surrounding region. Choosing Hang Tuah as the third hero (but placing him on top of the list) indicates that Abu Bakar Ellah does not look upon Peninsular Malaysia as detracting from the ‘we feeling’ in Sabah. At the same time, by putting Mat Salleh, Antanom and Hang Tuah together, the song suggests to the people of Sabah that they should be proud of their ancestors and heroes as much as the people of Peninsular Malaysia are proud of Hang Tuah, and that Sabah is as rich in history as Peninsular Malaysia. By ‘remember[ing] our origins’ this way, the song opens up for Sabahans the world beyond Sabah.

How can the people of Sabah simultaneously put in practice the seemingly contradictory ideas of remembering their origins and embracing the world beyond Sabah? The final part of the song explains:

<i>Sifat rendah diri</i>	To keep a humble attitude
<i>Hormat-menghormati</i>	To pay respect to each other
<i>Berbudi pekerti</i>	And to be well disciplined
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	That is
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people
<i>Pura-pura lupa</i>	To pretend to forget
<i>Suka angan-angan</i>	Like to dream
<i>Lupa asal-usul</i>	And to forget one’s origins
<i>Adalah . . .</i>	That is
<i>Orang kita</i>	Our people

The song suggests that apart from remembering their origins, Sabahans should also ‘forget’ them – not with mindless abandon but strategically, with humility, self-discipline and out of respect for others. ‘Forgetting’ is an act that seeks to include others as part of ‘our people’, as well as one that seeks to diffuse antagonisms that are often sparked when too much is invested in ‘origins’ as a category of inclusion/exclusion.

Conclusion

To conclude, we have seen the ways in which Abu Bakar Ellah suggests in his telemovies that a Sabahan identity can be fostered without being ‘anti-’ anything. This notion of ‘being-together’, while diametrically opposite to the racial practice in West Malaysia, has not led to the formation of a political movement and there is no guarantee that it will. Nonetheless, for the present, it serves as an interesting case study of identity formation in the age of global population migration, and of a potentially emergent future for contemporary Sabah at crossroads. A Sabahan *bangsa* that is on par with the three *bangsa* from West Malaysia may yet crystallize to serve as a guide for the latter to rethink the constitution of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in a world of irreducible plurality.

Notes

- 1 On Kadazan leaders from the inland district of Tambunan, see Yamamoto (2002).
- 2 *PTI* departs radically from films emerging from Peninsular Malaysia that deal with cross-ethnic and cross-religion romance, such as *Anak Sarawak* (Son of Sarawak, 1988, directed by Rahim Razali), *Spinning Gasing* (Spinning Top, 2001, directed by Teck Tan) and *Sepet* (Slit Eyes, 2005, directed by Yasmin Ahmad). In these Peninsular love stories between Muslim and non-Muslim, either the non-Muslim converts to Islam in order to marry their Muslim partner or they break up because the conversion is not an option for the non-Muslim partner.
- 3 The man's true name was Ontoros Antanom. He should be called Ontoros instead of Antanom, his father's name, but as the person is referred to as Antanom in English documents and is widely known to the people of Sabah, the conventional name is used to address him.

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8 The hero in passage

The Chinese and the activist youth in Riri Riza's *Gie*¹

Abidin Kusno

The figure of Soe Hok Gie [1942–1969] symbolizes the struggle of our young generation against undemocratic regimes. Gie is remembered as a nature lover [. . .] and he became famous through his diary published [in 1983] as *The Diary of a Demonstrator*. He is known by both the generation of '66 and individuals of today via a feature film titled *Gie*. The film has successfully promoted Soe Hok Gie and popularized his diary. Thirty-five years after his death, the spirit of his struggle seems to have returned. Metro TV voted him one of the ten most popular [almost all male] ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. No doubt, Gie represents the spirit of the youth, the rebel and the intelligent young man.

(Nugroho 2009: 117)

So wrote the authors of a book titled, *The Ten Most Popular Prominent Indonesian Chinese*. Based on a poll by a private TV program, the authors with some urgency introduced Soe Hok Gie who, compared to other winners, had not been known to many Indonesians until the release of the popular film *Gie*.²

In the year 2005, *Gie*, directed by Riri Riza, received numerous awards at the Indonesian Film Festival along with international praise, which continued well after the initial release.³ The narrative of the film is structured stylistically in ways that follow the diary. And while Gie is portrayed as narrating his own life, the film is clearly framed by the urgency of the present to construct a new kind of hero. As Riza points out:

Many young people are only taught about celebrated national heroes, like Ki Hajar Dewantara and Sultan Hassanudin [. . .] In fact, there are people like Soe Hok Gie, whose status was not lifted by the government, although he played a significant role in history. Hok Gie was a unique fighter and a clean activist.

(Cited in Sudiarno 2004)

The director has also made it clear that 'my original intention was just simple: I only wanted to tell the story of someone that we believe must be told

to the broader public, particularly the younger generations' ('Riri' 2005). In short, the film attempts to depict the short-lived life of Gie by focusing on his 'heroism' that the director believes the post-*reformasi* (reformation) peoples of Indonesia, especially the 'youth', ought to remember.

Like many Indonesians born after 1965, I knew nothing of Soe Hok Gie until recently. He did not exist in our school texts, nor had I heard of him from family members or friends. This is perhaps not surprising for a de-politicized generation that lived under Suharto's New Order (1966–1998). Gie's absence from the pedagogical apparatus of our social surrounding may be attributed to his status as a student demonstrator who worked actively against the political establishment. His activist profile would have never been accepted by an authoritarian state even though the demonstration in which he participated helped Suharto gain power. Under a regime obsessed with order and stability, a figure like Gie would have been a threat and thus best forgotten.

Another potential reason for Gie's erasure from the national memory of the Suharto generation may well be that he was very young when he died, too young perhaps for the narrative of Indonesian historiography. As a commentator notes, 'his achievement and impact are difficult to assess (Kuntowijoyo 1999: xxi). Furthermore, a young person would normally never be considered a hero. In Indonesia, it is generally known that the notion of heroes connotes seniority, along with gendered boundaries (which largely excludes females from becoming leading figures of remembered heroism). Young heroes may however exist but they are often seen in terms of a type, a model or a phenomenon which carries very little individuality.⁴

Despite the youth factor, a very strong reason for Gie's invisibility may be attributed to his ethnic background. Under the socio-political environment of the Suharto regime, people of Chinese descent such as Gie were far from the national hero type. For these reasons it is not surprising that all through the Suharto years Gie stood outside the national memory. A film centred on Gie as a hero seems possible only retrospectively – in the post-Suharto era when the boundaries of heroic knowledge have been challenged.⁵

For members of the post-Suharto generation, the retrieval of this figure serves various purposes. It allows people to come to terms with the guilt of past ignorance and the responsibility to create a new subjectivity for the present and future generations. For instance, Mira Lesmana, the producer, recalls her initial response to Gie's diary (first published in 1983). The book, she said, made her feel shameful of her generation who, according to her, is not even aware of the historical conditions of the 1960s. The diary has apparently transformed her. 'I still remember, every time I opened a page I felt ashamed of myself. What Gie did was extraordinary. At the age of 14 he was already a keen reader of history and literature. This person whom I had never known has made me feel proud as an Indonesian. My intellectual horizon [*cakrawala berpikir*] has been opened [by Gie's diary]' (Lesmana 2005: xxv). For Lesmana, the diary – which she then helped turn into a film – is inspirational, for it woke her up from her teenage world (*masa remaja*). With Riri Riza, the

director and writer of the film, Mira reinterpreted the figure of Gie after a series of interviews and research.⁶ What was at stake for them was not the truth about Gie but that he should serve as a new model for an Indonesian hero. Riri Riza makes clear that his intention in making a film about Gie is to provide Indonesian youth today with a role model:

We're not trying to reconstruct his life. [Instead] we're trying to deconstruct it. We will view him with contemporary eyes and hope that today's generation will be able to digest his message [. . .] I really want people of the same age as me, or younger, to know about Soe Hok Gie. Some of us may not realize that a young person, who enjoyed rock music and mountaineering – who was humorous and so easygoing – played a role in the growth of democracy in the country.

(Cited in Sudiarno 2004)

Riza believes that 'cinema is the most effective means for capturing human emotion. It has the capacity to express reality in three dimensions, both visual and aural. But such capacity makes sense only when the film carries a strong message' (Riza 2005a: xxix–xxx). For Riza, Gie carries an exceptionally powerful message for the Indonesian youth. 'Gie is not the stereotypical *role model* or hero that we have known in this country. He sided with the weak and the defeated for perhaps he wanted to remain a hero for those who have fallen, and (moreover) he died young' (Riza 2005a: xxx; emphasis added). Gie represents not only the forgotten generation of Indonesian students who pushed for democracy in the 1960s. More importantly, he embodies a new subjectivity, a 'role model' for the present generation. For Riza, to construct a new model of an Indonesian hero means to overcome the visual regime of the Suharto era in which a hero is marked by what Indonesian film scholar Intan Paramaditha calls 'the cult of Generals' – a product of the upper class *priyayi* (traditional bureaucratic elite) values and militarism constituting a dominant model of masculinity (Paramaditha 2007: 44). It is against the visual regime of the New Order that the cinematic form of *Gie* emerges as a strategic intervention. Gie is represented by members of the generation who appropriate him to resolve the contradiction of their own time. As Paramaditha points out, 'Riza's politics [of masculinity] shape the imagined Gie on screen' (2007: 53). Thus Gie is a work of both autobiographical truth and political imagination.

The film, while based on a diary, represents the desire of the filmmaker and his wish to create a new historical subjectivity. In this sense, the biographic representation of Gie produces a politics that argues for change, but such a change, as I will suggest, demands a performance that is embedded within the larger regime of 'modeling' or 'role playing' in Indonesian society. The demand raises the question of how a film dealing with sensitive post-war historical issues could escape from the perennial question of how to represent a Chinese Indonesian as a hero (see Heryanto 2009). This chapter discusses

the problematics of portraying and representing 'Chinese' identity as part of the national hero construction of Gie. I look at how the film *Gie* both defies and supports the constructed boundary that defines Chinese identity and how it opens up a space for everyone to become national heroes of today. I tease out some scenes in the film and situate them within the effort to open up a new form of representation in the cultural field of post-Suharto Indonesia. But first, what might have been the main filmic intervention of *Gie*?

A new subjectivity and filmic response to social change

In an insightful analysis of *Gie*, Intan Paramaditha underscores the profound attempt by Riri Riza to revise the masculine norm of the Suharto era, namely *bapakism* which refers to 'an adult male [...] a father, a married man, and a man of a higher position endowed with wisdom, charisma, power, family values, and self mastery', all sustained by the *ibu* (the Mrs.) and their children under the benevolent gaze of the state (Paramaditha 2007: 45). The ultimate manifestation of *bapakism* is the Indonesian hero of the New Order, ideally an anti-communist man in military uniform, a figure constituting 'the dominant model of masculinity.' *Gie* questions precisely this visual and social regime, and Riza uses *Gie* as a counter figure to the monumentality of the Generals. Paramaditha identifies several tropes used by Riza to challenge the dominant model of masculinity. First, *Gie* is an intellectual, a man of letters who could hardly fight and barely attach himself to political power. Second, he remains single and, in Paramaditha's words, 'unproductive' within the establishment of the New Order masculine norm. Third, *Gie* is a Chinese Indonesian, known widely as the 'other' of the nation-state although he is of an 'unusual' type outside the sphere of the business world with which the Chinese have often been associated. With this series of unlikely-hero tropes, a new face of manhood is constructed, one that is 'sensitive, fragile and often indecisive', a type that Reza recognizes in actors such as Jude Law (Paramaditha 2007: 52). The reconfiguration of the typical Indonesian hero takes the route of transnational 'mediascape', thus rupturing the discourse of origin, bequests and inheritance central to the reproduction of the national hero in the Suharto era. The figure of *Gie*, Paramaditha concludes, offers 'a different kind of heroism complicated by anxiety, uncertainty, and impotence' and such representation has helped undermine the patriarchal structure of the New Order (Paramaditha 2007: 54).

Paramaditha's valuable study encourages one to view the film *Gie* as representing a new generation of filmmakers undergoing a period of socio-political 'transition' known otherwise as post-Suharto *reformasi*. For this new generation the uncertainty of the present echoes the historical time of Soe Hok Gie. *Gie* is a phenomenal figure conceivable only in the era of transition (*zaman peralihan*).⁷ Riza seems to be aware of the similarity of his time with that of *Gie*, and he expresses the temporal convergence in various cinematic forms. For example, the student demonstrations which took place on the street in the

mid-1960s recall similar demonstrations during Riza's own youth in the late 1990s. The political mood of the two different times seems unchanged, or better, interchanged, as Indonesia's political trajectory remains in the hands of political parties that show no interest in improving people's livelihood.⁸

Riza portrays *Gie* as dealing with the historical sensitivities of the 'transition' period – sensitivities which are not dissimilar to those in his own (present) time. In this sense, *Gie* could be seen as making an intervention for change in societal awareness of the 'history of the present'. It takes the form of historical, if not nostalgic, remembrance of the past by those who have never experienced any of that past. For Riza, *Gie* is meant to inspire the Indonesian youth to reclaim their position in the political history of Indonesia. Released in 2005, at a time when Indonesians were defined more by the disillusionment of Indonesian politics, *Gie* could be seen in terms of a filmic response to the present urge for a new historical subjectivity. Although Indonesians elected Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono as President just a year before *Gie* was released, it remains uncertain if the incumbent government formed by the old guard could constitute new historical subjectivities. Critical of today's social formation, *Gie* cannot be said to campaign for the ideological present. Instead it occupies a relatively independent position in its effort to re-construct an Indonesian young heroic subjectivity even though this position does not necessarily stand outside the social order within which Riza and his film are embedded.

The theme of the student/youth as a site for the recuperation of historical subjectivity is indeed familiar to Indonesian culture, society and history, and when student demonstration against the state is played out in Indonesian film, it raises the question of where the student is located in the recognized trope of Indonesian film.

The youth and the moral nation

In his study of Indonesian film, Karl Heider writes that

Indonesian movies do not have bad guys. The Indonesian figures create disorder, confusion, chaos. They have done something wrong, bad, evil. But they are not inherently bad. We can best label them "agents of disorder." They can be converted and order can be restored.

(Heider 1991: 35)⁹

Heider's study of the 'pattern of Indonesian culture in cinema' emphasizes the idea of 'order and disorder' as a key to Indonesian life. Cinema, as part of Indonesian life, replays such a pattern that is, we must add, not only cultural but also political. The idea of order and disorder is central to the constitution of the national culture. While the maintenance of order and disorder is significant, Heider (1991: 38) continues, what is even more important is the dissolution of their difference and restoration of the order. The incorporation

of disorder into order indicates the capacity of the state (as the custodian of order) to moderate, if not dissolve, opposition altogether.

Heider's formulation encourages us to move beyond his analytical concern. Take, as in our case, the complex position of university students in the history of modern Indonesia. University students (*mahasiswa/i*) occupy a problematic 'middle space' somewhere between order and disorder. The *mahasiswa* occupy a *liminal* position, for in the social hierarchy of Indonesia they are considered adults-but-not-quite.¹⁰ There is no doubt they are no longer teenagers (*remaja* – the favorite theme of the New Order) but in many respects they are still dependent on the authority of their parents or the elders of the family. They are adults by legal definition but most are unlikely to have families of their own. In this limbo position, they are often seen as floating subjects struggling with their socio-political and sexual ambiguities. Nevertheless, they are the future perfect of the nation, one that will replace the old national subjects, for better or worse.

Situated at the threshold of time and space, university students are the generator of political change while at the same time serving as a vehicle for the formation of new power. They represent both the sentimental youth (who often invite some disciplining measure from the family and the state) and the uncompromising heroic fighters who struggle against the family and behind it the corrupted nation. In this way, the *mahasiswa* embody most strategically the concern in Indonesia over order and disorder. In some ways, the *mahasiswa* are expected to create some disorder even though such move is meant for order to be restored. Indeed they are often responsible for creating disorder but they too are the agents who will ultimately recuperate the (unfolding) order. This dual role makes the *mahasiswa* both a vulnerable and a threatening subject to the order of the nation. In this position they often emerge as the moral compass of the nation.

Soe Hok Gie plays precisely this role of the moral compass, as may be discerned in the filmic representation of his personality. The observant male character is set against the instability of the transition period. While he is filled with anxiety and self-doubt (more explicitly expressed in his diary), Gie is portrayed in the film as a type of leader who is relatively stable and gentle (especially in comparison with his friends, as I will discuss later). Cinematically, Gie (especially the adult Gie) shows consistent calmness despite the anxiety and rage one could feel from reading his diary. In the film (unlike the diary), Gie appears firm, recalling, I would suggest, the imagery of *halus* (refinement) which points to the superiority of the moral over the political – a quality that makes Gie untouchable by opportunistic power. The issue of the possibility and impossibility of the students being co-opted by power is indeed a central theme in the film. Gie confronts Indonesian politics on moralistic grounds. In Riza's words:

The spirit of this film is how to arouse many people with the story of a young man that is continuously in search of a way to remain honest and

consistently reject any effort to draw or persuade him to enter a particular circle. He believes that it is truth and humanity that must be defended.
(‘Riri’ 2005)

In this sense, one could argue that, through *Gie*, Riza formulates a moral (instead of a political) discourse as a terrain for the *mahasiswa* to engage in social change.¹¹ One could say that this form of Indonesian humanism poses a limit for Riza’s filmic intervention in Indonesian society.

However, for Riza, the championing of the moral over the political is meant to overcome the image of the *mahasiswa* as a mindless crowd of demonstrators easily harnessed by political powers. Riri Riza intends to show Soe Hok Gie as the embodiment of an ideal *mahasiswa* who is able to gain autonomy in the uncertainty of the ‘transition’ era within which he is embedded. The domain of morality is needed to fight against the opportunistic interests of political parties. Gie’s commitment to uphold morality above politics makes him immune to co-optation by political parties. Gie continues to be critical of the political power to the end of his short life. He plays a leading role in student demonstrations, which help to overthrow Sukarno and give rise to the Suharto regime. He is however also disillusioned by the New Order’s violent normality which prompts him to continue writing critical commentaries.

By making a postwar historical drama, Riza has helped lead Indonesian cinema out of the Suharto era, where the figure of youth was commonly depicted as lacking meaningful agency outside the custody of the family and the state. By visualizing Gie as a young middle-class student hero, Riza dispels the image of youth crisis often projected in the New Order *remaja* (teen) films.¹² Through Gie, Riza dissociates students from the nihilistic, violent and hysterical characters commonly associated with them. This is already an iconoclastic move, one that seeks to constitute a new subjectivity for Indonesian youth. He recuperates the feature of a young man who seeks to align himself with the people (*rakyat*), instead of with his family and the state.

The film thus moves beyond a mere critique of the visual order of the Suharto regime. Gie may be less of an action hero, but he spends a lot of energy thinking about why his Indonesia has been defeated and his dream for a just and more egalitarian society under the care of an honest government has never come true. By defining Gie as a model for a national hero with agency outside the state and the family, the path would perhaps be clear for future counter-hegemonic subjectivity.¹³

Yet as I have indicated above, the recuperation of the ideal youth rests on the construction of Gie as a moral subject who is able to transcend the domain of political interests. With the objective of investing the *mahasiswa* with new historical agency, the film *Gie* relies on the crisis of Indonesian politics, but the crisis does not seem to constitute a psychological trauma for Gie. Instead, the film follows a trait of the life of an idealist student whose socio-political consciousness develops in tandem with his encounter with contradictions in the urban environment where he lives.

Political consciousness and scenes on the street

As described above, university students occupy a liminal position in the order of Indonesian society and thus it is acceptable that they question authority for it is also through them that order can be recuperated. As if responding to this social formation, Gie is depicted in the film as a rebellious youth who grows up against the authority of the school and later on the state. The failure of education or the insufficiency of the pedagogical institution in providing education is vividly depicted in a series of incidents in the classroom. The young Gie occasionally argues with his teacher. He is seen reading books beyond those assigned by the school. At the university, his extracurricular activities include watching avant-garde films that offer him more satisfaction than the formal education he receives. Gie is a product of forces outside the order of conventional institutions, and he challenges them in various aspects of his life. His political consciousness evolves outside institutions and often on the street.

The first entry of his diary, dated March 4, 1957, is taken by the film as the moment for the emergence of Gie's critical consciousness. Leaving the school compound, the young Gie narrates the following inside a tram:

Today is the day when grudge has hardened. My grade for geography was 8 but three points were cut so I ended up only getting 5. I am not happy with that. I am upset because I received the third highest scores in that exam. I believe that at least I am the smartest in geography. I kept my grudge, which has now gone down to my heart and hardened as stone. The exam paper I threw away. Let me be punished. I have never failed an exam.

(Soe 2005: 58)

Gie's grade was lowered by a teacher with whom he has an intellectual argument in class, a downgrade he regards as unfair punishment for daring to be vocal with his views. Angered by what he perceives as unfair treatment, Gie, accompanied by Han, his best friend, trails the teacher home one day with the intention of seeking revenge. Han picks up a piece of wood which he plans to use to beat up the teacher. Gie and Han follow the teacher from the city to the shanties of Jakarta in the 1950s, and are stunned by the squalor of the teacher's living environment. They soften upon seeing this, as well as the presence of the teacher's wife and two small children. The scene of poverty they encounter overcomes their rage and the young Gie is awakened to the power of humanity inside him.

The aforementioned scene is just the beginning of young Gie's awakening, for he soon encounters another scene on the street that adds to his awareness of the profound inequality and injustices of his time. In the early 1960s, as Sukarno is building modernist monuments in Jakarta, Gie encounters a dishevelled man hungrily eating discarded mango skin retrieved from a trash

can, as if he had not eaten for days. As the man ravishes the food he found, the grand limousine chauffeuring President Sukarno passes by. The contrast of these two images vividly captures the condition of the time against which Gie is to fight for years to come. In the film the starving man appears well dressed. He is apparently someone who has fallen into poverty and destitution because of the rapid economic downturn of the country. The image of the man eating mango peel from the garbage bin is irreconcilable with the image of Sukarno being driven in a limousine towards his presidential palace. This scene that the young Gie witnesses shows the contradiction of the time, recalling the image of the proximity between the poor *kampung* (village) and the presidential palace in the satirical *Tales from Jakarta* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. In the 1960s the street bears witness to scenes of class conflict, which in turn unsettle Gie. Everything falls apart in the Sukarno era and the nation is in a state of ruin. Poverty and injustices prevail, yet ceremonies and parties continue at the presidential palace. Such bitter realism disappears as the film progresses into the era of the New Order when normal life prevails but at once concealing the unprecedented violence of the Suharto regime.

The scenes on the street register the idea that Gie is basically a product of social contradiction outside the sphere of institutions. His political consciousness, as portrayed by Riza, takes shape on the street outside the school and the family. The film makes no effort to link the development of Gie's new subjectivity with his family upbringing. This stems from Riri Riza's own take on his hero. Riza does not consider ethnicity, religion and regional cultures (or the sphere of the family) as central to understanding the motivations of Gie's life. As I will discuss in the next section, the director constructs Gie as a 'universal' Indonesian subject as if only then can Indonesian viewers recognize and identify with him. As such, the circumstance of Gie as Chinese is not an issue for Riza, even though the 1960s was an era marked by the 'national' question about the place of the Chinese, as the internal outsider, in Indonesia. In the following section, I show how the historical subjectivity of Gie as Chinese is formulated in cinematic form and how the film reveals the threat to and the recuperation of that subjectivity.

The family and the reconfiguration of the Chinese

There was probably no ethnic group in post-colonial Indonesia that was more insecure about the question of identity than the Chinese, given the country's history of violence (both direct and indirect) against them. *Gie* however is not intended to be a film about ethnic Chinese, even though it helps recuperate the history of ethnic Chinese as nationalists.¹⁴ Indeed what has made *Gie* an important film is the effort it makes to recognize Chinese Indonesians as contributing to the narrative of national 'heroism.' However, the film is confronted with a social field in which the idea of the Chinese as national heroes is not something Indonesia seems completely ready for, even though Chinese Indonesian films are becoming a popular genre.¹⁵

The film demands that Gie becomes a role model for Indonesian students, but Gie is also a Chinese. To resolve this 'contradiction', Riri Riza takes the trajectory of not allowing Gie to be seen as a product of 'Chinese culture' – whatever this might mean. Instead he shows the gap between Gie's ethnic world and his new political subjectivity, leaving the difference irreconcilable. The resolution to this 'internal war' is the overcoming of ethnic identity. This transposition is expressed in the film through the 'unspoken' enmity between Gie and members of his family.

In both the diary and the film, family support is not portrayed as foundational for the development of Gie as a student leader. The diary starts with a statement that makes no reference to parents or any other member of the family. Instead Gie situates himself in the larger events of the world before providing a report on the progress he has made at school.

I was born on December 17, 1942 when war was engulfing the Pacific. When I was five years old, I entered Sin Hwa School [a school specifically for ethnic Chinese]. In just two years, I moved to Gang Komandan. I was moved up immediately from grade two to grade three and then to grade four to test my capacity for that level. On December 1, 1954, I moved to Jalan Pembangunan. I received 8 for mathematics, 8 for language (*bahasa*) and 9 for general (social) studies (*pengetahuan umum*). I was expecting 7-7-10 for the respective subjects. Finally, with extra credits, I received 9-9-9. In the Strada middle school, I moved up from grade one to two. My average grade for the first semester was 5.5; second semester 6; and the third semester 7.

(Soe 2005: 58)

Although the film opens with the image of Gie's family, it shows the absence of communication between the members. The mother's voice is constantly heard but the father oddly never utters a word throughout the film. The mother (Nio Hoei An) appears out of place, identifying with none of her sons' activities especially those outside the home. The relationship between mother and sons is often marked by frustration, as expressed in the following dialogue: 'Gie untuk apa semuanya ini?' (Gie, what is all this activism for?), and Gie to his mother: 'Ah mama tidak mengerti' (Oh mother, you just don't understand). Gie's father (Soe Li Piet/Salam Sutrawan) was a writer for the pre-war Chinese press, but is portrayed as losing his capacity to write and he thus remains speechless for the duration of the film in what seems to be an alienated world of post-Independence Indonesia. Li Piet is neither authoritative nor benevolent and he stays mostly at home observing his goldfish and other pets.

The only exchange between father and son in the film is in the form of Gie showing his diary to his father. This can be seen as a tribute of filial piety to his father who, during the pre-war years, was also a writer. However, this act of dedication could also be seen as a registration of Gie's new subjectivity

which demands acknowledgement from his father who is shown (via his clothing) as still belonging to the realm of Chinese culture. Gie could be seen as repressing Chinese culture so that he could become part of a larger network of belonging in which writing serves a larger Indonesian audience, unlike his father who wrote only for the Sino-Malay press. With the end of the Sino-Malay press, his father spends a great deal of time observing his pets, as they perhaps represent a form of stillness in time, one which is apolitical.

As with his brother (the respected sociologist, Soe Hok Djin/Arif Budiman), Gie is portrayed as different. Several scenes in the film show how they leave the house together for school. Upon stepping outside, they will stop and turn to look at each other before walking in opposite directions. The mutual look between the boys shows only enmity. We get a sense that Gie, unlike his 'academic' brother, prefers a different route, one that is closer to the street.

Riza represents the family as irrelevant to the development of Gie's political consciousness. Members of his family appear to contribute little to the development of his intellectual life. Gie is portrayed as a rebellious type who will stand his ground and argue his case. In one scene, he has to be dragged away by his family while trying to rescue Han, his friend, from his abusing aunt. Gie is portrayed as someone who is ahead of his family. In this sense, Riza is determined that the Chinese family can never be part of Gie's political consciousness or become the basis for the constitution of the Indonesian heroic story.

Women and the communist figure

Although 'Chinese' is an irrelevant theme for Riri Riza, the film's basic choice of the central conflict between *mahasiswa* and the political regime in the 1960s means that it cannot avoid the issues of the Chinese and communism. Tan Tjin Han, the best boyhood friend of Gie (who is not in the diary) is represented as a Chinese youth who goes awry. Han grows up to believe in the vision of the PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party), where he works as a serviceman. The adult Han's house is shown as keeping a Chinese ancestral altar (the central icon of Chinese culture), under which he hides the attire of the PKI during the turmoil of 1965–66. Han is rounded up one night and subsequently executed in an unknown place. In this regard, Han (unlike Gie) is associated with the Chinese and the communist, while the mutilation of Han's body is seen as a result of Han's own recklessness and embeddedness in Chinese identity and ultimately his incapacity to stay away from the political game (*permainan politik*) of the time. By contrast, Gie carries the extraordinary virtue of his type, who is capable of overcoming his Chineseness to become a 'universal' subject and thus survives the time of turmoil.

The tragic fate of Han indicates the problem of bringing the Chinese and the political together. Gie on the other hand is able to separate the two worlds. In portraying social change through the contrast of Gie and Han, Riza

represents the image of an ideal youth who poses as a 'universal' Indonesian subject who carries no ethnic and regional identities. 'Chinese' is an ambiguous figure in the Indonesian life, but the film resolves that ambiguity by way of championing Gie (for being a universal subject) and decapitating Han (for being a Chinese and a communist). In this sense, *Gie* does not reconfigure the role of Chinese in Indonesian history. Instead it remains squarely within the dominant perception of the opposition between the Chinese and the political, of how one cannot be political and at once Chinese. In this sense, we can say that *Gie* remains in the problematic of the national culture which tolerates the moral Chinese but not the political Chinese.

Gie is an ambitious film that tries to reposition the historical Gie as a 'non-action' hero who nonetheless remains an unwavering figure as if he represents a new beginning for Indonesia. In this attempt, the figure of 'Chinese' and 'women' belong to the realm beyond which Gie stands as the new subject. As a protagonist, Gie occupies the position of an observer outside the domain of the Chinese and the women with whom he is connected. This position of an observer could be associated with Gie's form of masculinity, one which is confirmed through the absence of an authority figure in his family. Furthermore, Gie's manliness is constituted via the representation of women and men around him (such as Han) as marginal characters. Take, for example, Ira, his most committed co-worker and girlfriend who, although she actively participates in the student movement, defers to Gie who is always in charge in many affairs. The women in the film help Gie but none is able to develop a proper relationship with him. Gie works well with them when they are in a mission, but their communication seems to fail once they are off duty. In representing Gie in this way, Riza portrays the masculine subjectivity of Gie as formed only through a mission and as being in constant danger of dissolution once the mission is over.

In her study of *Gie*, Paramaditha suggests that the difficulty Gie faces in getting personal and sexual with women reveals an underlying attempt by the film to challenge the 'nationalized masculinity' of the state. While this may have been Riza's intention, there is also an attempt to restore Gie as the heroic figure in the memories of the women he once pursued. In the film it is Ira (not any member of Gie's family) who receives the news of Gie's sudden death. Ira receives the news with grief and her feeling represents that of everyone else. The 'heroic' figure continues to live in the minds of the women he once pursued and, by extension, these women represent the national memory. In this way, Gie becomes a transcendental hero who never dies, for his memory will be carried over by women who serve as custodians of national memory to the following generation. The historical Gie reportedly died in an accident while mountaineering. He inhaled poisonous gas from the mountain. The scene of his death is not shown in the film, just as his diary could not depict the scene. But there is a sense of immortality here, for what is more important perhaps is how the news of his death is received by a woman figure and via her the

image of the national male hero is recuperated. Although in his lived lifetime, Gie was not able to reach out to women, Riza finally gives him an afterlife by delivering him into women's memory.

Conclusion: film, public ryes and the relevance of history

Riza's film is situated in the cultural horizon of the 2000s – a melancholic time of moving backward and forward working both with and against the political cultures of the Suharto era. At the same time it challenges the horizon out of which it emerges, for instance, by articulating, as Paramaditha (2007) points out, a new model of masculinity for an Indonesian hero. The film also redefines, as I have shown in this essay, the image of Indonesian students as the rational and idealistic agent of change – the subjectivity that might give hope to future Indonesia.

Soe Hok Gie represents an unwavering type of student who cannot be easily harnessed by any political power. The film retrieves the social turmoil and political manoeuvre of both the Sukarno and Suharto eras as the context to present the integrity of Gie as the embodiment of an ideal youth. In fact for Riza the problematic eras of both Sukarno and Suharto are the condition of possibility for the emergence of Gie as a new type of hero. The film stages him as representing an ideal youth that answers to the need of the present for such a prototype. However, as I have also suggested, this ideal type is achieved by way of transcending Gie's ethnicity, for only then in the end can anyone become a Gie. A 'role model' is also a subject that best transcends history and culture. If a Chinese could leave behind his or her ethnic identity to become a 'universal' subject, then everyone else could do just the same and become a 'Gie.'

In this sense, Riza's choice of Nicholas Saputra as the actor to play the adult Gie in the film is symptomatic of a larger public force at work. Riza explains that Saputra, a Eurasian, was chosen because he met 'the artistic, quality, credibility, enthusiasm and commercial criteria.' The criteria point to the 'right' image for Gie as a supra-local subject. By featuring Saputra, the adult Gie appears as a non-Chinese subject. Riza defends the choice of Saputra on aesthetic and commercial grounds, arguing that Gie himself would not 'make a fuss about one's background, ethnic origin and so forth. Neither had he ever joined the struggle put up by the Chinese ethnic groups' ('Riri' 2005). While this is not entirely true, as a significant portion of Gie's diary reveals his unresolved struggle over the question of Chinese, Riza's glossing over of Gie's ethnic question points to the power of public discourse that still tends to separate the Chinese from the domain of national heroes. Riza continues to follow the general trait of filmmaking in Indonesian postcolonial history – a trait that follows the nationalist agenda in which, as Heider puts it, 'religions, regional cultures, and regional languages are recognizable but only as identifying marks, not as important motivating aspects of people's lives' (Heider 1991: 38). The creation of Gie as an ideal type thus points not only

to the intention of the producer and the director of the film, it points also to the social field which has been asking for a transcendental type of hero in our time of 'transition.' Film produces images that are both informed by and made available to the public. For film to gain effect it must rely on the public image that it helps to construct. Film produces identification, but it also relies on the kind of identification that has been operating in society. To gain support from the audience, films thus are pressed to be sensitive to the changing perception of the public.

Since Indonesia entered the post-Suharto era, two social actors have been recovered from Indonesian history. The first is the *mahasiswa*, whose crucial role in challenging political power is restored by Gie. The second is the ethnic Chinese, whose culture and language are beginning to be accepted in Indonesia's public sphere. Yet while these two types of social actors are central to the recounting of the Indonesia riots of 1998, which led to the fall of Suharto, they occupy two different spheres. The world of the *mahasiswa* remains distinct from that of the Chinese. As pointed out earlier, Indonesian nationalists today celebrate the return of the university students as the agent of change and are gradually recognizing the Chinese as part of Indonesian history. But they do not seem prepared to see the intermingling of these two worlds. In this context, *Gie* is the first film to profoundly interrogate the possibility of restoring these two subjectivities in the figure of Gie. Yet, as I have suggested in this essay, while the Chinese and the heroic *mahasiswa* were mingled in the body of Gie, they could not quite interact with one another.

Finally, it has been noted that film in Indonesia does not concern itself with 'historical accuracy.' As Indonesian director, Teguh Karya, notes in an interview about his history-based film *Doea Tanda Mata* (1984), the historical film in Indonesia is characterized by *tafsir* and *perumpamaan*, which means interpretation (parable) and metaphor (Heider 1991: 100). Historical films in Indonesia (and perhaps also elsewhere) 'reflect present understanding of time past' (Heider 1991: 100). And especially for the nation-state of Indonesia, history is a subject that is always sensitive. This has made Indonesian films rather problematic sketches of history which contribute to the shaping of public memory. In the long run, historical films tend to be absorbed into either a medium for state propaganda or an entertainment-based public taste. Such condition has eschewed the possibility of a critical historical film.

The cinematic *Gie* confronts the filmic field that has been saturated with the power of nation-state and the commercialism of the Hollywood genre. The cinematic form follows the chronology of the diary in which the narrative is marked out by a series of dates – 1956, 1960, and so on. This temporal structure organizes the entire film and helps viewers to situate their memories or knowledge of the eras through the experience of Gie. The film makes no effort to express the problems of the time outside those stated by Gie in his diary. While the relationship between the cinematic and autobiographical diary is complex, this relation puts the film in touch with a certain historiography.

Gie, however, is not meant to be a transparent historical document. The film intends to mirror the diary, but the diary and the film retain different levels of autonomy. There are points of contact where materials in the diary are interpreted, objectified and even displaced for the adequacy of cinematic representations. The ultimate aim of the film, one can say, is to turn *Gie* into an ideal type of a student that transcends history itself.

Gie is a student of history. He reads Camus, Sukarno and Marx alongside other thinkers, but all of these seem unable to offer him meaningful coordinates in life. He places more trust in the innocence of 'nature' and 'childhood', as conveyed by the film's iteration of idyllic scenes from his boyhood and his venture into remote areas, mountains and beaches. History and politics as represented by the film threaten humanity, promising a path that leads nowhere. Both are treated with deep suspicion by *Gie* and seen as inadequate as the basis for the constitution of a transcendental subjectivity. In some ways Riza, like *Gie*, sees history and politics as products of the ruling regime, which he seeks to dismantle by upholding morality as if this position is beyond politics. In the end if history offers no hope for the future, it is certainly the immediacy of print journalism and the diary, and now the film (in the hands of Riri Riza) that offers the post-Suharto generation a glimpse of hope for change.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Lakhbir Jassal and Intan Paramaditha for their helpful comments on an early draft of this chapter. Thanks also to Gunadi Darmono for making the writings of *Gie* available to me.
- 2 *Gie* was released in 2005 by Miles Films in collaboration with Sinemart Pictures. The producer was Mira Lesmana and the director Riri Riza.
- 3 *Gie* received Indonesian Film Awards for Best Picture, Best Actor and Best Cinematography. Riri Riza was born in Makassar in 1970 and started his career as a director in 1998 after graduating from Institute Kesenian Jakarta. He has directed several award-winning films, including *Eliana*, *Eliana* (2002) and *Laskar Pelangi* (2008).
- 4 In the national memory, heroic youths are collectively remembered on Heroes' Day (Hari Pahlawan) which is celebrated every year on 10 November. The day also commemorates the 1945 Battle of Surabaya.
- 5 For a discussion on the re-narrating of self and history, see van Klinken (2001).
- 6 The result is a screenplay written by Riri Riza (2005b).
- 7 'Zaman peralihan' is also the title of a book consisting of essays by Soe Hok Gie (1999).
- 8 For a discussion on the modes of these two different times, see Kuntowijoyo (1999).
- 9 On the importance of order in the filmic culture of New Order Indonesia, see also Sen (1994).
- 10 Victor Turner defines the liminal individuals as 'neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention and ceremonial' (1969: 95). See also Turner (1974).
- 11 On the ways in which *Gie* divides the moral from the political (as part of the political tradition of Indonesian intellectual after Independence), see Dhakidae (2005).
- 12 On *remaja* films during the Suharto era, see Sen (1986).

- 13 Kuntowijoyo (1999: xxii) even suggests that Gie's writing (if not the figure of Gie himself) could create a new kind of 'exemplary center' for Indonesia (in the post-Suharto era) which was undergoing a crisis of legitimacy in its ruling realm.
- 14 Riri Riza is fully aware of the particularity of ethnic Chinese in Indonesian history, as he reflects:

What makes it extraordinary is that (the young activist) is depicted through the figure of Gie, someone who came from a highly vulnerable social group, Indonesians of Chinese origin. I have found that since I was eight and was still living in Makassar, Chinese Indonesians have often been victimized by many groups. I have witnessed how their houses have been destroyed. Even when a Chinese Indonesian beat his housemaid, all Chinese Indonesians had to bear the brunt. Gie came from this circle and this is important to understand.
(‘Riri’ 2005)

- 15 For a discussion on the representation of ethnic Chinese in a post-reformasi film, see Sen (2006). In the mid-January of 2009, Bentara Budaya Jakarta screened several short and feature films on Chinese Indonesians. Beside *Ca-Bau-Kan* (2002) (discussed in the aforementioned essay by Sen), there were also, among others, *May* (2008); *The Anniversaries* (2006); *Anak Naga Beranak Naga* (2005), *Sugiharti Halim* (2008); *Cheng Cheng Po*, and *Babi Buta Yang Ingin Terbang*. For a brief write-up on the event, see ‘Pemutaran’ (2009).

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9 Alternative vision in neoliberal Singapore

Memories, places, and voices in the films of Tan Pin Pin

Kenneth Paul Tan

Discovery Networks Asia, a division of top non-fiction media company Discovery Communications, has commissioned and produced or co-produced several documentaries on cultures in modern Asia, sometimes focusing on folklore, rituals, the supernatural, and the paranormal to conjure up attractive images of Asia as an exotic, mystical, and even bizarre, locale. *Moving House* (2001, 22 minutes), for instance, revolves around an extended family that has to deal with the exhumation of its ancestors' buried remains in rapidly urbanizing Singapore. *Afterlife* (2003) is an anthology of documentaries on the theme of death rites in Asia. Both productions feature the directorial talents of Singaporean 'independent' documentary filmmaker Tan Pin Pin.

Tan graduated first with a law degree from Oxford University and then a MFA degree in Radio-TV-Film at Northwestern University, where she was awarded the Eastman Scholarship for Cinematography. She has been an artist-in-residence at the University of Technology Sydney (Australia), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore), Institute of Policy Studies (Singapore), and the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute (Singapore). She sits on the boards of The Substation and the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), the former an independent contemporary arts centre and the latter a state agency under the Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Arts (MICA). Other than *Moving House*, her documentary (or 'essay') films include *Singapore GaGa* (2005, 55 minutes) and *Invisible City* (2007, 60 minutes), both of which have received funding support from the Singapore Film Commission (SFC), another agency under MICA. Other than the episodes of *Afterlife*, Tan also directed some episodes of *Building Dreams* (2002), a documentary series on the history of Singapore architecture, and *John Woo: Crossings* (2004), a biography – also commissioned by Discovery – of the action film director from Hong Kong. Her short films include *Rogers Park* (2001), *Microwave* (2000), *80km/h* (annually since 2004), and *Lurve Me Now* (1999), a piece that is still banned in Singapore.

Raphaël Millet describes Tan as a 'pioneer' of the documentary genre in Singapore; her *Moving House* counted among the 'first breakthroughs' in a genre that is important for recording the history of 'a young nation still in the

making' (Millet 2006: 113). Indeed, the film was the 'first documentary commissioned by the Discovery Channel to be entirely conceptualized, initiated and directed by a Singaporean' ('Moving' 2006).

The history of Singapore

In 2005, the fortieth year after Singapore's Independence, Discovery Networks Asia produced a three-episode documentary on Singapore that did not involve Tan Pin Pin. Titled *The History of Singapore*,¹ this documentary opens with a dramatic voiceover, outlining the trajectory of Singapore's official history, identifying Lee Kuan Yew – Singapore's first prime minister – as its heroic protagonist, and laying out the puzzle of the city-state's success attained over just a few decades. The third episode begins in a celebratory tone, showing footage of the National Day Parade in 2005. Still focused on the historical factors that have made Singapore an unlikely and unique success story, the narrator makes no effort to conceal the sense of uncertainty about the future and Singapore's continued ability to overcome the new and old obstacles that the city-state continues to confront. This survivalist account of history that articulates success and vulnerability is reflective of the political leadership's instrumental approach to history. By selecting and linking together a series of events shaped by Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party (PAP), a national story is told about progress from an unstable, third-world past to an economically successful present that is now threatened by complacency, in large part the ironic result of middle-class affluence and comfort delivered by this same success. The national story – popularly known and branded as The Singapore Story – not only serves as popularized folklore with a moral to convey or a motivational mantra that urges Singaporeans to resist the complacency of success, but also a manual of development, planning, and 'good governance' that offers lessons for today's Singaporeans who want to maintain and exceed this success, and leaders of other countries who hope to reproduce it.

Indeed, this Discovery Channel documentary resonates with Lee's two-volume memoirs (1998; 2000), which have a strongly pedagogical character with Lee cast as the chief pedagogue. Lee's ubiquitous presence in the documentary is accented by inserting, into key junctures of the narrative, segments of an extended interview with Lee who interprets these events authoritatively. He literally and metaphorically offers the first and final word. In the very first of these interview segments, Lee explains:

Unless you know where you came from, unless you know what your ancestors have been through, you have no reference point. What makes us different from say the Thais, or the Filipinos, or the Sri Lankans? The difference is how we came here, how we developed, and that requires a sense of history.

Ironically, this instrumental approach to history is profoundly anti-historical, as it commits events of the past to the function of constructing a coherently meaningful and purposeful national trajectory, mainly by limiting what is necessarily a complex, pluri-vocal, and politically contested past to a single perspective – in fact one great man's originary perspective – of Singapore's history, significance, and uncertain destiny.²

This history is also a victors' history. It is the PAP's story about how it was able to drive Singapore to success, once it had come to power after defeating its antagonists – the communists and ethnic communalists. It is also a story about the triumph of global capital in partnership with a post-colonial state that was initially motivated by the ideals of social democracy, but almost immediately transformed into a highly coercive and militaristic developmental state.³ This was, at root, an economy managed by a strong state that enabled it to gain advantage from – by being useful to – the global capitalist system. Economic growth was pursued, often at any cost. This has been the mechanics behind the trumpeted claim that Singapore, classified today as a global city, has undergone rapid development from third-world to first-world status.

Proponents of neoliberal globalization attribute this success to an economy that is one of the most open in the world and to an incorrupt and technically competent government whose authoritarian policies – relatively insulated from the demands of democratic interests – have been fully supportive of capital. Over the last couple of decades, the Singapore state has privatized several public enterprises, liberalized the financial and legal sectors, and deregulated parts of the economy in ways that have been beneficial to inward direct foreign investors. The state continues to maintain a strong presence in the domestic economy mainly through the majority ownership of large companies known as government-linked companies (GLCs), managed by Temasek Holdings, its investment-holding arm set up in 1974. For instance, Temasek owns 100 per cent of MediaCorp, Singapore's comprehensive national broadcaster whose media include television, radio, newspapers, magazines, digital media, and movies. MediaCorp, in turn, fully owns its subsidiary Raintree Pictures, the closest thing that Singapore has to a film studio. Singapore's public service fluently speaks the language of New Public Management and explicitly pro-business policies have created a total business environment that continues to attract high-quality investments even though the cost of living and doing business in Singapore has risen relative to the surrounding region.

However, Singapore's embrace of neoliberal globalization has also led, directly or indirectly, to national problems. These have included more frequent and protracted economic crisis, a widening income gap, greater social divisions, and the emergence of poverty and an underclass, all of which have begun to contribute to a legitimization crisis for the government that has since 1959 been made up of a single party. Rapid neoliberal globalization has also been marked by indiscriminate destruction of the natural and built heritage in

order to build anew – erasing, silencing, marginalizing, and forgetting in an uncompromising and mostly undemocratic process of economic development and nation building. These problems have been exacerbated by a considerable inflow of migrant workers exerting downward pressure on the wages of lower-skilled Singaporeans and by the increasing presence of highly mobile foreign talent and cosmopolitan Singaporeans, whose internationally marketable skills exert an upward pressure on the highest salaries. Singapore today, with a third of its population consisting of foreigners, has become an increasingly unequal society, its practice of meritocracy quickly degrading into crass elitism (Tan 2008a).

The PAP government has consistently avoided the comprehensive state welfare option, believing that it would create a perverse incentive structure against hard work and that welfare expenditure would be a drain on the reserves, making Singapore's economy less competitive. To preserve a system that is beneficial to global capital, the state has had to be stronger rather than 'rolled back' (as neoliberals ostensibly prescribe) since it needs the capacity to reregulate the economy to contain its problems, perform the ideological work of nation building and social cohesion, and cultivate its power to quash political resistance and opposition to its authority and to the neoliberal arrangements that serve the interest of global capital but that also contains crisis tendencies around which political opposition can be mobilized. As such, globalization is unlikely to lead to Singapore's political liberalization or democratization. Instead, global capital is more likely to be supportive of an authoritarian state, a basic contradiction in the practice of neoliberal globalization.

The alternative and oppositional voices of Singaporeans who have been disadvantaged by these developments have either been distorted in *The Singapore Story* or blotted out of it. Many Singaporeans with alternative views have been consigned to the margins where they become invisible and inaudible; and Singaporeans who take an oppositional stance have been ridiculed, criminalized, or even exiled, if they could not be tamed or co-opted.

Following this neoliberal trajectory, the PAP government has embraced – especially since the 1990s – a strategy to establish a competitive creative economy. However, several decades of authoritarian rule and a monomaniacal nation-building project largely intolerant of critical and even alternative voices have put severe restraints on cultural and intellectual vibrancy. Reversing this effect has not been straightforward, especially since varying levels of liberalization in economic, social, and cultural terms have not been matched in the political realm where the PAP government strives to retain its position of power. Singapore's creative economy policies have focused on setting up an arts bureaucracy, building arts infrastructure, providing funding for local artists and the development of local artwork, and nurturing a local audience. The success of these policies, administered essentially by a bureaucracy, is measured according to highly commercial criteria, so the 'creative arts' system

that has emerged legitimizes and privileges internationally oriented mass entertainment over more critical, experimental, and even localized art.

Nevertheless, this commercial boost has on the whole provided artists with generous resources. In particular, the commercial boost has pushed and shaped a growing contemporary filmmaking industry. In this nascent industry, a number of filmmakers have been able to obtain funds and other support, resist absorption into the logic of authoritarian capitalism, and produce works that are alternative in style and sophisticatedly critical in their politics. The subsequent sections examine the socio-politically critical work of Tan Pin Pin, focusing on her efforts to discover, uncover, remember, assert, and preserve a pluri-vocal past through documentaries that give voice, visibility, and presence to the marginalized and forgotten in Singapore.

Arts policies and the creative economy of a neoliberal global city

From the 1960s to 1980s, the PAP government regarded the arts mostly as a propagandistic means of promoting national identity, community values, and social cohesion. The arts were also a useful showcase for presenting Singapore's cultural diversity to tourists: In this 'instant Asia', the Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other minority cultures were presented in vivid and harmonious, though rather stilted, formations which have become the dominant models for simplifying, limiting, and thereby controlling real diversity in Singapore. The arts were also seen as a luxury that Singapore could only really afford once its economy had developed and grown sufficiently. State censorship was heavily imposed on the work of radical Chinese theatre intellectuals and practitioners in Singapore who were inspired by progressive values of socialism in post-1949 China. Many were considered a threat to public order and detained without trial under the Internal Security Act (Peterson 2001: 36). In the 1980s, the state began to regard the arts as a resource for raising the quality of life, nurturing a gracious society, and – most significantly perhaps – developing the economy. Censorship was still heavily practised, particularly on politically challenging work as well as work that could potentially offend the conservative segments of a society that was being moralized through state rhetoric and policy that, often spuriously, adopted the language of Neo-Confucianism and Asian values (Tan 2007).

The 1990s saw a more determined approach to develop Singapore as a global city whose economy had outgrown the emphasis on manufacturing and services. The government promoted new sectors such as biotechnology, design, media, and the arts in this knowledge-based economy, for which creativity had become a new and important factor of production.

Freeing up restrictions on and providing support for entertainment, night-life, and popular culture were part of a strategy to enlarge Singapore's culture industry and to make the global city – once described as a cultural desert –

attractive as a place to 'work, live, and play' not only to foreign investors but also to foreign talent and the 'creative class', actively courted to widen and deepen Singapore's apparently small talent pool (Tan 2003).

Like other 'creative city' aspirants, Singapore appeared, in the new millennium, to be paying some attention to Richard Florida's prescription to improve technology, talent, and tolerance in order to produce high performing economies (Florida 2002). Florida's much-debated study of U.S. cities found a strong correlation between economic performance and the presence of artists, immigrants, and gays. To attract the creative class, the government needed to signal tolerance in spite of conservative popular sentiments within Singapore. In this regard, the government publicly revealed that its civil service upheld a non-discriminatory hiring policy towards homosexuals and assured liberal Singaporeans and foreigners that it would not act upon outmoded laws that criminalized homosexual acts (even though it was unwilling to abolish them). After staging a public debate, the government invited international casino operators to build and manage two 'integrated resorts' as part of the spectacle of global-city Singapore's 'liberalization'. Journalist Michael Backman (2003), however, criticizes Singapore's liberal reforms – that have also included the introduction of 'bungee jumping and bar-top dancing' – as misdirected and shallow. This 'liberal' global-city spectacle may serve usefully in a politics of distraction, where Singaporeans are encouraged to escape their problems by consuming fantasy worlds, which in turn helps to reinvigorate the demand-side economy. Its re-nascent state-supported film industry has been well positioned to produce commercial works that create such fantasy worlds to distract and depoliticize while making some modest profits but, more importantly, providing the paraphernalia of a creative global city.

Singapore's aspiration to be a 'distinctive global city for the arts' (National Arts Council 2008: 16) is linked to its prospects as a tourism city and a creative economy. In fact, Singapore's arts policies – now a component of the creative industries – are really the extension of a mainly economic logic that best characterizes Singapore's pragmatic policy orientation. This economic capture of the arts, critics have suggested, amounts to a superficial arrangement that specifically benefits the partnership between global capital and the authoritarian state (see for example, Lee 2007). Advocates of the arts, who once used the language of welfare and public goods to describe the need for state intervention (mainly in the form of subsidies for the arts), have turned to the language of economic growth and innovation to justify the state's role in promoting the arts as a resource and commodity that can sustain and enhance the economy. According to this instrumentalist vision, the arts in Singapore can promote tourism, urban regeneration, and community development. As a result, the modernist notion of an autonomous art that provides a vision of freedom and independence from the necessities of the practical world driven by economic profit, political legitimacy, and social moralities has broken down as the wall

between high and low culture collapses under the weight of consumer and pop culture, including entertainment, food, and lifestyle.

Consequently, the arts and its groups have come to be framed in the language of New Public Management. Jim McGuigan (2005: 236) observes how ‘managerialization’ is the dominant

ideological discourse that ‘makes management the driving force of a successful society’. Integral to such a discourse was the assumption that public agencies should function like private businesses in order to work efficiently.

The state – through the Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Arts (MICA), and its agencies such as the National Arts Council (NAC), the Media Development Authority (MDA), the Singapore Film Commission (SFC), the National Heritage Board (NHB), and the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) – has since the 1990s managed artists and arts organizations, disbursed grants that are pegged to key performance indicators and concretely stated deliverables, and helped to market their works at home and overseas to audiences who are viewed as customers. Arts companies and organizations must be registered, abide by principles of corporate governance, and maintain a properly accounted and healthy budget.

Subjecting the arts in Singapore to the logic and dictates of neoliberal globalization – by framing them within open economies that facilitate capital and talent flows and by internationalizing arts production and consumption – can have negative consequences. In the case of developing the film industry, for example, Singapore may find itself in a ‘new international division of cultural labour’ where Singaporeans are trained to do (possibly underpaid) technical work that supports creative talent from overseas. Although there are several film or film-related schools in Singapore, most of them focus on imparting technical production skills, rather than developing the creative and critical skills derived from a deep understanding of the humanities and even social sciences. And although Raintree Pictures, according to its website, ‘works with Asian and Western filmmakers to produce “borderless” movies for the international viewer’ and has provided major funding for international collaborative productions,⁴ the input from Singaporean talent has been rather thin. The opportunity for developing this talent is therefore lost. Further, although it is no longer fashionable to speak of national films, thinking about Singapore’s filmmaking efforts in terms of the transnational film may be premature and counterproductive since depth, complexity, and authenticity have yet to be established in a large enough body of ‘Singapore films’ that pose and problematize questions of national and cultural identity.

As Singapore’s film industry conformed to the paradoxically authoritarian logic of neoliberal globalization, commercial filmmakers like Jack Neo have been able to find more opportunities and resources for advancing their work

with a view to making modest profits if they succeed, while ‘independent’ filmmakers motivated by non-commercial or anti-commercial impulses – like Royston Tan – have been forced to confront these opportunities, reconsider their ideals, and negotiate a compromise.⁵ Such confrontations and compromises are also seen in the socio-politically critical work of self-consciously independent and award-winning filmmaker Tan Pin Pin, work that has both benefitted from and critiqued the different facets of neoliberal globalization, a hegemonic articulation that is complex, contradictory, and ultimately unstable.

Tan and many other local filmmakers have benefitted to some degree from the growth of Singapore’s creative economy, as new forms and larger quantities of state funding and other means of support become available. While Tan has not shied away from such state support, she has attempted to maintain her artistic and political independence by keeping her budgets very small, sometimes seeking help from local foundations and think tanks (mainly in the form of fellowships and some modest funding), and sometimes taking on commercial television projects to help pay for her true passion, which is independent filmmaking.

Critic Ben Slater (2006a) describes *Moving House* as a ‘judgement-free visual essay’. But Tan’s films – though subtle, gentle, and good natured – are actually quite critical of how Singapore’s national development and nation-building efforts have transformed the landscape, authored a dominant version of history, and marginalized voices that do not conform with the national image. Her films sensitively identify and reveal those things that have been lost, neglected, or hidden from view as Singapore progresses according to the deceptively unproblematic logic of neoliberal globalization. Ironically, Discovery Networks Asia – itself a corporate beneficiary of Singapore’s neoliberalization – is the link between a celebratory and pedagogical documentary on Singapore’s success and continued survival on the one hand, and on the other hand a filmmaker whose works provide alternative accounts, visions, and voices that attempt to decentre the dominant narrative. Tan’s style is a curious mixture of irony and celebration, often the result of simply allowing her subjects to speak for themselves and then editing sensitively and creatively to produce sometimes unexpected meanings and an unsentimental empathy for the subjects.

Contesting history

In *Invisible City*’s citation for winning the Prix Internationale de la SCAM at Cinema du Reel, the film was described as ‘a witty, intellectually challenging essay on history and memory as tools of civil resistance’ (Lui 2009). The documentary is made up of at least six intercutting strands recording different people’s attempts to discover the past, uncover it, remember it, and assert their own versions of it. In one of these strands, Tan accompanies a young Singaporean archaeologist, Lim Chen Sian, into the Fort Serapong site on

Sentosa Island (one of over sixty islands that belong to Singapore), where he leads a team of diggers who are looking for artefacts that can tell a more detailed story about Singapore's past, the broad strokes of which have already been outlined by official accounts. For Chen, excavating in Singapore rather than overseas is personally valuable as he seeks also to recover 'certain areas of his childhood [that] are gone'. Sentosa Island is a particularly poignant location for the start of this documentary, since the government has chosen it as the site for building one of two 'integrated resorts' with theme parks and casinos. This latest, and possibly most spectacular, addition to the Disneyfication of Singapore is a way not only to profit from local pleasure-seeking, but also to boost a lacklustre tourism industry. Rapid economic development has buried and will continue to bury Singapore's rich history under layers of official narrative and material landscape characterized by control, commercialization, and kitsch. Placing the archaeologist – whose role, it could be argued, is to recover what lies beneath these layers – at the beginning of the film directly relates Tan's own motivations to those of archaeology, driven by an inquisitive need to know about the past by physically digging beneath the surface, interpreting what is found there, and preserving this find for the future. Archaeology, as discussed in the film's 'audio commentary', is a metaphor for Tan's filmic motivations and techniques.

In a second strand, Tan interviews Ivan Polunin, an English doctor who moved to Singapore in 1948 and was a university lecturer and part-time documentarian for the BBC up to the 1970s, by which time he had produced hundreds of hours of film footage capturing, among other things, the lives of fishermen working on kelongs and the Cantonese-speaking heartlands of old Singapore. Tan's interview with the elderly Polunin takes place shortly after he underwent brain surgery, a trauma that has caused him to lose, by his own admission, much 'brainpower'. In this interview format, interspersed with extracts from his old footage, Tan and Polunin struggle to co-narrate the past, his responses alternating between dazzling lucidity, eloquence, and wit on one end, and mental blocks, impatience, and irritability on the other. Polunin remarks that Tan will have to do this 'the hard way . . . it takes you two-and-a-half hours to get one simple answer to one simple question'. But this, of course, is the very nature of truth searching: slow, resistant, and frustrating. In some ways, this struggle to remember and retell resonates with the experience of ordinary Singaporeans who have trouble revisiting the site of their trauma, where they might have been forcefully resettled en masse into public housing estates in the 1960s to 1980s, and where they have lost to progress and urban redevelopment the many places that were meaningful to their lives.

The capacity to remember is certainly fragile in a harsh and fast-changing environment: Polunin's efforts to catalogue his archive and protect the films from decay, Tan's efforts to make a film that relies heavily and therefore riskily on her subjects' diminishing capacity to remember, and Singaporeans' difficulty in dealing with the trauma of rapid development all attest to this challenge. Amid the difficulties and frustration, Polunin and Tan nevertheless

pursue their tasks with urgency and care. In answer to Tan's question about his motivation for assiduously videotaping the original film footage and painstakingly providing a voiceover commentary over the video, Polunin replies

Well what the hell is all this about? I can't even remember myself what a lot of it is. How can anybody else cope? At least I was there. I've got a pretty good idea what it was all about.

The complicated question of ownership is raised in the interview. Tan asks Polunin whether his collection should be endowed to the NAS since it 'represents the collective memory of a country'. Polunin is conscious of the 'very considerable commercial potential' of his collection that he estimates to be worth S\$2.5 million and he wishes to bequeath this to his children. In the audio commentary, Tan relates how she began to appreciate how even national history comes from very personal sources and so it should not be assumed that the state should own and control it. Polunin explains that as he gets older and thinks about questions of personal existence and immortality, his efforts to leave behind a legacy become more urgent.⁶

Shortly after this discussion, Tan makes an uncharacteristically explicit aesthetic intervention: the screen goes black and Polunin's voiceover recording slowly loses coherence, all suggesting a technical and memory break down. In fact, of all her documentaries, *Invisible City* is the most heavily and self-consciously constructed. For instance, the volume of the background audio featuring the sound of a rolling camera is exaggeratedly enhanced to emphasize the actively mechanical processes involved in memory making and the technical troubles to which it is vulnerable.

In a third strand, Tan interviews another elderly documenter of early Singapore, Marjorie Doggett, a woman from England who had moved to Singapore and taken photographs – mostly of colonial buildings – for the 1957 book *Characters of Light: A Guide to the Buildings of Singapore*. She is now bed-ridden and regrets not returning to England since today's Singapore is 'no place to get old in'. Doggett, who admits to having a 'photographic memory', explains that she took these photographs partly because the old buildings were all being demolished. And yet, she admits that

I didn't think of it at the time I was recording history. Nobody could have imagined the changes that have happened. You somehow thought that things would go on as they were. I think I did it for my own satisfaction really.

In a fourth strand, Chan Cheow Thia, a young member of The Tangent, a Chinese cultural and intellectual civil society group, accompanies a woman on a visit to the former Hawkers' Association premises in Paya Lebar where, in the 1950s, she attended literacy classes under the auspices of the Malayan

Communist Party. The woman appears disoriented in a neighbourhood that has changed so much that it is difficult to find the Association's exact location. Chan speaks to the camera:

A lot of people thought that 1965 was the pivotal point in Singapore's history where it's a Singapore story of miraculous growth from a third world country to a first world country. And all the important things probably happened after that. But we thought that actually there were also a lot of things that happened before 1965. And we wanted to present a more plural picture of what happened then apart from what was painted in the official accounts.

In a fifth strand, Tan interviews a former Chinese student protestor, Han Tan Juan, who laments how Singapore's official history demonizes the Chinese students in the 1950s as violent communists, when they were, according to Han, peacefully protesting against the closure of Chinese schools and against colonialism more broadly. Clearly, Han feels that a great injustice has been done by the 'winners of history' and is passionate about redressing this history. He nervously agrees to set the record straight by offering his private collection of 'provocative' photographs for Tan to film. Since these pictures depict police brutality towards the students, Han believes that he could be called in for questioning by the Internal Security Department and is taking a big risk to rectify an injustice. In her interview with Han, Tan captures the sense of disappointment that he has with the younger generation who are oblivious to this history and that what he said at a public forum 'has fallen on deaf ears'. In another moment of irony heightened by Tan's aesthetic intervention, Han philosophizes about Hegel's dialectic of reason to explain how Singapore's current circumstances are the inevitable result of reason and progress; but his rumination is interrupted by the 'Minute Waltz' ring-tone of a call on his mobile phone which he answers, while Tan allows the music to continue into the film's end credits.

In a sixth strand, Tan captures the many nuances of an interaction between a young female Japanese reporter, Izumi Ogura, who, through an interpreter, interviews an elderly Singaporean man, Guo Ren Huey, who had been tortured by the Japanese army during the occupation in the early 1940s and who has made it known that he hates the Japanese for this. Ogura is conducting several interviews of this kind to research an article that she will write to mark the occasion of the Japanese Emperor's visit to Singapore. Alfian Bin Sa'at (2008) observes how the film captures the tension in Ogura's effort: She 'wishes to inform her countrymen of the Japanese occupation of Malaya, yet cannot bear to listen to the details of how they tortured their captives'. The descriptions of abuse and torture are vivid and Ogura is visibly cringing, even at one point telling the interpreter to 'skip it, I know it'. She admits that it is difficult to listen to these accounts, 'but anyway it's part of our history'. She eventually makes the decision to avoid writing about 'only bad things' that the Japanese

readers ‘might not accept’, but instead to present ‘a beautiful story’ of the life and love of Guo and his wife during the war. But this approach to history, which involves fully reconnecting with the moments of trauma and then representing the facts in an acceptably beautiful format, is vulnerable to the criticism that it aestheticizes the suffering of others to promote one’s own psychic relief. Tan, however, does not go so far as to make this criticism. Indeed, had she done that, her films would themselves become more vulnerable to a similar criticism.

Invisible City is very much a film about Tan Pin Pin herself and the different facets of her work. In many ways, she is mirrored in the people she interviews and features. She grapples with similar questions and problems of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. And her passion for discovering, uncovering, remembering, asserting, and preserving the past is just as strong as those of her subjects.

Urbanization and the rapidly changing landscape

In 2002, Singapore’s iconic opera house, the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, was officially opened. Built at a cost of S\$600 million, the Esplanade consists of a 1,600-seat concert hall, a 2,000-seat theatre, and a few other smaller studios for more intimate performances. The Esplanade was built with ‘world-class’ performances in mind and, other than a few major local arts companies, has been largely beyond the reach of smaller, alternative, and more experimental arts groups and their audiences. The Esplanade itself is an example of neo-liberal, global-city landscaping that invariably includes opera houses, waterside developments, a skyline of skyscrapers, global corporate logos on display, luxury residences, regenerated downtown areas, disused buildings converted into arts housing and boutique businesses, and mega shopping and entertainment complexes (including casinos).

While Singapore celebrates its spectacle of ultra-modern urban development, critics point to the indiscriminately rapid destruction of the built and natural heritage in the name of progress, creating in its place a glossy, global-city clone prone to kitschy self-orientalization as a superficial means of asserting a unique identity for enticing tourists. In this rapidly changing global city, social memory is lost, the past is reconstructed according to the present needs of the market in partnership with the state, and the organic foundations of family, community, and even nation are reconstituted into one-dimensional official accounts, which tend to alienate rather than articulate.

Tan Pin Pin reflects on how

Singapore jumped from Third World to First World in the years I grew up, the post-independence years of the 70s and 80s. Its development is nowhere more pronounced than in the speed in which buildings are demolished and built over. Growing up, I felt I was standing on soft ground.

(quoted in Chua 2004)

Her *80km/h* (2004) is a 38-minute art film that documents the journey on the Pan Island Expressway from the eastern end of Singapore to its western end, all filmed in one take from a car moving at a constant speed of 80 km/h. By reproducing the project every year, Tan hopes that by 2013 she will be able to 'stack' the ten layers of recordings for 'a real time layered survey of our landscape'. Tan believes that this device gives the film 'cartographical value'. But it is also a record of change, innovatively layering multiple pasts and present in a composite image that illustrates the extent of change.

Tan's *Moving House* also tells a story about development and rapid change in Singapore's landscape, but does this through a 'home video'-style documentation of a day in the life of the Chew family, one of 55,000 families forced by the Singapore authorities to exhume and relocate the remains of their buried ancestors to make way for urban redevelopment. These 'authentic' scenes of a family experiencing 'sadness and confusion' are ironically sutured to clips from a black-and-white *Berita Singapura* newsreel from the 1960s, announcing Singapore's modernity to the world: 'Smart, modern flats . . . a great conception of decent modern living for all, and a signpost to Singapore's future'. These platitudinous declarations, Tan seems to suggest, continue to dominate the way Singaporeans are publicly led to envision their national identity and, in that way, forced to repress their rich personal memories and colourful everyday-life experiences that do not fit into this official narrative. The use of a black-and-white newsreel with a pompously enunciated voiceover also points towards the blandness of official visions of the contemporary Singapore nation, trapped in a colourless and pompous celebration of its modernity.

The audience is forced to confront the ironic resonances between two acts of violence required by urbanization and disguised by its urgent and celebratory rhetoric. First is the violence of draconian development policies inflicted on the living: newly independent Singaporeans needed to be disciplined into an obedient and productive workforce attractive to the multinational corporations that were establishing their operations in Singapore, and were resettled, sometimes forcefully (their land acquired on disadvantageous terms), into modern public housing estates consisting of standardized, high-rise apartment blocks. And second is the violence inflicted on the dead and buried: even the dead continue to be disrupted from their repose and humiliated as their homes are destroyed for 'further national development' while their physical remains are ground into dust, placed in standardized urns, and re-housed in standardized niches that line the walls of Singapore's modern columbaria. A synopsis of *Moving House* for the 2006 Bangkok International Film Festival describes how in 'a world governed by greed and the rhetoric of a "higher standard of living", the phrase "rest in peace" has a time limit'.

In both cases, official justifications have been forged out of a prevalent and persuasive development logic that reflects – acutely in post-colonial nations like Singapore – an obsession with cleanliness, safety, efficiency, newness, and all the things that have come to be associated with being modern. Official accounts of survival, economic development, and land scarcity have enjoyed hegemonic

status, and Singaporeans – as the documentary’s voiceover narration notes – have come to expect that ‘after development comes re-development. For Singaporeans, moving, rebuilding, resettling, whether voluntary or involuntary is a way of life . . . and the dead are not exempt’. Singapore progresses by being pragmatic, not by dogmatically holding on to beliefs and the past. One consequence of this ‘transience’ is the loss of a sense of belonging, identity, community, ancestry, and even history itself. As homes, schools, shops, even graves are demolished and the landscape continually redefined, it becomes difficult to anchor personal, social, even national memories to physical markers since organic places rich in meaning are constantly being replaced by either very functional or merely decorative spaces, where in both cases the spaces are temporary. Many Singaporeans today relate to their physical environment, increasingly populated by foreigners and immigrants, in a detached and sterile way. And, as the Singapore government has found over the decades of trying to build up its moral authority in the context of the disenchantment that attends rapid industrialization, manufacturing national identity, culture, and sense of belonging through policy making and institution building has not been easy.

Slater (2006a) observes how

Tan honed a certain sensibility for pointed documentary with *Moving House*, in which simple but effective editing choices say more than an hour of editorial narration. She also established her proximity to her subjects, close enough to let them talk, but far away enough to cast a cool eye.

Through filmed interviews with members of the Chew family, Tan allows them to express sadness and helplessness at the loss of many things that they value. One is tradition, specifically the Chinese memorial ceremony for the dead known as the *Qing Ming* festival, typically celebrated in April every year. ‘Without the cemetery, I think the atmosphere and tradition will die off’, reflects one of the Chew sons, who adds that after ‘putting my parents in the crematorium, I won’t go during the Qing Ming festival. I will only go [to the columbarium] during their death anniversary’. On the day of this major Chinese festival, extended families pay their respects to the dead by gathering at the graveyard to clean up their ancestral tombs and make ritual offerings of food and mock money, their obeisance an expression of the Confucian ethic of filial piety that is of primary importance in this festival (see Wong 1967: 119; Singapore Federation 1989: 45). Ancestors are honoured and appeased first of all by ensuring that their gravesite and coffins are auspiciously positioned, a task requiring the expert services of a geomancer (Chinese 2000). As one of the family observes, ‘when our ancestors die, they are buried in an auspicious location so their spirits can absorb the good feng shui elements from that location to transmit the good feng shui to the future generations in our family’. It is unsurprising therefore to detect an undercurrent of dread in the film as the Chew family submit to their worldly authorities’ orders at the risk

of not only losing the protection and blessings of the spirit world, but also of incurring its wrath. Re-housing the remains of their ancestors in the cramped confines of a standardized niche, one of 65,000 in the columbarium, could be seen as a violation of the dignity of the dead. To appease the spirits, a Taoist priest is employed to perform rites of absolution. Extra care is taken to shield the exhumed remains from the sunlight in accordance with Taoist beliefs that ancestral spirits are 'creatures of the night'. And everyone ritually exclaims, 'Prosperity to all!' when the ground is first dug and the urns installed in the new niche.

As Tan recalls, 'When the bones were being exhumed, which is a very sacrilegious scene, there was lightning and thunder, perfect for the scene. I had the heavens help me make thunder. To this day, I cannot forget that moment' (Slater 2006b). In the film, one of the family recounts how '[w]hen the coffin was sawn [open], there is thunder. Don't know whether it's a good omen . . . or bad omen. But personally I think it is a good omen'. These theatrical gestures, self-consciously mimicking campy horror film styles, help to 'ritualize' the terrible deed as a means of dealing with deep and visceral fears and sadness. Tan is able to present this uneasiness in the way she subtly captures the strange mixture of respectful ritual, theatrical expressions of dread, curious looks, and spontaneous joking that on the surface may be mistakenly read as disrespect for the dead.

The jokes and laughter are also a means of coping with the dilemma of whether to obey the spiritual or temporal authorities, as well as the dreadful consequences of choosing to destroy – and possibly desecrate – the 'physical link between the world of the living and the dead' and to relocate these ancestral remains in modest, maybe even humiliating, new environments. Slater (2006a), who describes the film as an 'essay on the lengths an extended family will go to in order to be obedient', observes how

obedience takes two forms: that boundless loyalty to their deceased loved ones, bearing witness to the premature re-appearance of their bony, decayed remains; and an unspoken commitment to the 'powers-that-be' that have imposed this humiliation upon the living and the dead in the name of progress.

One of the Chew sons deflects the responsibility for this choice by explaining, 'When I offer my prayer, I told my late parents, we have no choice but to exhume you, because our government requires the land. We hope you will keep protecting and blessing us'.

The jokes and laughter, ironically, also resonate with the sense in which *Qing Ming* has been celebrated 'like a picnic', an opportunity for the whole family to come together. One of the family reveals how '[i]n the past, we would bring all kinds of homecooked food, we'd buy a big watermelon to cut it up there to share with everyone. Now, there can be no more such gatherings'. Destroying the graveyard destroys what has been an important motivation to

bring the family together not only through the respectful remembrance of the dead, but also a celebration of fellowship among the living. Although vestiges of *Qing Ming* practices may be observed at the modern columbaria, the location is not conducive for large families to come together in a convivial atmosphere. The film ends with a shot of a faded photograph of the Chews posing in family solidarity at their ancestral tomb, presumably during one of the *Qing Ming* festivals of the past. This is a snapshot of a family reunion that will never take place again. The violence of urbanization has not only destroyed the auspiciously located resting place of Singaporeans' dead ancestors, but also caused the loss of a long-standing Chinese tradition of filial piety, as well as an opportunity for family reunion.

Tan allows members of the family to vocalize their timid resistance to the government's exhumation exercise. One of the family notes the contradiction in the government's reasoning:

[The dead] have been lying down there so peacefully for the past 20 years. All of a sudden, we disturb them. Sad! Most unfortunate, our country's area is small . . . why should they have so many golf courses? A waste of land too. Why can't they provide this land for a permanent cemetery so that the traditions can be maintained?

A message posted on a blog interestingly describes how 'this generation [depicted in *Moving House*] criticises the effects of change when change and modernisation was what it sought. But, sometimes I think nostalgia is a lighter form of guilt'.⁷ Indeed, the family's concern with prosperity and convenience as expressed frequently in the film suggests their complicity with these processes of modernization. Perhaps their mildly expressed regrets are really just coping mechanisms for modern Singaporeans who would not easily give up their contemporary conveniences, but still feel an ambiguous sense of loss. Tan's critique is sophisticated enough to allow these contradictions to complicate an easy dichotomy between tradition and modernization. Her film is, in fact, most effective when it allows the contradictions to reveal themselves. For instance, the audience is constantly prompted to think about the contradiction between the government's urbanization drive and its nation-building project that has relied on an official rhetoric of Asian values (which must surely include the family and traditions of filial piety). Through this contradiction, perhaps, the government's rhetoric presents itself as pragmatic, perhaps hypocritical, or at least insincere; and the urbanization effort insensitive and indiscriminate.

The documentary's narrator makes an ironic observation of the columbaria: '40 years ago, the vision involved better housing like this for the living. Now, it's the dead who enjoy such modern accommodation'. But while the clean, orderly, and efficient public housing estates serve as a metaphor of modernity for the new columbaria, the columbaria themselves – a reflection of the death

of living tradition and a 'second death' of dead ancestors – also serve as a deathly metaphor for the living, suggesting the 'deathliness' of living in cold, standardized, overly rationalized high-rise and high-density spaces. Genuine community – imagined as the colourfully traditional villages where people bonded together and cooperated without calculation – has been atomized by urbanization.

Voices from the margins

Singapore's tight embrace of neoliberal globalization has rapidly transformed the urban landscape from a rich and organic source of meanings, values, identities, and memories to a glossy and ever-changing global-city clone, where historical complexity is more readily reduced to narratives that serve to sustain authoritarian government and new modes of social control tacitly supported by global capitalism as a way to contain the system's crisis tendencies. This dynamic has also relegated many alternative, economically valueless, or simply eccentric voices to the margins where they have become silent in Singapore.

Tan Pin Pin provides alternatives to the official project of nation building by foregrounding some of these marginal voices in *Singapore GaGa*. Tan, in a featured interview included in the film's DVD release, observed that a vacuum was created when 'people talked about Singapore [in] very nationalist, big picture terms'. Her film is intended as a way to help fill this vacuum with diverse, heterogeneous, eccentric, and highly personal voices of Singaporeans – ordinary, marginalized, and forgotten – and, in that way, to enable Singaporeans to reclaim their own country and therefore identity. Even these 'abandoned' voices, Tan seems to say, are capable of being very patriotic and resilient in spirit. Her film draws together the strangely ordinary and ordinarily strange Singaporean voices into a harmonious and at times pleasingly dissonant musical texture that is an exciting complement, rather than shrill disruption, to the rather more serious, prosaic, and even pompous tones of officialdom. 'In a technical, bureaucratic, monological, and prosaic system,' I have argued elsewhere, 'these have been ghostly voices that the film delightfully brings back to life' (Tan 2008b).

Tan displays a skill for irony that is benign and thought-provoking. She is able to expand the audience's understanding and appreciation of Singaporean diversity without being overly prescriptive. In the documentary, Tan features individuals who – in less skilled hands – might have collectively appeared like a freak-show. A sprightly wheelchair-bound lady sings a jingle that she composed herself as she sells tissue paper packets at the train station. An old man, revelling in delusions of grandeur, bills himself as a 'national treasure' as he performs a 'one-man band' repertoire in a busy underpass. World-renowned, avant-garde pianist Margaret Leng Tan, who made her name in New York in the 1960s and returned to a more welcoming Singapore several

decades after, performs Cage's 4'33" on toy piano at the void deck of a public housing apartment block. Guo Ren Huey, the same elderly Chinese man who was interviewed by the Japanese reporter in *Invisible City*, sings patriotic Chinese and anti-Japanese songs that he can remember vividly. Fun-loving and precocious female students at a *madrasah* (Islamic school), modestly covered in *tudung* (headscarves), cheer for their teams at the school's sports day, but also sing patriotic Singapore songs in both English and Arabic. By showcasing these marginal subjects, Tan's documentary throws into relief the dominant image of a Singapore that values able-bodied productivity, world-class talent (relegating the local to second-rate status unless foreign branding is acquired), the bureaucratic simplification of cultural diversity through stereotype, and the norms of the majority over 'racial' and other minorities that are potentially 'un-Singaporean' (Tan 2008b).

In the film, it is difficult to miss the criticism, though it is often subtle, gentle, and humorously ironic. For instance, Margaret Leng Tan's 4'33" scene that ends with her remark that 'we never listen to the environment, we're too busy listening to the thoughts in our heads', is immediately followed by a scene in which Tan Pin Pin interviews the announcer on Singapore trains, Juanita Melson, whose familiar voice issues instructions to commuters everyday. The announcer explains to Tan how 'it's good for them [commuters] to know there is a voice that comes on air and gives them instructions'. The announcer's good diction stands in stark contrast to the tones of Singlish, Singapore's colloquial vernacular, and in that way serves at another level to instruct Singaporeans to speak good English. The government has constantly urged Singaporeans to avoid Singlish in order to be able to communicate effectively with the rest of the English-speaking world, in particular with the tourists, delegates, and investors whom Singapore hopes to attract in a neo-liberally globalized world.

A second example points to Singaporeans' authoritarian personality. An old lady, who encounters the 'national treasure' in the underpass, asks if he has obtained a licence to busk. She walks away, dissatisfied and sceptically muttering to herself, when the old man informs her that he has in fact got a licence from the National Arts Council.

A third example lies at the end of the film, when Tan shows scenes from Singapore's annual National Day Parade, an expensive public spectacle calculated to arouse strong feelings of patriotism and to affirm national values conducive to the interests of global capitalism. The scenes are cut abruptly to a shot of a lonely busker performing the song 'Wasted Days and Wasted Nights':

Wasted days and wasted nights / I have left for you behind / For you don't belong to me / Your heart belongs to someone else / Why should I keep loving you / when I know that you're not true / and why should I call your name / when you're the blame for making me blue.

Conclusion

As a neoliberal global city, Singapore has had to face more difficult problems at the national level such as economic crisis, a widening income gap, greater social divisions, and the emergence of poverty and an underclass. The more commercial arts, supported by the state and its various economy-enhancing programmes, can be valuable not only for upgrading the economy to be more competitive and creativity-driven, but also for producing fantasy worlds into which the disenchanting and marginalized can escape. Citizenship and the nation are mainly a function of the imagination, which can be fostered through the arts and popular culture. And this partly accounts for the increase in state resources set aside for funding and developing the arts.

As a media hub, Singapore has been successful at courting a diverse range of global media companies such as AXN, BBC, CNBC Asia, Discovery Channel, HBO Asia, Lucasfilm Animation, MTV Asia, Nickelodeon, and Walt Disney Television to set up their regional offices and studios in the city. The rapidly increasing presence of global companies and workers, facilitated by neoliberal globalization and the need to make Singapore an attractive city to foreign investors and talent, has profoundly transformed the physical and cultural landscape of Singapore, making them almost unrecognizable over a short period of time. At the same time, the media hub has generated new demand for global and local creative talent, and many new opportunities and resources for Singapore's own talent to grow and prosper.

In this environment, socially and politically conscious artists – even as they succeed in gaining access to the generally increasing stock of state funding and other support for the arts – will become further sensitized to the more visible and acute problems of political authoritarianism, social justice, and rapid and indiscriminate urban transformation. Inspired by street-level realities that contradict the national rhetoric of success, artists like Tan can – in neoliberal Singapore – find more resources to support their work, more thematic and topical materials to feature and critique in their work, and more sympathetic audiences who can relate to the sense of degradation and loss evoked in their work.

Notes

- 1 *The History of Singapore* was directed and produced by Tim Lambert, for Discovery Networks Asia. DVD distributed and marketed by Universal Music Singapore, 2006.
- 2 For a similar argument, see Loh (1998).
- 3 The 'betrayal' of social democratic ideals was most pronounced in 1976 with the PAP's expulsion/resignation from the Socialist International and its forceful articulation of its pragmatic orientation as summed up in the title of its collection of polemical essays edited by Nair (1976).
- 4 MediaCorp Raintree Picture's corporate profile is available on its website at www.mediacorporaintree.com/about_us/corp_profile.htm (accessed 7 February 2010).

- 5 A close analysis of three Singapore filmmakers who range from commercial to independent (Jack Neo, Eric Khoo, and Royston Tan) is offered in Tan (2008b).
- 6 Polunin passed away on 21 December 2010.
- 7 The comment was posted by one 'NARDAC' on the weblog *Tym Blogs Too!* 8 March 2006. Available online at: www.toomanythoughts.org/blog/2006/03/listening-to-singapore.html (accessed 29 June 2006).

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10 Documentary filmmaking, civil activism and the new media in Singapore

The case of Martyn See as citizen journalist

Yasuko Hassall Kobayashi

Singapore, which used to be called a cultural desert, has decided not to wear this crown any more. Having already established itself as a global centre for finance and education, among other areas, the richest country in Southeast Asia has been taking steps to transform itself by cultivating the arts as well as activism by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Under the slogan, 'Developing a distinctive global city for the arts', state money has been poured into the sector. Film production is, as part of the arts, also recognised and promoted in line with the new state policy. As a result, from major film productions to alternative documentaries, the number of local Singapore films has visibly increased. Also, since the Singapore International Film Festival was launched in 1987, it has been running every year.

In 2005, a documentary film entitled *Singapore Rebel* by director Martyn See was submitted to the Singapore International Film Festival. The film was not only subsequently withdrawn from the festival, it was also banned in Singapore. *Singapore Rebel* is a 26-minute documentary focusing solely on Dr Chee Soon Juan, a leader of the opposition party, Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). The Singapore media authority considered *Singapore Rebel* a 'party-political' film and therefore in violation of the Films Act in Singapore. The banning of his film surprised See but it is not an uncommon experience for Singaporean filmmakers. Other Singapore-made films have been banned in the past, as have such foreign productions as *Sex and the City* (lifted in 2004). *Lurve Me Now* (1998) by award-winning Tan Pin Pin is still banned even as her highly acclaimed film, *Singapore GaGa* (2005) is celebrated in Singapore. In 2001, a 15-minute film about J. B. Jeyaretnam (former opposition member of parliament) made by three lecturers from Ngee Ann Polytechnic in Singapore was also banned. Even if a film is not banned outright, it might still be heavily censored. Royston Tan's *15* (2003), for instance, underwent 27 cuts before it was deemed fit for release in Singapore.

Despite these daunting prospects, See continues to make documentary films. His second work was released in 2006 and, like his first, its subject is not a Singapore mainstream-friendly choice, either. The film, *Zahari's 17 Years*, is about Said Zahari, a former editor-in-chief of the Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, who was detained without trial for seventeen years in Singapore, making him the second longest-serving political detainee in Singapore after Chia Thye Poh. Like *Singapore Rebel*, this film was minimally edited, allowing Zahari to talk about himself and his life. This film eventually met the same fate as See's first film.

What makes See different from most mainstream filmmakers in Singapore is his extensive use of the new media (web log or blog, YouTube, Google Video, etc.) to support and circulate the discourse contained in his films. After *Singapore Rebel* was banned and police investigation into the film began, See set up a personal blog to share with the public what he was going through during the investigation. His blog contains factual details of the investigation and even some visual images from it (e.g., a letter from the Singapore Police). He continued to provide details about the investigation until it concluded in 2006. All his films, including *Nation Builders* (2007), are linked from his blog to YouTube. While few serious filmmakers are prepared to put their creations on new media platforms like YouTube for free public access, See clearly sees the use of the new media as key to his interventionist role as a citizen journalist in Singapore. In the Singapore context, James Gomez (2006) uses the term 'citizen journalism' to describe how individuals and groups outside political parties use internet platforms (e.g., discussion groups, mailing lists, websites, online petitions, podcasts and blogs) to supply alternative political content during elections. Based on this concept, a 'citizen journalist' is one who expresses social and political views and opinions by using new technologies enabled by the internet. In See's case, the new technology is YouTube and his personal blog.

What this chapter deals with is not so much Martyn See's film style or philosophy. Rather it situates See and his activities at the intersections of documentary filmmaking, civil activism and the new media in an attempt to understand his efforts to expand the democratic space in Singapore. I begin by exploring existing literature relevant to this case study before introducing alternative views on social movements and civil activism proposed by the Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci. By deploying Melucci's ideas, the rest of the paper will analyze details of Martyn See's life and films.

Reframing civic intervention in Singapore

Studies of Singapore tend to approach civil society and activism by examining either or both from one of two angles. Some examine Singapore from the perspective of the state, while others approach the subject from the side of civil society. The former approach broadly seeks to answer the question of how the government has been able to rule and control Singaporean society

so successfully, and to bring about such economic prosperity to the city-state. For example, Garry Rodan (1993; 1996; 1997) analyzes Singapore authoritarian state governance; Chua Beng Huat (1995) looks at how the government manages to control society by opening up and closing down spaces for social participation; and Christopher Tremewan (1994) explores the harmony between the government and local capitalists by analyzing how the government controls socio-economic structures. Regardless of whether such studies criticize the Singapore state or celebrate its success, their essential focus is the same: to examine society from the perspective of the government.

The second type of study examines Singapore from the viewpoint of society. As pointed out by James Gomez and Lenore Lyons (2005), several studies in the 1990s that purported to examine civil society in Singapore were in fact examining discourses by the state about civil society instead. This approach reflects a view that civil society in Singapore is a space shaped and controlled by the state. Gomez and Lyons (2005) criticize these works for focusing only on NGOs that are well known to be funded by the state; works often cited by the government and academics in state universities as proof that the government allows a space for civil society. This picture of NGOs is also linked to Singapore state discourse about civil society. In Singapore, instead of 'civil society', the term 'civic society' is more familiarly met in speeches of ministers. While 'civil society' emphasizes the rights of citizens, 'civic society' depoliticizes claims of rights of the citizens by emphasizing their responsibilities (Lee 2005). In the latter discourse, the presence of NGOs is not a problem at all, since NGOs are expected to support state policies rather than to provide any real space for the people to articulate alternative political views. It is not unknown that the government promotes certain types of NGOs in Singapore as part of its policy to transform Singapore into a cosmopolitan global city. Although the active presence of NGOs is a 'soft factor' and a key dimension in the measurement of what makes a global city, NGOs supported by the state in Singapore are in a very sophisticated way encouraged not to act politically or to bring about any political change. If NGOs function merely to endorse state policies, then the best Singapore can have is a civic society, not a civil society.

Apropos of films, it is possible to draw a similar view to that of NGOs in Singapore. First, the state has attempted to depoliticise film production and the arts in general, even as it provides ample funding for the sector as part of its culture-boosting package to create a global Singapore. Academic studies on Singapore have in fact tended to focus on new state policies to boost culture (Kong 2000; Kawasaki 2004; Chong 2006; Tan and Fernando 2006). If funding is the carrot, then, the state's expectations would be the stick, for the arts, including film, are expected not to be critical about the current government or Singapore politics, but to turn Singapore into any other cosmopolitan and globally competitive cities. From this viewpoint, the proliferation of the (depoliticized) arts goes hand in hand with the state's attempt to show that Singapore too possesses a vibrant arts culture, as any global city would.

To ensure that film production stays in line with state policy, the Singapore government uses the Films Act to legally prevent filmmakers from producing any 'political film' about Singapore. In recent years, a wide array of local documentaries and box-office hits have been released that shed critical light on Singapore society. Almost all of them, however, skilfully avoided overtly political themes, as required by the Films Act. This, at best, makes the film industry and a majority of filmmakers in Singapore much like the well-known state-funded NGOs: both support and constitute a loyal part of state policies.

Where the new media is concerned, few studies have evaluated it as a potentially powerful tool to bring political change to Singapore. Some studies have shown how it is used by political opposition parties in Singapore to disseminate their views due to limited access to the mainstream media. They are also generally sceptical about the usefulness of cyberspace as an agent of political change. This is unsurprising as, compared to the highly successful cyber activism in South Korea (Hyon 2005), for example, the Singapore case shows little change being brought by the new media. The reason lies primarily in its control by the state. Long-term Singapore watcher Garry Rodan (1998: 80) underlines that the Singapore government monitors websites with the aid of the domestic telecommunications industry. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) tracks websites for any disturbing content deemed undermining of public morals, political stability or religious harmony in Singapore. Local internet service operators and content providers have to be licensed and are expected to comply with SBA conditions. In addition, all political parties, religious and other organisations, and individuals with web pages discussing religion or politics must register with the SBA. Service providers are expected to take action by closing down websites deemed capable of causing hatred of the Government, inciting disaffection against the government, and undermining public confidence in the administration of justice (Rodan 1998: 81). In his analysis of how the Singapore government exerts tight controls over the internet and other media, Rodan implicitly gives a pessimistic verdict about the usefulness of the internet as a tool to empower individuals and civil society in Singapore.

In a word, existing literature suggests that film and the internet have little use in cultivating civil society in Singapore. More fundamentally, the future of civil society or civil activism itself seems bleak. The pessimism of that literature seems to lie in a particular image or notion about how 'civil society' or 'civil activism' ought to be constituted. First, civil society or civil activism is situated against the state in a clear binary structure. Civil activism has to be in conflict with the state in a clear form as civil society. Second, civil activism is conventionally imagined as having to bring about concrete political changes by collective action. This nineteenth-century notion of civil activism or civil society has become much less relevant for understanding contemporary civil society and civil activism, simply because global societies have become much more diversified culturally, linguistically, socially, economically, politically and religiously. This is true of Singapore, despite its strong government.

Disconnected individuals in a diversified society inevitably have different political agendas, instead of sharing 'the' agenda. This makes it unrealistic to imagine a very clear enemy or target for a group of people to fight against, like 'society' versus 'state'. In addition, the meaning of politics and civil society/civil activism, as well as what it means to 'intervene' in particular causes, varies wildly between individuals. This applies not only to Singapore but other societies as well. For instance, a Japanese housewife I met recently in London shared with me that she uses a designer, eco-friendly shopping bag as a 'lifestyle choice'. 'This is my way of participating in green politics', she said. In her mind she is participating in green politics or green consumption, although the significance of her action (of using a designer eco-friendly shopping bag) remains highly contestable.

Alberto Melucci (1996) provides an idea which greatly helps us to move away from conventional notions about contemporary social movements and civil activism. Melucci (1996: 8) argues that the focus of social movements or civil activism has shifted from traditional landmarks such as race or class toward cultural grounds. The shift is also accompanied by other changes, such as the ways in which social movements or civil activism are born, conducted, continued or discontinued, as well as the number and identities of the actors. The actor today is no longer always part of a collective but is often an atomized individual. Similarly the agenda for social movements and civil activism is no longer always race and class but more personalized cultural politics. This well explains the earlier statement by the housewife about her participation in green politics.

Social movements and civil activism have evolved in such a way that they are no longer reducible to protesting in front of Parliament House and chanting slogans in public. As is becoming increasingly commonplace, more activists and concerned individuals are taking to cyberspace, circumventing state control of national media to express their individual or collective views where they previously could not. The goal of the participants is not always to bring about physical political changes, but more to displace dominant social perceptions and meanings. Hence, to analyze and understand a social movement or civil activism now requires us to adjust to new ways of conceiving intervention, instead of trying to identify a collective, situating civil society against a clear enemy such as state power, or judging in advance whether a particular movement/activism can bring political changes. In short, Melucci suggests that we view social movements and civil activism as challenges to the dominant meanings and codes circulating in society (Melucci 1996: 1).

To illustrate the foregoing, consider the dominant code in which heterosexual marriage represents the only legally or morally legitimate kind of marriage. To the many who are not heterosexual by act, orientation or identification, the code represents a point of conflict during the process of making sense of their lives as individuals and social entities. In this and other ways, crucial dimensions of daily life become conflict points, provoking new actors to lay claim to their autonomy as they try to make sense of their social world and

their place in it (Melucci 1996: 8). Analysing social movements and activism thus requires us to understand the dominant codes in societies: how they are questioned and by whom, for whom those codes create conflicts, how those people try to make sense of the gap between the codes in question and their own thoughts, and how they become actors of a particular social movement or civil activism in order to claim different meanings and their legitimacy. This kind of analysis will reveal a complex combination of meanings created over the course of a long time.

In the subsequent discussion, I deploy the aforementioned notion of social movement and civil activism in an attempt to understand Martyn See, his film production and his interventionist activities. I demonstrate how See began to feel threatened in his everyday life as he tried to understand the dominant codes and to challenge them through filmmaking and cyberspace. The data used here are drawn from interviews I conducted with See and other activists, as well as new media discourse.

'Singapore Rebel'

Martyn See was born in Singapore into a Chinese-speaking Singaporean family. He was educated in Singapore, where he has lived his entire life. After compulsory national service, he learned video editing in production houses and subsequently became a freelance video editor working with local filmmakers such as Eric Khoo. See's career in the film industry spans almost twenty years. Before producing his first documentary film, *Singapore Rebel*, he had already become interested in political issues in Singapore in the mid 1990s. The first window, which showed him how political opponents of the Singapore government can be persecuted, was a book, *To Catch a Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew's Prison* (1994), by Francis T. Seow.

Francis T. Seow is a former Solicitor General and President of the Law Society in Singapore. In 1988, he was arrested by the Singapore government and detained without trial under the Internal Security Act. His charge was to have received funds and advice from the United States for the purpose of promoting democracy in Singapore. Seow was detained for seventy-two days, during which, as revealed in his book, he was subjected to torture (e.g., sleep deprivation and exposure to intensely cold air-conditioning). He was released after seventy-two days. Before being tried in court he left Singapore for the United States and was convicted in absentia. He now lives in Boston.

To Catch a Tartar (Seow 1994), which details Seow's mistreatment by the Singapore government, is still banned in Singapore. It radicalized See's view of the current government: 'My eyes were opened to the darker side of the PAP's history. [PAP or the People's Action Party has been the ruling political party in Singapore since 1959]. I read it from cover to cover. I felt . . . frightened, depressed and angry at the same time' (cited in Chia 2008). Through Seow's revealing book, See began to see the government differently from the dominant view created and presented by the mainstream media.

The book did not, however, take him immediately to where he is now in terms of political consciousness. The second turn came in 2001 during the general elections. Then, See witnessed how Dr Chee Soon Juan (leader of the opposition party, the Singapore Democratic Party or SDP) was badly heckled by the then Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong over a loan the Singapore government allegedly made to former Indonesian President Suharto. The mainstream media's view of the 'good' Singapore government versus a 'bad' opposition party leader presented to the Singapore audience as the dominant code did not, however, function as expected. Instead it created radical doubt in a majority of the audience, including See who in recollection says that 'Chee Soon Juan got hammered very badly. I wondered, is this guy as bad as the media made him out to be? So I decided to check him out myself' (cited in Chia 2008). See also knew about Chee from his book, *Dare to Challenge: An Alternative Vision for Singapore*, first published in 1994.¹ How the mainstream media presented Chee began to make less sense, and See was driven to 'see for himself': 'I wanted to see for myself if the opposition politician as portrayed by the mainstream media in Singapore is accurate.'²

From this point onwards See spent almost two and a half years in trying to understand Chee Soon Juan. See spent time with Chee at his office and home, and while Chee was standing at the railway station or the Speakers' Corner appealing to the public. See observed Chee, and met other members of the SDP, as well as his friends and family. While filming his documentary about Chee, he met and got to know a broad range of activists, including James Gomez, who was arrested by the Singapore police after the general elections in 2006.³ Through filming and meeting activists, See clearly identified 'a vacuum created by the media' (Chia 2008), pondered on it and tried to fill it out with his film. As he did so, things came to make sense to him.

See's *Singapore Rebel* was funded by neither the government nor any other organizations. It was produced on a very low budget, shot with a Samsung mini DV camera, and edited on a Macintosh laptop computer. The entire project cost just 400 Singapore dollars (Brownlow 2006). Making the film provided See with insights into the ways in which Chee operated as a political rebel. The film allows Chee to talk about his life in Singapore, and to account for how an academic who graduated from an elite university in the United States and working in a prestigious institution like the National University of Singapore (NUS) was fired when he joined an opposition party to stand for election. Chee talks about being sued several times by the government for defamation, his bankruptcy due to the fines from his convictions for defamation, his arrests and experiences in prison, his street speeches, his political beliefs and so forth.

Singapore Rebel does not pretend to be a sophisticated production. It was barely edited, though not because See lacked editing skills. See had in fact edited one of the most celebrated Singapore films, *Singapore GaGa* (2005), by Tan Pin Pin (see Tan's discussion on the film in Chapter 9). Instead of employing elaborate techniques in creating *Singapore Rebel*, See simply

allows Chee himself to provide an account of his life and belief, and to answer questions that any man on the street might ask. The simple narration helps viewers to visualize the high price Chee has paid for juxtaposing different political views as a leader of an opposition party. In terms of possessions, he has almost nothing left, aside from his politics. Like many others, I wanted to ask Chee what compelled him to risk it all. On my behalf, See posed this question himself towards the end of the film. The response is surprisingly simple. Chee just wants to remind Singaporeans that democratic freedom has been forgotten in Singapore. Also, as the mother of a child, I wanted to ask him how his family, in particular his children, felt about his negative image as portrayed by the mainstream media. Does he worry about it? See asks him this, too, and the answer is rather liberated. 'My children will know what the truth is. It does not matter what LKY [Lee Kuan Yew] calls me or labels me.'

Singapore Rebel captures an image of Chee which is at odds with the image constructed by the mainstream media in Singapore. Far from 'stupid' for standing up to the government, or *kaypoh* (interfering) in fighting to expand democratic space in Singapore, Chee, sounding sensible throughout, comes across as someone who cares deeply about freedom of speech and is concerned about the suppression of opposition parties in Singapore. By making *Singapore Rebel*, See gives voice to Chee, a marginalised political rebel, and so answers the question he had asked himself years before: whether the portrayal of Chee by the mainstream media in Singapore was accurate.⁴ See's answer to the question however poses a challenge to the dominant codes enforced by the Singapore Government about Chee and opposition political parties in general. In fact, the Ministry of Information, Communication and Arts (MICA) regards the challenge posed by 'party political film', as it labels *Singapore Rebel*, as sufficient reason for banning it:

'Party political films' are disallowed because they are an undesirable medium for political debate in Singapore. They can present political issues in a sensational manner, evoking emotional rather than rational reactions, without affording the opportunity for a meaningful rebuttal or explanation to audience and viewers.

(‘Party’ 2005)

Police investigation and See's blogging activities

On 12 January 2005, See submitted *Singapore Rebel* to the Singapore International Film Festival under the category of Short Film Competition. On 11 March, See had to withdraw his film due to a warning by the director of the film fest, Lesley Ho, that the censors had deemed the film 'objectionable' under the Films Act. In Singapore all films must be submitted to the Media Development Authority (MDA) for vetting and potential censorship. Flouting this rule will result in the owner(s) of the film being fined up to 5000 Singapore dollars under the Films Act.⁵ Although *Singapore Rebel* had previously been

sent to human rights film festivals in the U.S., New Zealand and Malaysia, the MDA lodged a police report after examining it. As a result, the film was no longer a matter of the arts but had become a police case. On 16 May, the first police investigation was conducted at the Cantonment Police Complex. Police Assistant Superintendent Chan Peng Khuang asked See about fifty questions (See 2005a).⁶ At the end of this first interview, See was told by Assistant Superintendent Chan that the investigation would continue. See subsequently expressed his feelings on his blog as follows:

When is PM Lee giving his National Day Rally Speech? Last year, he announced that police permits will be waived for indoor meetings. Perhaps in another effort to show that Singapore is truly 'opening up', he will announce the abolition of Section 33 of the Films Act, and spare me the potential ignominy of a criminal record.

(See 2005b)

Here, in Melucci's terms, we can observe See's conflict with the dominant codes. See had laid claim to his autonomy by creating *Singapore Rebel* as part of the process of making sense of his life. Now crucial dimensions of his daily life – filmmaking and editing – have become a point of conflict in the face of the dominant social codes regarding filmmaking in Singapore. On 25 August 2005, See was interviewed by the police for a second time, once again at the Cantonment Police Complex. The interview lasted three hours. Many of the questions he faced were the same as the ones asked during the first interview. There were questions about his views on opposition parties and the mainstream media; the equipment used to make the film; existing raw material; the people involved in the film production; where the film had already been circulated; and his connection with the Singapore Democratic Party. At the end of the interview, the police authorities required See to submit his remaining copies of *Singapore Rebel*, receipts from courier services he used to mail the film to foreign countries, the Samsung mini-DV camera he used to shoot the film and any remaining raw footage (See 2005c). See submitted the required items to the police on 29 August 2005. Although various newspapers abroad showed concern over the police investigations and confiscation of his film equipment, the investigation continued. The police also contacted some of See's friends, including filmmaker Tan Pin Pin and blogger Jacob George, whose phone numbers were listed on his mobile phone. See wrote on his blog:

The police has intensified investigations against me by calling up blogger Jacob George whose number is listed on my mobile. The walls are closing in. Not only am I unable to speak freely on my own phone, the police is now closing in on individuals who are totally unconnected with the making of 'Singapore Rebel.'

(See 2005d)

Years back, when See first read Francis Seow's *To Catch a Tartar*, he had felt 'frightened, depressed and angry at the same time' (cited in Chia 2008). Now he was in a way reliving Seow's past ordeal. On the police investigation and how he was coping with it, See said, 'It was surreal to be placed under police investigation for 15 months for making a short documentary but I continued to live my life normally.'⁷ To make matters worse, no lawyer contacted him to offer any legal help, although See himself had contacted a human rights lawyer, M. Ravi, who represented the SDP in the elections of 2006 (See 2007c). What does See mean by 'I continued to live my life normally'? One of his activities was to keep developing his blog, giving details of what had transpired regarding his banned film and occasionally sharing how he felt about it. If Francis Seow used the classic might of the pen to publish a book about his fearful experience with the Singapore government and let the world read it, See used the new 'might of the blog' to share what was happening to him in real time. By doing so, he could provide pieces of information about his case which would not be reported by the Singapore mainstream media. Also, in his capacity as a citizen journalist, he could watch the watchers by reporting what was really unfolding.⁸

As a result of the numerous times he had been interrogated by the police, and had his video camera, tapes and raw materials seized by the latter, See gained first-hand experience on what it was like to deal with the Singapore police, and to perhaps even fear being detained himself. He began to subsequently pay attention to other detainees in Singapore history. He found a significant publication on Singapore detainees by Amnesty International and started posting crucial reports and records on his blog about historical detainees such as Chia Thye Poh, who was the longest-detained prisoner in Singapore (twenty-two years). He also supplied information about other Singaporean detainees such as Dr Lim Hock Siew, Lee Tse Tong, Said Zahari and Dr Poh Soo Kai, detailing how they survived detention, and how the Internal Security Act enabled the government to incarcerate these individuals (See 2007a). See also paid attention to the relatively recent 'Marxist Conspiracy' arrests of the mid 1980s. His blog has developed from a record about his banned film and subsequent police investigation into an archive for him to delve into what is not reported or presented as the standard view of Singapore history. This development shows his ways of making sense of his own conflict, by looking back at Singapore history, looking at other activists, journalists and lawyers who are claimed as criminals, and 'seeing for himself' whether what they did was really a crime.

Zahari's 17 Years

It is not surprising, therefore, that See's second film, *Zahari's 17 Years*, is about a long-term ex-detainee in Singapore. Said Zahari, who has a brilliant command of both Malay and English, and who worked as editor-in-chief of

the Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, was arrested in 1963 when the government launched 'Operation Cold Store' to round up all those alleged to have been involved with leftist or communist organisations. Zahari was detained for seventeen years for allegedly being a communist. Now living in Kuala Lumpur, he has since published his experiences as a book titled *Dark Clouds at Dawn: A Political Memoir* (2001).

Like See's first film, *Zahari's 17 Years* was minimally edited. It allows Zahari to talk directly about his life as a detainee, his political beliefs and his views about Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore politics by answering questions occasionally posed by See. The film reveals his fear of being tortured, how his detention was unexpectedly long without any explanation given by the state on why it needed to be so long and how Zahari attained an excellent command of Chinese during detention from his Chinese fellow detainees. Some of Zahari's answers cannot but prompt viewers to question the legitimacy of what was done to him by the government. For instance, towards the end of the film, when See asks how Zahari views the Internal Security Act, the latter replies:

You see, using the Internal Security Act is supposed to be in the interest of national security. But whose security? Older people detained like me and so many others, for us, whose security is that? . . . Lee Kuan Yew's security, yes. But definitely not the security of Singapore.

For many who regard Lee Kuan Yew as an untouchable patriarch of Singapore, Zahari's candid comments about Lee can be very refreshing. When See asks about Singapore's longest detainee, Chia Thye Poh, Zahari replies:

How many years was he detained? Ah? 23 years? . . . What a vindictive person Lee Kuan Yew is! . . . A poor little fellow [Chia Thye Poh]. He was only 26 years old when he joined me in prison. He was a lecturer at the Nanyang University. He was very eager in political principle. He wanted to establish a democratic free country. Then Lee Kuan Yew also accused him as a communist. Everybody was communist. But why did he detain us for so long? It is a very interesting question. Until today, he was not able to explain why he detained us for so long. When I launched my book in Hong Kong, I was interviewed by CNN. They asked the same question: Why were you detained for so long? I answered them. The only person who can answer this question is Lee Kuan Yew.

Most of Zahari's views captured in *Zahari's 17 Years* are already covered in his book, *Dark Clouds at Dawn*. Nonetheless it is a very powerful experience for viewers to see Zahari on film sharing his thoughts and experiences or answering See's questions logically, sensibly and in a way that more than dispels any notion one might have of him being a rascal. His side of the story will no doubt be new to a majority of Singaporeans who have little, if any, knowledge of the histories of Singapore detainees, having long been taught to

believe that the Internal Security Act is, contra Zahari, for the protection of national security. Like *Singapore Rebel*, *Zahari's 17 Years* challenges the dominant codes in Singapore. The latter film was, in a sense, borne out of See's experience of the former as 'essentially a re-enactment of the revelation I felt about how powerful the media is in shaping an entire population's perception of a person.'⁹ With both films, See aims to show views marginalised by the mainstream media in Singapore and 'to hold the audience's attention [i.e., focus it] on a political issue'.¹⁰ As a citizen journalist, he does not make long or elaborate documentary films requiring huge budgets; instead, he creates manageable ones which he can shoot and edit on his own budget while paying his bills by working as one of the most skilled editors in Singapore.¹¹

Zahari's 17 Years was submitted to Singapore's Media Development Authority (MDA) on 6 January 2006 for the necessary approval. While See was waiting for the rating of *Zahari's 17 Years*, on 20 March 2006, he was interviewed a third time by the police about *Singapore Rebel* at the Tampines Police Post. Finally, on 7 August 2006, the police closed the case and issued him a warning. His camera was promised to be returned but the tapes were retained in police custody for subsequent destruction.

On 13 April 2006, *Zahari's 17 Years* was passed by the censors. It was scheduled to be screened at the Singapore International Film Festival but the plan was cancelled at the last minute (See 2006). In 2007, the Cultural Studies cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, organized a screening of the film as a by-invitation academic event.¹² However, about two weeks before the screening, the news broke. See contacted and informed me that *Zahari's 17 Years* had been banned by MICA on 10 April 2007. The stated grounds for banning the film are reproduced on See's blog:

The film gives a distorted and misleading portrayal of Said Zahari's arrest and detention under the Internal Security Act in 1963 and is an attempt to exculpate himself from his past involvement in communist united front activities against the interest of Singapore. The government will not allow people who had posed a security threat to the country in the past, to exploit the use of the film to purvey a false and distorted portrayal of their past actions and detention by the government. This could undermine public confidence in the government.

(‘Press Statement’ 2007)

As a result of the ban, any person who possesses or distributes the film can be punished by a maximum two-year jail term and a maximum fine of 10,000 Singapore dollars.¹³ At that stage, it became clear to See that there was no possibility for him to organize public screenings of his film, at least in Singapore, in a legal way. In the face of this, See decided to upload his films to YouTube and Google Videos ‘to allow the world to judge [these films] for themselves.’¹⁴ Of course, most serious film directors would not be willing to make their work available for free in this way. In fact, this point was raised

by a Dutch scholar when See's fourth film, *Nation Builders*, was screened at the Asia Research Institute in 2008.¹⁵ To this, See answered that, when his films were banned by the government, the new media like YouTube was the only way left for him to share them with the rest of the world as a citizen journalist. Since completing *Zahari's 17 Years*, See has continued to create manageable films in terms of labour and budget that pose questions to the dominant codes, and to upload them onto the web so that the world can watch and judge them.¹⁶

Further activities to challenge the dominant codes

Apart from making films, developing his blog, and using the new media to circulate his films and ideas, See also participates in other activities in order to challenge the restricting dominant codes in Singapore. For instance, on 29 March 2008, he organized a private film screening event called *Dare to Document: Political Films by Singaporeans* in the Little India district of Singapore. The three films screened included those of other filmmakers/activists. They were *How My Favourite Opposition Party Fought the PAP (and lost their pants, again)*, co-produced by award-winning Singapore film maker Ho Choon Hiong and Martyn See; *Speakers Cornered* by Martyn See; and *Five Day Fast* by a young activist Seelan Palay. See has also organized other types of meetings. He co-organized a private function in 2008 entitled *Cyber Activism: the Malaysian Experience* with Seelan Palay, Isrizal Mohamed Isa, Ho Choon Hiong and Muhammad Shafi'. The function, held on 10 April 2008, featured such speakers as Steven Gan, the co-founder and editor of celebrated news portal *Malaysiakini*, and Nathaniel Tan, an internet activist with the Malaysian opposition *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*. The chairperson, Alex Au Waipang, was a well-known gay activist and author of the well-known blog, *Yawning Bread*. It was a gathering for activists to listen to how other activists and the opposition used the internet to bring about a sea change that was the Malaysian general elections in 2008. The elections saw the ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), losing two-thirds majority control of Parliament for the first time in its fifty years of power (see Lim in another chapter).

Interestingly, the two speakers from Malaysia, Gan and Tan, were also invited by the Singapore government to meet state authorities and share their views on the last Malaysian general elections. If the Singapore government seriously needed to know what transpired in Malaysia so that it could prevent the same from happening to the ruling party in Singapore, activists in Singapore seriously wanted to know how they could put to use those Malaysian strategies in their own general elections. Many questions posed to the two Malaysian speakers at the private function sought to identify the relevance and possible applications of the Malaysian case to Singapore, and lessons from it for Singapore. The event was highly successful in three ways. First it attracted so many activists and Singaporeans interested in politics that the venue was so packed

that the air became steamy during the meeting. Second, the two speakers themselves evidently enjoyed the sharing of experience, stating that they found it most interesting to meet with activists in Singapore.¹⁷ Third, it provided a space for Singaporeans to learn about contemporary differences and similarities between Singapore and Malaysia in order to draw lessons from the latter.

See's activities have clearly developed beyond filmmaking. They blur the lines between culture and politics, off-line and online media, and filmmaking and activism. This style seems to present a model to other activists, including Seelan Palay whose political documentary film, *One Nation under Lee*, was recently banned in Singapore. Palay did not start from filmmaking but first emerged as an activist and a Tamil artist. Having met See and organized private functions with him, Palay too began to make films with the advice and help of See, as well as Ho. His debut film, *Five Day Fast* was a promising effort, while his latest, *One Nation under Lee*, a vast improvement over the former, was rated best political video in Singapore by the blog *Singapore Viewer*. See's move from filmmaker to citizen journalist is now applied in reverse by Palay: from human rights activist to filmmaker. Palay has also set up his own blog and uploaded details of the police investigation about his banned film, *One Nation Under Lee*.

Concluding remarks

Melucci's view of contemporary civil activism as intervention that challenges mainstream meanings elucidates the case of Martin See. See's activities as a filmmaking citizen journalist are not a collective act. He makes films by himself in order to answer his own questions. His intention is not to precipitate physical political changes or to become an opposition politician, but to find out whether the portrait of an opposition party leader (Chee Soon Juan) created by the state and the media it controls is an accurate one, and to understand a former political detainee (Said Zahari) by allowing him to narrate his own story. See's personal quest for answers is, however, far from personal in effect, for it exerts great impact on the public imagination of the two 'rebels' featured in his documentaries.¹⁸

On 11 September 2009, the ban on See's first film *Singapore Rebel* was lifted by the MDA, although it remains uncertain if the government's move had anything to do with the pressures exerted on it by See's activism or by the fact that more than half a million people around the world have viewed the film online. Nonetheless, the type of activism that See exemplifies, although still in its infancy in Singapore, needs to be listened to and watched carefully, to see where it may potentially lead and what kind of changes it may bring in the future. In any case, as a result of interventions by the likes of See and Palay, it can safely be claimed that there certainly exists civil (as opposed to civic) activism in Singapore which is not funded or tamed by the government, or connected to any PAP members (whether in some section of the government

or in the PAP itself). Despite the highly pessimistic views often expressed about Singapore's civil society, activism and the possibility of creating meaningful political opposition, young activists such as See and Palay have been influenced by their antecedents like J. B. Jeyaretnam, Francis Seow and Chee Soon Juan. All these figures demonstrate with conviction that each generation of activists invariably contributes something to the subsequent generations, inspiring segments of Singaporeans to keep alive their hope for the emergence of an unfettered civil society in Singapore.

Notes

- 1 See said 'I knew about him through his books and election rally speeches.' My personal correspondence with Martyn See, 11 October 2009.
- 2 Personal correspondence with Martyn See, 11 October 2009.
- 3 Personal correspondence with Martyn See, 11 October 2009.
- 4 Personal correspondence with Martyn See, 11 October 2009.
- 5 According to the Films Act, 'Every film in the possession of any person shall be submitted to the Board without any alternation or excision for the purpose of censorship at the owner's risk and expense and at such time and place as the Board may appoint.' The Films Act is available online at: http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-107&doctitle=FILMS%20ACT%0A&date=latest&method=part.
- 6 The following are some of the questions See was posed at the police station (See 2005a):
 - 1) About the film production: Who conceptualised it? / Who produced it? / Who shot it? / Who edited it? / Who funded it? / How much was spent? / What was the objective of the film? / Who else was involved in the production? What camera was used? / Who shot the Istana arrest scene? / How long did you take to make it? / Who did you give copies to? / Who put up the film on the internet? / Are you still in possession of any copies?
 - 2) About See's connection with Chee Soon Juan and the Singapore Democratic Party: Is Dr Chee a personal friend of yours? / Where did you film the interviews? / How did you approach Dr Chee to make the appointment? / Are you a member of any political party in Singapore? / Where did you film Mr J. B. Jeyaratnam?
 - 3) About his personal blog: When did you start this blog? / What is the purpose of this blog?
 - 4) See's personal data: What is your highest academic qualification? / How much do you earn per month? / Do you contribute to CPF? / Do you own a computer? / Do you have a production house?
- 7 Personal correspondence with Martyn See, 11 October 2009.
- 8 An opposition party candidate, James Gomez, said that he met See after his film was banned and told him, 'You have to watch those people who think they are watching you. Mirror it back.' My personal interview with James Gomez, 18 March 2007.
- 9 Personal correspondence with Martyn See, 11 October 2009.
- 10 Personal correspondence with Martyn See, 11 October 2009.
- 11 Martyn See explained his stance of producing films as manageable projects at a film screening organized by myself and Dr Liew Kai Khiun at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 12 March 2008.

- 12 The event was organized by myself and Dr Liew Kai Khiun as an academic event of the Cultural Studies Cluster, Asia Research Institute in 2007.
- 13 See letter dated 10 April 2007 from MDA to See online at: http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_j5BotyyITFg/RhvXF808YCI/AAAAAAAAACc/bNVPsk_fsL8/s1600-h/MICA+letter.jpg (accessed 31 October 2009).
- 14 Personal correspondence with Martyn See, 11 October 2009.
- 15 The film screening was organized by myself and Dr Liew Kai Khiun at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 12 March 2008.
- 16 See's films, including *Nation Builder* and *Speakers Cornered*, are available for download from his personal blog at www.singaporerebel.blogspot.com/
- 17 Information provided by Alex Au during my interview with him, 22 April 2008.
- 18 See continues to pose questions about Singapore politics and political history, most recently in the film, *Ex-political prisoner speaks out in Singapore* (2010), which too has been banned in Singapore in July 2010. This time See was ordered by the government to remove the film from YouTube (See 2010).

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11 Cinema and state in crisis

Political film collectives and people's struggle in the Philippines

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There is an ominous phrase to refer to the seriality of fatal incidences in the Philippines. 'Only in the Philippines' showcases the exceptionalism of excessive violence both in the everyday life and in the grand history of the nation. The brutality of the negligence of the state and the complicity of the protagonists, listeners and viewers are harnessed to showcase the unique and oftentimes sad realities that supposedly can only happen in the Philippines. In September 2009, for example, the worst flooding in Metro Manila's history occurred with typhoon Ondoy bringing much of the city under rampaging water. According to a government announcement, the disaster-coordinating body had only thirteen rubber boats for operations, which, needless to say, were far from adequate in the face of the typhoon's magnitude. Then, prior to the national elections in May 2010, the first fully automated poll in the Philippines was planned amidst massive national anxiety: in a country where past elections had been ruled by 'guns, goons and gold', will it not pave the way for high-tech fraud and vote-buying? Why automated polls at a time when the incumbent president Gloria Arroyo – hoping to insulate herself from corruption cases after her term – ran for and easily won a local seat in Congress? Since then, talks have been ripe of a Charter change that will pave the way for a parliamentary system, with her as the first prime minister. Amidst the privatization of the national elections – entrusted to Smartmatic, a private foreign company – and reports of substantial disenfranchisement of voters, Benigno Aquino III was elected president, while other candidates respectively won the 17,000 contested positions in the country. The post-elections scenario, although usually optimistic, has instead yielded an enormous anxiety about the nation's future. The Philippines is always in an anxious state, ceaselessly grappling with the neocolonial and neoliberal conditions.

The perennial reality check encapsulated in the phrase 'Only in the Philippines' has allowed me to think on what I will discuss in this chapter. Two things have become apparent: one, crisis has come to characterize Philippine everyday life, or as critic Neferti Tadiar puts it, it 'becomes common currency for understanding the conditions of contemporary Philippine life' (2009: 2); and two, that 'the sea of people' or the material reconstitution of

the masses in their everyday lives under the Philippine state becomes the mode to understand the collective experience in the crisis that is the Philippine state. What I will discuss are fragments of the narrative of the sea of people in the historic time of crisis under the Philippine state that negotiates its own place in neoliberal globalization. This complex web of describing the Philippine state is undertaken through a politics of representation: an analysis of creative responses in independent and political films, as well as in literature and visual art.

I begin with a historical framing of the Philippine state through the anxiety of the returning elite during the Spanish colonial time as a reference to the massive deployment of overseas contract workers (OCW) in the present. I then examine how the state's diasporization of Filipino contractual workers has shifted to the virtual worker through the more recent mobilization of primarily young people as call center agents in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), the new sunshine industry that the state has mustered. Subsequently, I demonstrate how film plays an integral part in negotiating the actual and virtual diasporization of Philippine labor as integral in state formation. Mainstream cinema has romanticized the OCW figure while the independent cinema movement has foregrounded subaltern figures of everyday life, all anxious and denied access to respite and redemption. I argue that these cinemas are complicit in the state's neoliberal project of shaping the ideals of the middle-class citizenry. I demonstrate this by focusing on the media production and works of political film collectives as struggling within the limits of both mainstream and independent cinema in the country and, with its oppositional mode of production and reception, able to bring the overtly political back into the artistic contestation. In short, as I argue, it is in the political film collectives that the crisis of the state is rendered visible and contestable.

Primordial ambivalence of the nation

In the chapter 'Memories' in Jose Rizal's novel *Noli me Tangere*, the lead character Ibarra, riding in a carriage, traverses Manila's main thoroughfares. The manner in which his crossing of Manila is described is inflected with historical sites and psychical insights, generating a turn-of-the-century image of a colonial city and a liberal mind at work. Ibarra profiles its author's background: a returning doctor, educated in Spain, having done his formal schooling in the elite education available in the colony, idealistic and contemplative of everyday matters. Rizal's transatlantic education and travel had allowed him access to Europe's liberalism, informing his novels of the value of liberal education and thinking – the gold that he could mine as a kind of colonial trade-off for the Philippine resources that had enriched Spain. It is ironic that Rizal's own diasporic experience, through his return and novels, becomes the defining moment that encapsulates and articulates his formative colonial years and transformative ideals for the colony.

Noli me Tangere is a meditation on these facets of colonial life and aspiration from Rizal's privileged subject position. As can be concluded from his novels – that a social revolution can only be affected by a learned populace – Rizal is caught in his own bind: able to represent the colonial condition yet unable to transform it. It was only through his death and the circulation of his novels that the formative nation crystallized. After which, with the transatlantic colonial project of the U.S. in the Philippines, the promise of the nation remains a distant project.

Ibarra gazes at Intramuros, the Spanish colonial walled city, and Bagumbayan, a wide-open park, the site of many public executions of insurgents and subversives, including in the future, Rizal's own. Rizal knew of the conditions of possibility in the colony: segregated by Spain's older structures, the colony had no recourse except through heroic deaths and the anxieties of life and death in the everyday colonial state. Yet in the novels, Rizal only gave in to isolated heroic deaths, not through systematized deaths from revolutionary struggle, an opportunity that was already available then. His transatlantic experience had both freed and imprisoned him. Read analogously, his vision of the nation becomes the absent signifier in the periodic and ongoing reevaluation of the nation, marking the ability and inability of the present Philippine nation to transform into something progressive and modern. Rizal suffered from melancholia in not being able to bring in the ideals of European liberalism, and was depressed by the inability of the colony to take on this liberalism and to transform accordingly. His plight is echoed even in the present life of the nation: that the ideals of liberal thought and processes have yet to transform the nation, as the Philippine state itself remains the major hurdle that negates social transformation to better the lives of its own citizenry.

Diasporic nation, diasporic citizens

The larger-than-life mural by Antipas Delotavo, entitled 'Diaspora' (2007), was first exhibited in Megamall, one of the largest malls in the Philippines. What is particularly striking about the massive mural is its lack of a central focus. The sea of people moving in the same direction invokes a historical moment of exodus but neither arrival nor departure is certain. The mural is necessarily overwhelming as the phenomenon of migrant work or the overseas contract workers (OCW) in the Philippines has continuously provided relief from the state's abandonment of public services, including local labor employment that ensures access to education, food, shelter and justice. The state's relinquishing of its function in the individual lives of OCWs and their dependants comes at the time of global neoliberalism's introduction and equally massive deployment. After India and China, the Philippines is the third largest exporter of labor in the world (Kobayashi 2009). Of the country's 90 million population, 10 percent are OCWs (Kobayashi 2009), with remittances in 2008 standing at US\$16.4 billion compared to US\$6 billion in 2000, an annual growth of 13.3 percent (Songco 2009). In 2006 it was estimated that

27.6 million people lived below the poverty level (Australian Government 2010). In a survey conducted in 2009, 71.4 percent of Filipinos rated themselves as 'poor' ('7 out of 10' 2009).

Exhibited inside a mall space, the quintessential site of consumption in the Philippines, Delotavo's mural also calls into attention the coming into full circle of migrant labor. The diasporic return journey of the OCW is superseded by the actual journey of capital flow. The migrant workers leave the country to work and make sacrifices for their families. They remit monthly wages to support their dependants back home, allowing the latter to aspire towards middle-class consumption. The middle-class space of consumption is in the huge malls that dot the urban centers. In this sense, the return of the OCW is first a sublimated one that precedes the OCW's physical return: the OCW's remittances enable their families to aspire, purchase and accumulate markers of a spatially specific and temporally earned middle-class life.

The rise of the 'OWC film' – a melodramatic subgenre that highlights the character of the migrant worker – in Philippine cinema attests to the growing interest and acknowledgement of the OCW phenomenon as a wellspring of profit for businesses and virtual connectivity through diasporic capital between OCWs and their families. The OCW film came in two phases: initially as a 'historical trauma' film, marking the rape, death and quest for justice for actual migrant workers such as Delia Maga and Flor Contemplacion in Singapore, Maricris Sioson in Japan, and Sarah Balabagan in the United Arab Emirates; and now followed by fictional heterosexual romance, featuring the country's foremost lovetteams, and produced by Star Cinema, the country's largest film studio. What is interesting about the regular production of OCW films is the conspicuous agenda being emplaced. If one out of ten Filipinos is a migrant worker, supporting as breadwinner an average household of five members (which equates to nearly half of the country's population), then the imperative of the 'OCW lifestyle' or the state's engineering of migrant work as normal and universal or as normative of Philippine economic development becomes more pressing than ever. What the OCW film emplaces is for its audience – prospective migrant workers themselves – to adapt to the lifestyle, even when melodramatically represented, of the OCW: accepted sufferance, worker and tourist in the hostland, dysfunctional yet working family set-up, and the continuous return to the homeland and hostland.

In mainstream cinema, the OCW film had helped to bring audiences back to the movie houses. Since the late 1990s, the movie industry's output has plummeted to its all time low, producing only some thirty films a year. The local industry could not compete with Hollywood blockbusters in the era of intensified globalization of American popular culture. Apart from OCW films, what had helped sustain the Philippine movie industry were the soft-porn films that periodically raked in profit for mainstream and independent producers. In 2004, however, the largest cinema complex owner in the country, SM (ShoeMart, also the largest mall developer) banned the exhibition of R-18 films in its movie houses. With soft-porn films generally rated R-18, the

mainstream heterosexual genre immediately disappeared. The rise of digital independent filmmaking, however, increased overall production output. The independent filmmaking scene also became the birthplace of the new soft-porn – the gay cinema. Bearing the same characteristics of exploitation of sexualized bodies and the proliferation of sex scenes as its precedent heterosexual variety, the gay soft-porn film interestingly became the regular profitable draw in independent filmmaking.

The dominant character of independent filmmaking in the country – dark mining of poverty and the representation of subaltern identities and their subterranean lives – primarily catered to the international film festival market and the local intellectuals. Because of budget constraints, very few independent films foregrounded the migrant worker's life. The mainstream industry tapped into this commercial market, continuously making central the migrant worker in the aspirational life of the nation for middle-class status. The Filipino Channel, an affiliate of ABS-CBN, the largest media conglomerate that also owns Star Cinema, has a growing cable channel abroad, mostly in immigration areas of Filipino workers. The service sector, like telecommunication and retail companies, also credits the OCW as a market to maintain its commercial viability. The OCW films incorporate what Jonathan Beller (2006) terms the 'cinematic mode of production' or the late capitalist's discourse of corporeality that engages and enforces audiences to perform intellectual labor. It is the newer naturalization of capital through the dominance of visual culture, with cinema taking on a central trope in the understanding and filtering of corporeal practices in 'the political economy of the postmodern' (2006: 1). The OCW films make productive the sociality of the OCW figure in the Philippine neocolony. Through the engineering of the visual culture of the OCW, the historical OCW experience is rendered as necessarily desirable. Through succeeding formations of visibility – cell phones, social networks on the internet, Skype and other video-chat platforms, global television, and multimedia branding of local phenomena such as boxer Manny Pacquiao and singers Arnel Pineda and Charice Pempengco, among others, including the Delotavo mural in Megamall – a newer historical reality rendered less historical and more virtual, and therefore more desirable, is made to assuage the contemporary citizens of the Philippines.

From historical to virtual OCW

The indirect Philippine remedy for pandemics is to eventually give in to local opportunities provided by neoliberal globalization. The sunshine industry for this transnational network is Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), a kind of subcontracting of certain operations, particularly call center operations, to dispersed parts of the world. Borrowed from transnational production of multinational work, BPO goes into the cheapest locations to engage in the efficient rendering of customer services. Comprised predominantly of young

people performing fake American accents, call-center agents work mostly at night to service the requirements of BPO companies, where it is daytime in most First World sites. President Gloria Arroyo would reiterate this triumph of local employment – although the OCW has been continuously sustained by the Philippine state – by producing media mileage of her conversation with call-center agents in a coffee shop, thanking her for giving them the opportunity to work locally and earn high-entry paying jobs.

BPO work is similar to overseas contract work in the ‘3D nature’ of jobs involved. Although not as dangerous and literally dirty as domestic work, call-center work is repetitive, with a strong quota system to ensure the supply of numbers in the speedy engagement between agent and client. It is degrading, with the agent often suffering from racial slurs. It is also a 24/7 kind of operation, similar to domestic work abroad. However, the combination of agents in call-center operations translates to the single body of the OCW. Similar to India, the Philippine market is generated by the fluency, if not mimicry of English native-speaker accents, and in the Philippine case, promulgated by the colonial and neocolonial legacies of the American public school system that used English as the medium of instruction. The BPO boom is also technically known as the ‘offshore call centers.’ Global outsourcing profit was around US\$150 billion in 2007, with the Philippines raking in US\$2.4 billion in 2006. The Philippines is already placed third after India and China in call-center operations. About a decade ago, only 20,000 agents were involved in call-center operations in the Philippines; the number has now ballooned to 200,000 agents. The number is expected to rise to 2 million in 2010, and expected to contribute some US\$11 billion, roughly the amount of OCW remittances.

Middle class ethos of national citizenry

What I would like to discuss now is the transformation of the middle-class imaginary into a normative cognitive mapping of everyday life in the Philippines. This means that individuals of all classes are made to substantiate national existence through the prism of a middle-class fantasy. Through everyday technologies and media, such as malls and malling, urban travel and immobility, television viewing and listening to the radio, everything in the national scope is expressed through a kind of privatized empowerment of citizens transforming their own lives to gain access to middle-class-ness.

To be middle-class in the Philippines is to experience middle-class-ness intermittently. There is no strong middle-class base in the country, and through sachet marketing and economics (products and services reduced to small packets and instalments), everything is reduced to daily use and consumption that allow even the most disenfranchised access to the possibility of middle-class-ness sustaining itself. In another Tagalog essay, I termed this as ‘lumpen proletarianization’ (Tolentino 2009), where government neglect and delay in the delivery of services allow for businesses to take over the daily distribution

of commodities and thus insulate the Philippine state from massive protests and even protract the possibility of triumph of the revolutionary modality of transformation.

With the middle-class imaginary deeply entrenched in the lives of citizens and the citizenry's social mobility on the one hand, and with the Philippine state's invisibility on the other hand, there is no other way but for individuals to take on the crisis, maneuver their way around it, and find daily sources of relief in businesses' taking-over of Philippine governmentality. This has been the topic and thematic of the recent wave of Philippine independent films. With Hollywood's successful dominance of the commercial film industry and local studios relinquishing to Hollywood's dominance, the glimmer of hope for Philippine national cinema lies in the output of the indie film movement. Directed by young filmmakers who have limited or no access to the big studios, produced with small to medium-sized budgets, the indie films harness the politics of director Lino Brocka, the most political of Filipino filmmakers and who led the second-golden age of Philippine cinema with his visual contradiction and subversion of the aesthetics of the 'true, good, and beautiful' of the Marcos conjugal dictatorship (1972-86). Brocka's films proliferated images of poverty; the weight of the real, however, is resolved with a degree of personal culpability of the action undertaken by the lead character seeking relief from his oppression. The indie film movement also proliferates images of poverty, but resolves the problematics of the real with a neorealist closure: that the heavy weight of poverty will not be able to resolve the subaltern individual's predicament and, as such, the filmic world just moves on, with the heavy social and historical weight not diminished at all in the everyday.

One landmark filmmaker of the indie movement is Brillante Mendoza. His feature film, *Tirador* (Slingshot, 2007), examines the lives of lumpen proletariats or, more specifically, the 'tirador' (agents of petty crimes, coming from *tira* or 'to make a hit') in a community of the urban poor. What the film condenses, similar to the filmic quotation of historical events of human rights violation in Brocka's *Orapronobis* (1989), are the scenes and characters familiar to those victimized by the petty criminals. It chronicles the familiar yet abjectionable encounters with and among the lumpen proletariats. The scenes are replete with activities disseminated through urban legends, popular discipline and surveillance mechanisms of business establishments, even the state's fascistic nature to suppress the subalterns. They include shoplifting a DVD player by confusing the salesperson with inquiries about a variety of models, staging an apology when caught, and even staging a revenge performance by tucking the appliance between the legs while loudly wailing about the capture. The lumpen proletariats are devoid of politics other than to save their own lot with get-rich-quick and devil-may-care attitudes and actions. Thus, on the one hand, the film doubly familiarizes the abjectionable (the activities of the poverty stricken and politically disenfranchised lumpen subclass) and, in doing so, humanizes the lumpen underclass; and on the other hand, the

recourses of the lumpen underclass are made no different from the actual middle-class and intellectuals' own undertaking, for they too have been lumpen proletarianized with very little access to further social and historical mobility.

The debilitating effects of shoplifting and other ways of the lumpen underclass become allegorical to the indie cinema audience's own positioning as middle-class subjects. Making do with very limited resources in order to survive in the everyday system of the Philippine state, the middle class and artists have to resort to pilfering and borrowing in order to be rendered as productive subjects within and outside the Philippine state. By the end of *Tirador*, so massive is the disenfranchisement that only a tragic-comic resolution of life continuing is possible. The final scene is an actual endorsement episode of politicians vying for the national elections of 2007 in a popular outdoor mega-church service. The politicians pray on stage with the leader of the mega-church and deliver speeches to worshippers while the lumpen proletarians pickpocket the worshippers who are busy with the service. In the film's ending, the complicity of accommodation in the political and religious lives is exposed. While transforming the spiritual lives of worshippers, mostly from the underclass too, there is very little transformation of the material condition. The lumpen underclass thrives on its own kind, stealing what little they can from the mass worshippers of mega-churches in the Philippines, where so huge is the membership that most of the services are conducted in wide-open spaces.

While the indie cinema movement is able to locate the contradictions of the state, it does very little to navigate political options for the subaltern identities foregrounded in the film narratives. Shot in gritty cinematography with narratives set in the neorealism mode of 'a slice of life' or 'a day in the life of', there are no solid epiphanies that could undermine open-ended resolution of indie productions such as *Tirador*. Life goes on for the subaltern characters and their communities. The humanist critique only allows for the foregrounding of the weight of social realities that could never be fully resolved on film. With indie cinema texts also being circulated primarily for an arts festival audience, now more 'middle-class' than ever in Philippine society, the gentrified citizenry and its ethos are materialized in film viewing: seeing things the middle class fears and abjects, and therefore accepting a position of supremacy over these subaltern identities and narratives.

Political film collectives: oppositional mode of production and reception

In the Philippines, political documentary films are an integral part and yet rendered invisible in the discourse of the independent cinema movement that favors the feature-length narrative. These films nonetheless achieve significant political status because they are produced by political film collectives, which are inextricably linked with the national democratic social movement. They flourish alongside the phenomenal rise of independent cinema in terms

of output, range of topics discussed and oppositional processes of production and reception. Started by the original film collective, Asia Visions, in the 1980s, what ensues now in the rise of political film collectives is the use of film for critical pedagogy, connected with the backlash against the Left's split in the 1990s. These films engage in reiterating the necessity of Left politics in the recent neoliberal economics that negate the viability of drastic social transformation. Also, as will be made clear, unlike indie films which are characteristically in search of a moviegoing audience, the films produced by political film collectives have ready audiences. They are shown at the sites of community socialization (including basketball courts, larger homes of members, classrooms and hallways) and used as part of discussions of larger issues, whether they be expanding organizing work or as consciousness-raising tools for the other sectors.

The level of efficiency of producing and disseminating media texts by political film collectives remains high, so much so that these collectives now flourish in the major regions and sectors in the country, including the guerrilla fronts. In Metro Manila, the youth media group is Sipat or Sine Patriyotiko; the workers' sector has Mayday Productions, a documentary group based in the NGO (nongovernment organization), EILER (Ecumenical Institute for Labor, Education and Research, Inc.); the alliance of people's organizations in Metro Manila has Tudla Productions; and the multisectoral alliance Bayan has Kodao Productions. In this chapter, I will be showcasing the oppositional film practices of Tudla, Sipat, Mayday and Kodao Productions. There also exists various political film collectives based in the regions of Cordillera, Ilocos, Southern Tagalog, Bikol and Mindanao.

Icy Salem, Executive Director of Tudla Productions, an alternative film and media collective, explains in a personal interview that the forms of their media output include newsreels, video documentaries, photo essays and animation videos (Tolentino 2010a). The collective has also launched the Lino Brocka Political Film and New Media Festival, an annual showcase of political films, as well as the Pitik Mulat Visit and Exhibit project, an extension program of installing themed images at various sites. Tudla's focus is on creating audio-visual media texts with social messages about Metro Manila's urban poor, comprising regular and intermittent workers. According to Salem, Tudla's media projects are driven by the aims of raising the knowledge and consciousness of the urban poor, and uniting and mobilizing them on issues and situations that affect them. Not only are the conditions confronting the poor discussed in the collective's media productions, including videos, more importantly, analyses of the Philippine society – its maintenance of the conditions of oppression and poverty – are also presented. This, according to Salem, helps ensure the longevity of use and contribution of the media texts to various people's organizations.

Some of the video documentaries of Tudla are *Buhay Barya* (Life of Coins), produced in conjunction with the campaign for the P125 daily wage increase; *Daangbakal* (Steel Road), started during the height of the widespread

demolition of homes in North Manila to give way to the South Rail Project; *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* (In the Name of Sugarcane/Profit), about the massacre of farmers protesting in Hacienda Luisita, owned by the Aquino-Conjuangco families; and *Banta sa Bayan* (Threat to the Nation), primarily done in the *Oust Gloria* (Arroyo) campaign. What results from these documentaries is that the people's organizations spearheading the campaigns become the producers, as the research, case studies and timeframe are based on the campaign plans of the organizations. The people's organizations are also the main audience of the documentaries as their members are directly involved in and affected by the campaigns.

In creating newsreels, Tudla gets campaign updates from other people's organizations and contacts on the burning issues of the day in their sectors to enable the collective to document the important aspects of the campaigns. There are no voiceovers in the collective's media texts; presented instead are simply images and scenes accounting for the campaigns, interviews with participants and leaders that narrate the stories behind the campaigns, and also analyses of the campaigns. Tudla's audio-visual productions for the people's organizations are based on requests from the organizations themselves. The latter include Makabayan (an alliance of progressive party-lists); Pagbabago: People's Movement for Change; Bayan Muna (a leading party-list); and We Watch Voter's Education, among others. Tudla unites with the objectives of the request regarding the content and goals of the presentations.

Another collective working closely with cause-oriented groups is Sipat and Mayday Productions. Miles Asa, of Sipat and Mayday Productions, describes the collective's *modus operandi*:

The collective forms the staff of the video group program for a particular timeframe. The program contains the plan for regular discussions, including brainstorming, monitoring and evaluation – how to develop the knowledge and analysis on the issue through study and research, production and dissemination of the video. The program combines field work and office production work.

(Tolentino 2010b)

The regular discussions on national, sectoral and regional concerns generate the idea for the video. From these discussions, the collective plans the next steps, such as deciding on whether to make the documentary, and what teasers and tactics of argument to employ should it decide to make the documentary. As in the case of Tudla, much of the work undertaken by Sipat and Mayday Productions are based on requests from people's organizations and in response to the initiatives of various organizations and sectors, such as those involving peasants, government employees and women, among others.

Sipat and Mayday Productions were originally constituted as initiatives of the sectors where the filmmakers and organizers came from collectives. Formed by progressive media artists from the student sector, Sipat began by

engaging with issues involving students, such as tuition fee increases and repression on the university campuses. According to Asa (Tolentino 2010b), Sipat started as a result of a series of violent dispersals of students at the University of the Philippines (UP) in the Senate. In the first mass action against Senate Bill 2587 that gives UP its new but commercially oriented charter, no one covered the event on video. But when students and teachers were dispersed, the collective members borrowed video cameras and started shooting. The unedited coverage of the dispersal of the protest action was shown on various campuses. Thus, Sipat was born. Asa explains, 'As the struggles of the students progressed, so did their stories. These become the content of the video.' The produced video was then used in screenings to engage other students to the cause. For Asa, the lesson learnt from Sipat's incipient involvement in collective activism was the realization that they could not rely on mainstream media practitioners, which left before the protesting students were dispersed, to cover the news.

Mayday Productions, by contrast, was formed by cultural workers of the labor sector. Their first video project *Lakbayan* (Protest March) revolves around a march by the people's organizations based in Southern Tagalog demanding genuine land reform and justice. As part of the production work, the collective marched with the 'lakbayani' (protest marchers) and participated in the protest itself, singing protest songs and engaging in periodic noise barrages. As a result, its members were also dispersed alongside the protesters, although on the following day they rejoined the march against the violent dispersal of the previous day. Asa explains (Tolentino 2010b) that just days after the march, the idea for the video developed. There was a long discussion after the shoot and the flow of *Lakbayan* was firmed up: the sections of the marches were contrasted with the lives of the workers – looking for employment, working like a machine, protesting, dealing with the institutional response and continuing with the protest despite suppression by the authorities. The integration allowed for film collective members to understand the conditions of existence of the community and to plan for ways of framing the film in order to highlight the conditions of existence and the possibility of collective struggle by the people of the community. When the film was eventually completed, it was shown to the community to obtain feedback, which was then integrated into the final copy. Once finalized, the film was passed on to other areas of organization work in the community, and to other sectoral networks: students, out-of-school youths, educators, women, workers and peasant organizations.

According to Asa, not all issues can be encompassed by a video production (Tolentino 2010b). Based on partnerships with various organizations, alternative forms, such as publications or classroom-type discussions and forums can also be recommended. Notwithstanding, the objectives of the film collectives are always political: consciousness-raising towards the progressive analysis of issues affecting the nation, and using film to organize and mobilize the people to act on these issues. Digital technology is maximized for an overtly

political objective. Members of the political collective study the technology, as well as the social and political issues. Projects are planned and executed collaboratively with other people's organizations. The pre-production stage includes the staff involved in the project studying the issues at hand, and uniting with the people's organization to come up with the concept, content and analysis of the issues. The production stage is undertaken through a long, in-depth integration with the masses and case studies in order to fully absorb their viewpoints, and in so doing, answer the question of how best to encourage wider mass participation.

In making a film about homes being demolished to revitalize the old railway system, for instance, the political film collective integrated with the community, through the assistance of an urban poor group based in the area. Through a wider involvement of the masses, the video production was able to use the language of the members of the people's organization, which was the primary audience of the video. When the film was completed, the collective persevered in soliciting mass criticism (*kritisismong masa*) where feedback on the text was encouraged, especially on the line of analysis, after which the video was further improved upon. Since 2006, however, Tudla Productions have had no camera of their own and only one computer for all of their needs. The video camera they use is either borrowed or owned by one of its members. Operating on small budgets, the collective is dependent on its members with cameras, as well as on long-standing members' support. Salem explains that 'With transportation fare and food, and the purchase of tapes, the project can easily roll into production' (Tolentino 2010a).

The *modus operandi* of the political film collectives share certain fundamental similarities, although, in the case of Kodao Productions, podcasts have been introduced to cover protest rallies, press conferences and events of the people's organizations. According to Raymund Villanueva, Executive Director of Kodao Productions, the collective also produces video shorts called 'Viewfinder' that deal with the burning issues of the day. The issues covered so far include Cha-Cha (Charter Change), PP1017 (Arroyo's declaration of a state of emergency), and the Hacienda Luisita massacre, all within an average of twelve-minute runs. As for documentaries, Kodao produces two distinctive types. The first are 'tribute' videos, which discuss the lives, views and contributions of leaders of the people's organizations. These include tributes to Medardo 'Ka Roda' Roda of Piston (a transport workers' organization), Dan Vizmanos, former military officer turned leader of Bayan (the alliance of progressive people's organizations), Romeo Capulong of the lawyers' group, and Carmen 'Nanay Mameng' Deunida of Kadamay (the organization of the urban poor sector). The second are documentaries similar to those produced by other political film collectives, namely those made at the request of the people's organizations in the church, environmental, health and children's sectors, among others. In the past years, however, the Kodao's focus has been on human rights.

In contrast to feature films produced by the indie film movement, documentaries by political film collectives in the Philippines are made with and consumed by their ready primary audience. For Tudla, according to Salem (Tolentino 2010a), 'the first cut is routinely discussed with the collective's members for recommendations and revisions before it is shown to the organizations for further feedback and revisions.' Salem explains that, in the latter stage, film screenings are held in the community, with discussions initiated after each screening. He observes that, when organized, members of the community are more articulate in their analyses of the films. Unorganized members tend to offer few comments, aside from feedback that they are happy to see themselves on the screen. They also tend to get easily agitated by the issues dealt with in the films, especially if the slant favors their view. According to Salem, the collective is still trying to discover the best way of getting substantial comments, especially on the portrayal of the masses, its appropriateness, and on other matters the masses would want to see on film in order to better improve their productions.

Similarly, Kodao has its regular 'Sinehang Bayan' (People's Moviehouse) which, according to Villanueva (Tolentino 2010c) involves the collective going into various communities to screen its new videos, especially in the area where the video was shot. For a new environmental video, for instance, the collective returned to Kasibu in the province of Nueva Vizcayz to screen the director's cut in order to obtain the community's views and recommendations for the final cut. In another Kodao project geared for the poor in the urban and rural communities, the videos were screened in covered basketball courts or under bridges, among other places. Villanueva further details that, 'in the mountainous communities, we look for a house where there is electricity or a generator to set up the video screening.' Kodao Production also uses small classrooms in schools and colleges for the same purpose. It distributes its videos for free in the regions and to nationalist organizations, while extra copies are sold at cost. Kodao, like Tudla, too, uploads its videos to YouTube and its own website, allowing access to free downloads.

On their part, Sipat and Mayday Productions work closely with cause-oriented groups and educational, research and church-based institutions to disseminate their videos, some of which have been subtitled in English for the overseas solidarity network. Ever-ready for film-screening activities, these partners even request copies of certain videos to screen on their own. For maximum impact, the collective perseveres in launching as many film screenings as possible, especially during a particular campaign period. Asa stresses (Tolentino 2010b), however, that, despite the ability of the political film collectives to work efficiently enough with meager resources, it remains 'a big challenge' to screen the political videos they produce. First, limited resources to finance, plan and set up the necessary machinery invariably restrict the number of mass screenings they can organize. This is a reason why the collective allows the people's organizations to make copies for distribution. Second, the collective faces suppression by institutional powers. Asa reveals

that the collective is no stranger to censorship; once its videos are classified as X-rated or unfit even for adult audiences, the collective already by default faces restricted means to disseminate its work. In fact, because practitioners of the political film collectives are not regarded or treated as professional media, they face significant hurdles, if not mortal danger, even before the videos could be completed.

For instance, EJ Mijares, a member of Sipat, was arrested by the police merely for shooting film footage of a protest being dispersed by the riot police in Metro Manila. The resultant documentary, *Mendiola*, the name of the site of historic protests in Manila, was also banned from being shown at the independent film festival, Kontra-Agos (Counter-Flow), when it was lined up for exhibition in Robinson's Galleria. In another example, according to Asa (Tolentino 2010b), when Tudla was shooting *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* (In the Name of Sugarcane/Profit), the explosive footage containing the massacre scene in Hacienda Luisita had to be transported clandestinely through the sugarcane fields to evade the authorities. The camera was rolling when bullets were fired on the protestors. The video showed that the bullets were fired by those inside the gates of the sugarcane refinery. The footage would later be used as evidence in court to counter the claim by Hacienda Luisita, Inc. Even then Benigno Aquino III, who was a congressman at the time, insisted that the shots were fired by the protestors themselves.

In conclusion, what the debilitating nature and affect of the Philippine state undertake is to substantiate the imaginary of middle-class-ness into the everyday. A relief from the lumpen proletarianization of the underclass and actual middle class takes the form of political social movements that, through protracted people's struggle, have engaged and critiqued the discourses of the Philippine state. Because political film collectives were formed in the various centres and sectors of the people's struggle, they are able to create media products that are, unlike the mostly narrative feature-length films generated by the indie film movements, directly linked to their triple objective of arousing, mobilizing and organizing the people. It is through the political expositions and analyses of social movements – as foregrounded and represented by political film collectives – that the Filipino masses can engage with the debilitating project of depoliticization of the neoliberal state. The enjoyment and pleasure of the political in the state's agenda, oftentimes disguised in the operations of soft-power, create the imaginary of individual agency and social emancipation necessary for the maintenance of the state. The political agenda of political film collectives in particular and social movements in general allow for a temporal breakdown of the state's signification process of middle-class-ness, calling into the foreground the materiality of the conditions of poverty and corruption that disengages individual transformation from ever taking place other than through state-endorsed processes. Oftentimes, transformation is analyzed only through the social and historical, and not through the everyday. The Philippine state demonizes the radicality of the sea of people marching and struggling together in favor of its own recourse to

individualism and everyday. In the media texts of political film collectives, however, the everyday timeliness of issues becomes the site to explicate the social and historical.

Epilog: crisis of disasters of the state

September 26, 2009 will be remembered as an ominous day, so unlike the everyday, in the Philippines. Equaling the volume of rain poured in hurricane Katrina, typhoon Ondoy, on a seemingly regular rainy day, caused the worst flooding in Philippine history. It turned Metro Manila's elevated places into a sea of brown water, with currents carrying the city's trash, homes, sewage and dead bodies. The Philippine state is never known for disaster preparedness, and by the very nature of disaster as an event that is exceptional, beyond prediction and speculation, an act of nature and God, the state is able to evade culpability and accountability in disaster prevention and management. This is not the character in Rizal's novel – analytical and astute in European liberalism – that anxiously stares across the sea, contemplating the promise unrealized in the colonial space. Through disasters, the abnormality of everyday life is rendered. People are expectedly displaced; their lives corrupted through the visible effects of disasters. Disasters have rendered people to dehumanized status – forcing them to flee their homes, carrying sentimental religious images along waist-deep waters, crossing floods through cables dangling in higher posts, and so on. The sea of people becomes the massified disenfranchised entity, disconnected with the causes that have homogenized their individual statuses. What is rendered invisible are the culpability and accountability of the government and businesses that have already dehumanized collective private lives. Figuratively, they have been submerged and dangling on wires from the effects of neoliberal globalization and the relinquishing of the state of public services. The state in crisis through disaster provides relief for the people and the state itself from fully realizing the historical stakes, thereby effacing the actual and ongoing crisis of the state. The new middle class – individual and families of OCWs and BPO workers – finds relief in its diasporic and virtual social relations, and in capital's vote of confidence in its finance-producing labor, especially in times of disasters.

In the aftermath of the flooding that killed 246 people so far, affected 2 million and, forced the evacuation of 567,000 others, disaster management by the government and big businesses becomes the more-than-exceptional way in which the state assumes a human face. In the philanthropic act of distributing relief goods and rescuing lives, the state is able to reconstitute its own crisis – on the one hand, by assuming leadership in disaster management, it is exonerated for the most part; and on the other hand, it garners fiat value (currency that exceeds the actual face value) in its management of the crisis, enabling the nation's peoples to move on with their lives. Exceptionalism through disaster management enables the state to disengage its historical abandonment of public services. Philanthropy becomes the recourse during times of disaster,

and even as I write this, super typhoon Pepeng, although weakened, is still on its course into the Philippines. The crisis prior to the disaster is understated, as the crisis that is the Philippine state is able to reinvent itself. It is through the creative responses – literary, cinematic and media texts as sites of cultural interpretation and social intervention – in the political possibilities of the everyday, in the historical and social time, and in the foregrounded political causes, that the invisibility of state abandonment is never fully realized and that the imaginary of middle-class social mobility is rendered visible. In this simultaneity of time, the sea of people also rehearses the staging of its shared sea of change.

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12 Nostalgic parodies and migrant ironies in two Thai comedy films¹

Pattana Kitiarsa

Sociologist Peter Berger argues persuasively that humour, which he defines as ‘the capacity to perceive something being funny’ (1997: x), is both ubiquitous and subtle. Its existence is universal but in most everyday life situations humour is fragile and short-lived. Nonetheless, humour should be regarded as ‘a necessary constituent of humanity’ (Ibid.). Berger’s argument is applicable to any serious attempts to understand humour and laughter in the domain of everyday life, as in the world of the comedy film industry, where production, distribution and consumption of cinematic humorous sentiment are large-scale, profitable businesses. Here I define comedy film as a genre that crafts, commodifies and transmits sets of scripted and performed humour, and that seeks to provoke laughter and variations of humoristic response from its audience. Most comedies feature light-hearted stories but some are known for their witty ethnocultural or political commentaries, as we shall see.

In the mid 2000s, the Thai film industry produced two ethnoculturally distinctive comedy films: *Yam Yasothon* (2005) and *Noo Hin the Movie* (2006). Both films share many similar features. They can be generally classified as musical comedies. Their stories are drawn from and are about the contemporary lives of young men and women from the Thai-Lao/Northeastern Thai (or Isan) countryside, be they in the countryside or urban centres such as Bangkok, to which high numbers have migrated. In the films’ repackaging and retelling of these stories through comedic tropes, the Thai-Lao/Isan dialect and traditional ethnocultural traits come through prominently, if not entirely colour the films. No less significantly, *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* emerge from the same grounds: both were shot and released during the years that saw the rise and fall of Thaksin Shinawatra and his now-defunct Thai Rak Thai Party. These were the years that gave birth to Thailand’s ongoing economic and political turbulence uncertainty, which then peaked with the military coup that ousted Thaksin in September 2006 and the resulting tensions between the Yellow Shirt (royalist movements led by the People Alliance for Democracy) and the Red Shirt (the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship). Lastly, *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* share the similarity of providing commentaries on Thailand’s social transformations out of which they emerged.

This chapter traces the interconnections between the two comedies: the class-inflected Isan identity they feature so prominently; the comic mode in which they narrate Isan stories; the rural-urban migration theme they employ; and the social transformations taking place in contemporary Thailand in the wake of Thaksin's rise and fall. It examines these interconnections through an exploration of a series of questions: What is it about *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* – films with strong local ethnocultural sensibilities – that made them such box-office hits with urban-based and other groups of audience? What does filmic laughter generated through these comedies mean? How can we capture the sociocultural meanings of their cinematic ridicule, jeering and laughter? My argument is that *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* stimulate laughter through what I call 'nostalgic parodies' and 'migrant ironies', and that the laughter generated by these filmic tropes goes 'far beyond joking, jeering, and ridicule', to borrow a phrase from Kundera (1980: 57). These tropes are not evenly applied to both films. Most parts of *Yam Yasothon* are more heavily nostalgic compared to *Noo Hin the Movie*, where migrant ironic laughter is featured more prominently than in the former. Still, as we shall see, these tropes are tightly interwoven into the dialogues, gestures, locations, music and scripted acts in the films. They poke fun at traditional rice-farming peasants (*chao rai chao na*) or villagers (*chao ban*) as rural-to-urban migrants who are being transformed and integrated into the critical mass of working-class or 'grass-root' people (*khon rak ya*). Just as importantly, the same tropes are employed to critique the modernity that cosmopolitan Bangkok represents.

The selection of *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* is methodologically purposive. Both films are chosen for their comedic genre as much as for their plots and themes reflecting rural-urban/global cosmopolitan encounters. They provide self-reflexive cinematic representations of how Thai-Lao villagers interpret, act and embrace modernity as rural-to-urban migrant workers away from home. They give voices, albeit comical ones, to characters who find themselves awkwardly trapped in the ongoing process of geographical and sociocultural mobility and transformation. In addition, both films fit well with my scholarly interest in ethnographic observations of the Thai-Lao villagers of Northeastern Thailand, and issues such as how and why they are integrated into the larger structures and institutions like the modern-nation of Thai state, the national and global economies and popular culture (see Kitiarsa 2007; 2008; 2009).

The discussion proper begins in the next section, which sketches out the contextual background of *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* in the world of Thai comedy films. The next two sections provide a detailed discussion of nostalgic parody and migrant irony in *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie*, respectively. In the conclusion, I reiterate my central thesis on the filmic storytelling modes of nostalgic parody and migrant irony in the midst of radical social transformations on the ground in Thailand.

***Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* in the context of Thai comedy films**

Yam Yasothon and *Noo Hin the Movie* belong to the much-discussed, post-1997, economic crisis Thai films (Jirattikorn 2003; Knee 2003; Harrison 2005; Chaiworaporn and Knee 2006). Partly ignited by the decision to devalue the Thai currency by the Royal Thai government, the 'Tomyam Kung Crisis' seems to have unleashed new creative energies in the Thai film industry. It has even become a periodical marker of the revival of the Thai film industry; 'a relative boom' (Chaiworaporn and Knee 2006: 58) which saw a proliferation of new productions, creative cinematic ideas and talents, as well as increasing impact of Thai films on domestic and international audiences. Harrison (2005) enthusiastically suggests that films produced in the wake of the 1997 crisis have shown marked improvement: 'when retro cowboy flick 'Tears of the Black Tiger' [...] became the first Thai film ever to receive a public screening at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2001, this clearly signalled that Thailand had arrived in the world of international cinema' (Harrison 2005: 321; see also Harrison 2007). On her part, Chaiworaporn (2002: 459) notes that 'the big change in this post-revival period is the diversity of themes', encompassing biography, epic, action, and drama'.

Ingawani (2006:85) points out that Thai films from the 1950s and 1960s could be called 'escapist lowbrow' cinema (*nang nam nao*) as a significant number of them were 'melodramatic, sex-obsessed, transfixed by aristocratic values', and featured 'unrealistic' themes. It was only in the 1970s, after the uprising of the students-led movement toppled the military government in October 1973, that films of a new type emerged. Imbued with radical social consciousness and concerned with human dignity and justice, these 'New Wave' (*khluen luk mai*) films were 'on the whole concerned with establishing sympathetic auto-ethnographic observations about the socially insignificant' (Chaiworaporn 2002: 449). They deployed the feature-film narrative and 'added the kind of realist touches implied to be missing from the lowbrow *nam nao*.'

Although scholars have examined the different generations of Thai cinema, none so far has focused on Thai comedy film of any period despite the fact that the comedy genre has remained in the mainstream for far longer than the so-called 'New Wave' and other generations of Thai cinema. Cinematic laughter has been ignored (along with its social commentary, as well as cultural or political implications), perhaps due to the apparent nonsensical purpose of comedy films, despite the fact that the latter is a genre with proven market success. Comedy and its spirit have never died. They have survived all political and socioeconomic weathers, including military dictatorship in the 1960s, political turbulence in the 1970s, economic boom-time in late 1980s and early 1990s, and the recent economic and political crisis in the 2000s. Most can be classified as 'cheaply and quickly made B-grade works' (Chaiworaporn and Knee 2006: 59). The most popular examples cover a range of tropes

including rampaging ghosts and spirit exorcist, teen romance, new country-bumpkin military recruits and funny transvestites. Thai comedy films on old-fashioned village life and migrant adventure that employ a strong regional Thai-Lao dialect are considered rare breeds.

Both *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* sell cinematic versions of stereotypicalized folk and urban humour through the eyes and standpoints of Isan people. It is no secret that Isan-ness or ethnocultural identities of the Thai-Lao people from the Northeastern Thai region are made and consumed as comedic commodities in these two films. Both films' stories and characters were created by two successful personalities in the country's comedy show business and comic publication: Petthai Wongkhamlao (widely known by his stage name as Mum Chokmok) and Phadung Kraisri (widely known by his cartoonist pen-name, O) respectively. Both men are native sons of the Northeast. They were born in rural villages in the Northeastern Thai provinces of Yasothon and Ubon Ratchathani, where they grew up. The storyline of *Yam Yasothon* is drawn partly from Petthai Wongkhamlao's childhood memories. Yam is indeed Petthai's other nickname. He has risen to Thai comedy stardom from a rural village in Yasothon province. Noo Hin is a much-loved cartoon character from the comic series of the same title created by Phadung Kraisri or O, a talented cartoonist. Like Mum Chokmok, O came from a rural Isan village in the Ubon Ratchathani province. Both Mum Chokmok and O are in their 40s and at the peak of their careers. These, in short, make *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* auto-ethnographic projects; both were written, performed and narrated by former rural village men who have migrated to cosmopolitan Bangkok, built flourishing careers and become members of the rising middle-class.

Nostalgic parodies in *Yam Yasothon*

Yam Yasothon is a romantic musical comedy set in the Yasothon Province in the late 1960s that tells the story of two young village couples: Thong and Soi, and Yam and Joei. The men, Thong and Yam, are relatives living under the same roof. Joei is Soi's live-in domestic helper, identifiable by a prominent mole on her face. The two young couples' romances are as idyllic as folk-life in a small rice-farming village could imaginably be: together they plough the rice field with water buffaloes, fish in the pond or creek, spend time in a bamboo hut amidst green rice fields, enjoy the annual temple fair and so on. The happy couples, however, soon run into the obstacle that is Soi's dictating and protective aunt, Doktho.

A social climber, Doktho disapproves of her niece's relationship with Thong, strongly encouraging her instead to get close to Yotchai, the son of the wealthy and influential sub-district headman. When Soi continues to see Thong despite her attempts to break them up, Doktho decides to send both Soi and Joei away to her friend in Bangkok. She connives to keep the couples

separated as Soi and Joei spend time in the capital city taking vocational courses to improve their employability in the modern world. Meanwhile, the lovelorn Thong and Yam travel to Bangkok to search for and reunite with their loves. Poorly equipped with knowledge pertinent to modern life in Bangkok, however, they find themselves overwhelmed by the city. They have no idea how traffic lights operate and are confused by Bangkok's complex locations, large-scale building complexes and the sea of strangers from different backgrounds. With only compulsory schooling in their village, they speak Central Thai with a thick Thai-Laos or Northeastern Thai accent, making communication in the city difficult. Unable to find the girls, Yam and Thong return disappointed and empty-handed to their village. Only after several more twists and turns in the plot are the young couples reunited before the film concludes.

On the face of it, *Yam Yasothon* would seem to belong to the category of lowbrow B-grade films discussed by Chaiworaporn and Knee (2006) and Ingawanij (2006). It is kitschy, loud, colourful, exaggerated and perhaps even crude in its use of toilet humour. I would argue, however, that *Yam Yasothon* (and *Noo Hin the Movie*, as we shall see) is not so much a lowbrow B-grade film as a parody of it, one which revisits and pokes fun at the now-vanishing village lifestyle. Adopting the same comedic retro/periodical approach as the internationally acclaimed *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000), *Yam Yasothon* plays on the excessiveness and exaggeration of films from the 1950s and 1960s. It mocks and mimics several existing genres and conventions of entertainment and sociability from a bygone era, which were once taken as channels to express the seriousness of life in the past. As well, it pokes fun at the film-makers' fond memories of the fast-disappearing rural farming world. *Yam Yasothon* achieves this mainly through the cinematic device of 'nostalgic parody'.

Nostalgia usually describes emotional longing for the bygone past and appears in many forms, e.g., longing for some unrecoverable loss, sadness, homesickness, desire for things from the good old days, traditional festivals or rituals, and urban conservation projects of certain architectural or landscape signifying connections with the past. I define nostalgia as (1) an individual or collective act of emotional recollection and longing for things, events or persons from the past, and (2) a planned sociocultural project to revisit the shared past through historically or culturally marked events or objects at the societal level. The key point in most nostalgic projects at both individual and collective levels is that the idea of pastness is always shaped by certain sets of ideological tropes and purposes. People cannot revive and revisit their historical past entirely and matter-of-factly. In order to relive the past, the fragmented portion of it needs to be reconstructed and represented to serve the present purpose and interest. Therefore, any nostalgia project is unavoidably embedded in the politics of fragmented representation.

By contrast, parody is a filmic trope that displays how nostalgia is perceived and expressed. By definition, parody means a way of making fun or spoofing target persons, institutions, situations and things. Acts of imitating, mimicking,

mocking or satirizing something serious or sacred for humorous purposes are common themes in many types of arts, including film, literature and music. Parody is an important point of departure to think about comedy film. Matthews (2000: 5) suggests that:

parody does not have a distinctive narrative pattern – unlike, for instance, romantic comedy with its predictable happy ending. Instead, parody is a *mode* of comedy which appears in stand-up, sketch comedy and sitcom as well as feature films. Parody can be distinguished by the way it makes jokes drawing on conventions of other genres and forms.

From this definition, three underlying properties of parody can be discerned. First, parody does not exist by itself: it comes into existence only through some parasitic relationship with other comedic genres, forms and mediums. Second, parody plays on other existing forms: it apparently makes fun out of other pre-existing forms of comedy by adding some articulating or twisting touches into them. In so doing, it heightens ‘awareness of the conventions of particular genres’ (Matthews 2000: 12). Finally, parody by nature is intertextual: it needs to deal with different kinds of textual situations, integrate them and represent them with different manners and purposes. Sometimes, ‘they also employ self-referentiality, heightening audiences’ awareness that they are watching a film by breaking conventions of realist representation’ (Matthews 2000: 13).

Yam Yasothon provides ample evidence to show that imitating or mocking old-fashioned rural stereotypes and serious romantic love stories is an effective way of producing nostalgic parody, which in turn produces laughter. To begin with, the film’s comedic imitation of the past is present in its very structure: the whole story is announced and summarized by a designated on-stage announcer, whose job is to verbally remind the audience about where they are in the plot. This imitates the announcer’s pivotal role in folk performances, such as *mo lam* (Thai-Laos folk opera) and the *lukthung* musical band.² Second, scripted dialogues and actions of most characters consist of some abridged versions of old-fashioned flowery language once popularly adopted in love-letter and romantic poem writing, and in the performance of romantic roles in Thai-Lao folk drama (*mo lam ruang*). Third, masculine aggression is virtually eradicated and replaced by excessive politeness in verbal exchanges and social mannerisms. Big men and local bandits (*nakleng*), one of the trademarks of B-grade films in the 1960s and 1970s, are transformed into humorous figures with extraordinarily feminine traits or harmless cronies. More often than not, ill-intended words are neatly hidden or inserted in the same sentence with words indicating politeness.

As further illustration of nostalgic parody, consider the ways in which *Yam Yasothon* cleverly plays on two existing popular teen slangs: *choei* and *ver*. Both slangs are of Central Thai origin and are used nationwide as part of everyday language, including mass media. The former emerged after the Second World War to designate persons, things or ideas that are outdated or old-fashioned (e.g., old-fashioned uncle or *lung choei*). By contrast the latter, which came into usage around the mid 1980s, is coined from the English word ‘over’

to denote, literally, 'too much' or 'too excessive'. Both terms are basically used to describe different types of attitude and norms. A *choei* person is usually characterized as someone who is left behind in the passage of time or who refuses to catch up with fashionable modern things and trends, whereas a *ver* person adopts a somewhat opposite approach to life. A *ver* person is likely to be excessive and obsessive about embracing modernity and updating him/herself with the latest trends.

In the everyday Thai-language idiom, both terms are powerful and widely used to describe a wide range of everyday-life social activities. They are used colloquially to justify not only fashionable or unfashionable behaviour, ideas, or things, but also to judge something as socially acceptable or unacceptable. The meanings of both slangs seem contrastingly different but they could be fittingly complementary to each other in comedy gags and acts. In other words, both slangs signify two opposite poles of attitude and outlook toward the process of modernization among the Thai populace. They unveil the Thai people's modern consciousness of place (*kala*) and time (*thesa*) (see Van Esterik 2000) as an eternal backdrop of modernity. They are key ingredients in *Yam Yasothon*, which uses the notions of *choei* and *ver* extensively to maximize cinematic ridicule and laughter of the 'stereotypical ideas of rural folk' (Lee 2009:100). The chief way to do so is to heighten the audience's awareness of the extreme literal meaning and cultural connotation of both slangs by adding some extent of excessiveness and exaggerated-ness into the filmic speech-acts. Key examples include an emphasis on old-fashioned love-letter language, old-style temple fair entertainment, old-fashioned costumes, village life in the days before electricity and paved roads, and hyper-feminine bodily gestures in some characters.

Of course, these kitschy *choei* and *ver* features in *Yam Yasothon* are neither the social norm today nor a faithful recuperation of the past. The bright neon-coloured costumes worn by the actors playing rice farmers and their over-the-top dialogues do not exist anywhere in real life situations now or four decades ago. Rice farmers have never worn such colourful costumes. Although traditional villagers in the region preferred bright colours in their old-fashioned silk fabric and temple fair decoration, they have never used red long-sleeved shirts or orange pants working in the muddy rice fields with water buffaloes. It is precisely because of, rather than despite, this incongruence that viewers find the excesses of *Yam Yasothon* comedic.

Notions of *choei* and *ver* are also creatively manifested in the use of language in *Yam Yasothon*. Take for example the scene where Yam and Joei go fishing in a pond and the dialogue that ensues when they have to go into the water to retrieve by hand any fish that might be trapped in the net. In the water close to Yam, Joei, eager to help, manages to grab a strange catfish (*pla duk*) that turns out to be Yam's private part:

Joei: Look Phi Yam, my dear! I have caught a big catfish.

Yam: Damn it, you stupid head. It is my very own catfish. Get your hands off my fish now. It is very painful.

Joei: Oh! Now I know why the catfish I just caught has no spines on its fins. Your fish is quite big, darling.

The same cinematic ridicule and laughter, derived from excessively polite language that is nonetheless wittily mocking or rebuking, applies also to the other couple, Thong and Soi, who are so madly in love that they hug, cuddle and kiss whenever they are out of Doktho's censorious sight. In one scene, Soi romantically requests that Thong wade into chest-high water to pluck a lotus flower for her, to which Thong readily agrees. Standing on a wooden bridge next to the pond, Soi gives her lover instructions on which of the many flowers she wants picked but the latter keeps getting it wrong until she loses her patience:

Soi: My dearest Phi Thong, what a good-looking person you are, but you are also *ta thua* [literally, peanut-eyed]. Your vision is so poor. Even from a short distance, you can't see the lotus flower I wish you to pick for me.

Thong: Oh, my dear Nong Soi, why do you develop such a *pak ma* [literally, a dog's mouth or bad mouthing] disposition? You did not point out clearly enough which flower you wanted, yet you blame me for having bad eyesight.

These nostalgic-parodic examples of village love and romanticism in *Yam Yasothon* are clearly at odds with the 'high class' or bourgeois notion of love and romanticism. The former turns the latter on its head, transforming what are normally 'serious' subjects into matters of ridicule and laughter. Indeed, the rural young lovers' romantic mood is very *ver*. Never barefacedly mad or angry at each other, the couples always iron out differences and disagreements sweetly. When Thong works in the muddy rice field under the hot sun, Soi lovingly shades him from the sun and wipes his sweat with a handkerchief. In addition, male-female roles in pursuing and initiating sex are parodically reversed. Joei takes all the initiatives and is in control of her relationship with Yam, who is relegated to the feminine, submissive, receptive role. Yam even cries as if he were a young virgin girl after being forced to have sex with Joei. In this sudden gender reversal, Joei, temporarily adopting the male role, consoles Yam. She promises to take care of him and tells him to stop crying and get dressed. She then proceeds to remind him that Thong and Soi are in another hut and that it is time to go home. When the two couples meet up, Joei even congratulates Thong and Soi loudly when she learns that they had accomplished three rounds of sexual intercourse.

At the discursive level, love in *Yam Yasothon* is often jokingly compared to or mentioned in the context of bodily excrements. Love and sex are substituted with or equated to bodily needs. Life cannot be sustained without natural bodily functions, so young men and women cannot live without their loved ones. With this logic, love can be placed side by side with some

substances of normally disgusting bodily discharge like pee, fart and shit. Take, for instance, the scene in which Yam, after returning home one day from the rice field, gets extremely annoyed with Thong and Soi's ultra-romantic daily departures and decides to tell them off nicely:

Yam: You two may go home now! You guys won't drop dead instantly because you have to stay apart from each other for only one night. Soi, do not be afraid that Thong, my nephew, would see other women. You are always on his mind. Whenever he pees, your face is on his mind. Whenever he farts, your face is on his mind. Whenever he releases himself in the morning, your face is still on his mind.

Yotchai, the headman's son whom Doktho wants Soi to marry, too, uses the analogy of love as bodily discharge. Yotchai complains to his parents that he cannot wait any longer for the day when Soi would become his wife. He wants to know when his parents would go and ask Doktho for Soi's hand in marriage on his behalf. His love, he tells his parents, is overwhelming:

Yotchai: I always think of my dear, Nong Soi, whenever I inhale and exhale. Whenever I eat, I do really miss Nong Soi. Whenever I fart, I do really miss Nong Soi. Whenever I shit, I do really miss Nong Soi. I can't live my life without her any more".

In addition to pee, fart and shit, love is also comparable to ear excrement (*khi hu*), another form of bodily waste and discharge. This time love blinds the disgusting side of this excrement, as the following scene demonstrates. In the bamboo hut surrounded by green rice fields, with the transistor radio playing *lukthung* music by his side, Thong is lying on Soi's lap, while the latter cleans his ear with the shaft of a rooster feather. With Thong in ecstasy as a result of Soi's effort, Soi pulls out the dirty shaft and smells it lovingly. 'How does my ear smell, Nong Soi?' asks Thong. 'It smells so good. Even if your ear is infected, I believe the smell will still be fragrant', Soi sweetly replies to her lover.

Yam Yasothon plays on notions of *choei* and *ver*, nostalgically parodying old-fashioned rural stereotypes and serious romantic love stories to maximize laughter. But the film does more than generate laughter. Just as it cinematically re-presents a past time that is lost, it also reminds viewers of contemporary Thai village life in transition, of it being transformed by modernity radiating outward to rural areas from cosmopolitan Bangkok. The film shows that, in the face of the modern, rural men are doing less well than the women. In Bangkok, whose modern ways Thong and Yam are unable to relate to when they visit the city for the first time, Soi and Joei thrive. Sent away from the village to Bangkok, the girls learn typewriting, conversational English, dressmaking and beauty by taking vocational courses to improve their employability. Joei even goes for plastic surgery to remove the prominent black

mole on her face, ridding herself of what has been a blemish on her beauty. By the time the girls return to rural Yasothon, they have already become sophisticated modern women.

Village women such as Doktho and Naiyana (the madam/wife of sub-district head and Yotchai's mother) are also portrayed as well-adjusted, modern women. They have adopted urban clothing fashion and become far more well-versed in capitalistic ideas and the English language than their male counterparts. English is considered a language of western-style modernity in Thailand. Doktho, for example, is a moneylender in the market who is successful enough to hire two domestic workers to help her. When speaking, she tries to imitate the speech of educated, middle-class, urban Thais by mixing some common English terms into her Thai-Lao dialect. Although the film pokes fun at her awkward code-switching and poor translation (of local words into English and vice versa), a common gag in most Thai comedy, village women like Doktho and Joei show a strong desire to embrace and articulate modern ideas or things of Western or foreign origins. Their success makes the village men seem awkward and slow to prepare and adjust to the rapid pace of modern lifestyle.

Migrant ironies in *Noo Hin the Movie*

While *Yam Yasothon* reminds viewers of village life in transition and young rural workforces on the verge of massive labour migration to urban centres, especially Bangkok, *Noo Hin the Movie* tells the story of the contemporary generation of young girls who travel to Bangkok to become full-time migrant workers in the capital's bourgeois households, restaurants and factories. The film stimulates laughter through what I call acts of 'migrant irony', which I define as humour or ridicule generated through the incongruence between the actual reality of migrant workers in low-paying employment, on the one hand, and, on the other, their actions, ranging from unsophisticated and dumb to witty and heroic.

Along with nostalgia and parody, irony is a key term that helps us to better understand comedy film. Irony is a form of crafting, expressing and perceiving meanings of dialogues and social interactions, which works well with comedy films. According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online, irony is an English term derived from *eironeia* (literally, simulated ignorance) in Greek. It means two things: '(1) the expression of meaning through the use of language which normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous effect and (2) a state of affairs that appears perversely contrary to what one expects'.³ From these general definitions, I define irony in the context of this discussion as a source of humour, ridicule and light sarcasm that is generated through words and speech-acts conveying meanings that are opposite to their literal senses.

Although there are several types of irony (e.g., dramatic, tragic), it is comedic irony that is widely discussed in film studies and literature (see Vandaele 2002). For example, Palmer (1994: 15) argues that laughter does not necessarily

indicate a joke – it might mark embarrassment. Laughter could also be taken as a form of permitted disrespect. Rosaldo (1987: 67) shows some ironic politics of laughter through the example of a Czech general who was forced to leave his homeland and eventually found himself working as a janitor in Chicago. ‘He was pathetic. He lived in misery all week long and on Sundays put on his military uniform and reminisced with old friends about bygone days. His life was no joke’. Ironic qualities of such a person and situation are what I will be tracing through *Noo Hin the Movie*. As we shall see, migrant life in this comedy film is also no joke!

Migrant irony is highly conditioned by the fact that migrant workers who grew up in the countryside village setting are removed from their home village to earn a living in strange city environments. It is an irony of encounters between rural migrants and Bangkok’s western-style modernity. In light-hearted comedic manners, migrant irony reflects a process of self-identity crafting for the migrant workers themselves. This makes their migrant selfhood an ongoing act of negotiation and projection in urban contexts, as illustrated by Noo Hin, the protagonist in *Noo Hin the Movie*.

Providing an innocent and optimistic view of migrant life in Bangkok in the 2000s, the film revolves around Noo Hin, a young teenage girl and a comic menace from Ubon Ratchathani. It opens with Noo Hin’s damaging chase of an imaginary lizard, which is considered a local delicacy for Isan villagers. She runs across the dry rice field, rides on the back of a young male buffalo and runs riot into an open-door festival. She causes heavy damage to vendors’ and village properties, and is subsequently punished by her parents. Later, when the family has no food to eat and her parents see some migrant villagers returning from Bangkok, they remind Noo Hin that she is old enough to help support her family. Noo Hin finally decides to go to Bangkok and, after failing to get a job in the factory, gets hired as a housemaid by a well-to-do family. There, despite being a comic menace with a propensity for causing chaos, she is hardworking, self-confident, sincere and witty. Noo Hin is more than capable of doing her daily chores and her employers are pleased with her performance. Through her own efforts, she even manages to save one of her employer’s daughters, Khun Milk, a model-wannabe, from being exploited by a nude photographer, a son of a wealthy sponsor of the modelling contest that Khun Milk hopes to win.

Despite her skills, Noo Hin is looked down upon whenever she goes out in the city, especially when attending social functions with her employer’s two beautiful daughters, Khun Milk and Khun Som-o. Migrant irony in *Noo Hin the Movie* in fact starts with her job description and her struggles to create an identity for herself in Bangkok as *phu chatkan ban* (literally, house manager). She wants this self-proclaimed job title to replace the derogatory *khon chai* (literally, servant or house maid). Despite her village background, Noo Hin is no pushover. She is not afraid to speak her mind and she will not back off from what she believes is right. For instance, when she is called *khon chai*, she bravely corrects the ‘hi-so’ (high society) people, insisting that she is a

professional house manager, not a servant. In a way, she is proud of her profession and embraces it as her self-identity regardless of other people's attitude towards it. It is a job that gives her the much-needed salary to support her family in her poverty-stricken home village.

In many respects, *Noo Hin the Movie* can be taken as a critique of Bangkok from the migrant workers' ironic standpoints. The film poses critical but funny comments about the modern lifestyle of wealthy Bangkokians. In a letter to her mother, Noo Hin writes that she does not understand many strange public cultures and pastimes that she encounters in cosmopolitan Bangkok. Bangkokians look quite friendly but are ready to fight all out over sale items, such as ladies' underwear. She notes that many young ladies are crazy about applying whitening lotions and creams to their armpits, and are happy to show off their hairless whitened armpits in public. She is quite shocked to witness whitened armpit contests among young ladies in popular shopping malls. Noo Hin finds all this perplexing, just as she is perplexed that her employer's two daughters, Khun Milk and Khun Som-o, should be obsessed about gaining that perfect body figure associated with professional models on TV and fashion catwalks. In her eyes, Khun Milk and Khun Som-o are already body-perfect angels; they are leggy, busty, smooth skinned and curvy. Khun Milk's name, in fact, hints at this. 'Milk' is a fashionable Thai nickname for girls, which is derived from the English word. Noo Hin and most Lao-speaking Isan people pronounce it as 'Miw'. There is a double meaning in the Thai translation of this term as 'nom'. On the one hand, it means 'milk', as in the healthy liquid drink produced by both humans and animals. On the other hand, it also refers to female breasts. When Noo Hin gets to know Khun Milk for the first time, she laughs out loud because Khun Milk's nickname matches so well with her voluptuousness. In short, life in Bangkok is as much an amazement as it is a puzzle for Noo Hin, a young teenager from an Ubon rural village.

Noo Hin's life in Bangkok demonstrates the lifestyle of a lowly migrant side by side with that of the extremely well-off. Noo Hin works and lives like most migrants from the countryside in Bangkok. They have different ways of life from their middle or high-class employers. They retain their rural village identities through their food, music, clothing and pastimes. They are also proud of their ethnocultural roots as *khon Isan* (literally, Isan people). We see these qualities reflected by Noo Hin's tastes and values. When she meets Khun Milk for the first time and is offered a job as a housemaid, she does not accept it grovellingly but with a list of working conditions, which include no household chores from 8:30 p.m. onward, the prime time for TV drama (*lakhon tivi*). Like thousands of housewives and young and old women throughout Thailand, Noo Hin is addicted to the popular *lakhon tivi*, especially the ones featuring lowbrow love-triangle stories involving the hero and two rival heroines. Noo Hin also loves Isan village food, especially grilled chicken (*kai yang*), papaya salad (*som tam*), spicy and sour minced meat salad (*lap*), and glutinous rice (*khao noew*). In the market or around her employer's neighbourhood, she prefers to befriend people with the same background as hers.

Noo Hin the Movie well reflects the popular mood of Thailand in the 2000s. To explain this, we need to remember that the first half of the 2000s, which coincides with Thaksin Shinawatra's rule as prime minister, saw Thailand making a relative recovery from the 1997 economic crisis. The Thaksin administration boosted the rural economy through various populist schemes, such as giving 1 million baht to each village nationwide to establish the village fund, providing 30-baht health insurance for all, investing in mega-projects to improve infrastructure (e.g., highways and other public facilities), and providing scholarship loans to poor students. Critics have argued that by giving away cash to the people, Thaksin only stimulated the people to consume more luxury goods and to accumulate more debts without enhancing any genuine productivity (see Phongpaichit and Baker 2004). The 'grass-root' people were, by contrast, extremely happy with Thaksin's populist policy. By 'grass-root' (*khon rak ya*), I refer to the poor working-class people in both urban and rural Thailand.

Popular songs from *Noo Hin the Movie* such as *Phu Chatkan Ban* (House Manager) and *Sao Rong Ngan* (Factory Girl) nicely capture the popular mood of the country in the early 2000s. The first song describes how a migrant worker like Noo Hin becomes a satisfied model domestic worker in Bangkok. The second song idealizes the normally low-paying and health-hazardous factory jobs. It shows how factory work is a dream for young village girls: it provides good fringe benefits, nice uniforms, good salary and a better lifestyle, with many young friends and free time to go shopping. Another song featured in the film, a *lukthung* top-hit during the Thaksin years and Noo Hin's favourite, is *Saphai Nayok* (literally, The Premier's Daughter-in-Law). The song is about Thaksin's only son (Phanthongtae Shinawatra), who was then the most eligible bachelor in the country, a dream partner for young girls in the land. Most, especially those from the countryside, dreamt of becoming the wealthy and powerful Thaksin's daughter-in-law. It was no doubt only a dream and the song was only meant for fun. Significantly, nonetheless, the song remains a social remnant of the Thaksin era, a time when young migrant workers and grass-roots people were on a high, dreaming of good jobs and having a good life in Bangkok and other urban areas.

Noo Hin the Movie testifies to a time of optimism for Thailand's rural population, a period when the rural can-do spirit was high and heroism was possible. A lot of this energy was channelled into the characterization of Noo Hin, whose journey into the middle-class world in Bangkok is marked by her acts of migrant heroism. She is a brave, witty and young diminutive girl, who has a dream of flying on aeroplanes and visiting foreign countries, especially the United States and Western Europe. She takes initiatives, such as submitting pictures and biodata of Khun Milk and Khun Som-o to the organizers of the Thailand Super Model Competition, which her beautiful boss subsequently wins. She fights off the enemy's homosexual cronies to save Khun Milk from abduction. Along the way, she heroically saves young girls from the

countryside who have been forced into child labour in a toy factory. When she tricks one of the homosexual gangsters, Noo Hin relies on her wits and identity as an Isan village girl. The gangster, who turns out to be a young migrant from a neighbouring village, shares his migrant story: how he was put in charge of overseeing the factory's child workforce, how the gang leader paid for the plastic surgery he underwent to makeover his appearance, and so on. To this, Noo Hin replies:

Noo Hin: My brother, the plastic surgery not only changed your look, but also altered your heart. Your heart is getting darker, even though your face looks better. Gone forever is your generosity and kind heart as an Isan person. It is shameful that you have forgotten your roots.

Conclusion

Both *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* confirm the idea that 'humour is an ordinary, everyday activity' (Mulkay 1988: 7). They are made out of ordinary materials about ordinary people who have become migrant workers or displaced persons in Bangkok and other urban areas. The films are also a set of ethnographic texts that, when read against the timeframe covering the 1960s to the 2000s, show us critical moments of social transition in Thailand, a time when more and more rice-farming villagers (*chao rai*, *chao na*, or *chao ban*) are becoming urban-based dwellers or grass-root migrant workers. Simultaneously, read in the narrower context of the Thaksin era, *Yam Yasothon* and *Noo Hin the Movie* offer us a cinematic sense of the popular mood of the time, a time when rural folks were in high spirits and still able to mock and poke fun at themselves. Laughter as an utterance of their hope and growing confidence was abruptly stopped midway when Thaksin was removed in the 2006 military coup. When the Thai political crisis turned violent in the late 2000s, migrant parody and laughter became false signs of hope and confidence that the Thaksin administration promised in the first half of the 2000s.

What makes the films' kitschy revisiting of the rural past and narratives of migrant adventures so funny? As I have argued, they ignite laughter through the filmic modes of nostalgic parody and migrant irony. No doubt shaped by their makers who are of Thai-Laos or Northeastern Thai village origins, both films poke fun at the old-fashioned village past but firmly place their self-reflexive comedic gaze on the contemporary ultra-modern, materialistic Bangkok lifestyle. Characters like Yam and Noo Hin help to unveil the socio-cultural meanings of parodic laughter and ironic moments presented in the films. Laughter, generated through the exchange of words, speech acts, physical actions and musical performances, form a core part of the poetics of Isan/Northeast Thai migrant and grass-root selfhood. By laughing deeply, both films reconnect their makers and target viewers to their Thai/Lao ethnocultural roots. By laughing deeply again and again, both films reaffirm their identity

as individuals and workers whose contributions to Thailand's economy, politics, and popular cultural life have been more significant than has been recognized.

Notes

- 1 Except for some popular personal Thai names, the transcription of Thai and Thai-Isan terms follows the Royal Thai General System of Transcription sanctioned by the Royal Institute, which is available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Thai_General_System_of_Transcription (accessed 18 June 2010).
- 2 *Lukthung*, literally, children of the rice field, is a genre of Thai modern music. It is a post-Second World War musical invention, incorporating folk music elements and lyrics with some Western musical instruments and a band with a star vocalist taking centre stage and accompanied by a troupe of young, female dancers. In contrast to the urban middle-class-inspired *lukkrung* (literally, children of the city), *lukthung* has rapidly become a very large-scale, nationwide fan-based business.
- 3 Available at: www.askoxford.com/results/?view=dev_dict&field12668446=irony&branch=13842570&textsearchtype=exact&sortorder=score%2Cname (accessed 7 November 2009).

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Index

- A1 Studios 28
ABS-CBN 190
Abu Bakar Ellah 112–113, 124–125
Aquino, Benigno III 186, 199
Arroyo, Gloria 186, 191, 195
Asa, Miles 195–196, 198–199
Asia Visions 194
Aung San 29–30
Aung Thapyay (The Triumph of Thapyay) 28
auteur cinema 46
- bangsa*: common denotation 93, 113, 118; redefined as power-bloc 118–119; Sabahan efforts to attain *bangsa* status 113, 119–121, 125, 127
Beller, Jonathan 190
Biro Tata Negara (BTN; National Civics Bureau, Malaysia) 101–102
Boa Deng (Red Lotus) 7, 43–48
Brocka, Lino 192, 194
Burmese Way to Socialism 25
Burnt Theater 55, 60–64, 66, 69
Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) 187, 190–191, 200
- Chee Soon Juan 15, 168, 174–175, 181
Chia Thye Poh 169, 177–178
Chinese *see* diaspora
citizen journalist 14–15, 169, 177, 179–181
civic society 170
civil activism 171–173, 181
civil society 170–172
Cold War 3, 78–79, 85
- colonialism 27–29, 98, 157, 187–188
communism 7, 44, 75–76, 79, 86, 97–98, 140–141, 157, 178
- Delotavo, Antipas 188–189
diaspora: Chinese 13, 97, 101–102, 107, 131–133, 138–143, 145, 151; *Việt Kiều* 10, 73–75; Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) or Overseas Contract Worker (OCW) 15, 188–190
Dror, Duki *see* *Journey of Vaan Nguyen*
- Embun* 96, 98–99, 101–102
ethnicity: minorities in Burma/Myanmar 6; race as ethnicity 100; chauvinism 23, 25, 100–101; *see also* *bangsa*
- Films Act 15, 168, 171, 175–176, 182
Freud, Sigmund 62
- gay *see* homosexuality
Gie 13, 130–145
Guests in Shanland 6, 33–34, 36
- Hanuman 56–60, 63, 69
Heider, Karl 134–135, 142–143
Ho Choon Hiong 180
Hoàng, Đoàn *see* *Oh, Saigon*
Hollywood 5, 12, 26, 45, 48, 78, 189
homosexuality 26, 36, 65, 77–78, 152, 190, 215–216
- Internal Security Act 151, 173, 177–179
Isan 203–204, 213–217
Israel 78–81

- Jeyaretnam, J. B. 168, 182
Journey of Vaan Nguyen 75, 78–84
- Kanlaya, Dara 45–46
 Khmer Rouge 7–8, 53–54, 67
 Kodao Productions 197–198
 Kuomintang 29
- Leftenan Adnan* (Lieutenant Adnan)
 96–98, 102
 Lesmana, Mira 131–132
 lumpen proletarianization 191–192, 199
- Mankekar, Purnima 25
 masculinity 54–61, 63–66, 69, 132–133,
 141–142, 208
 mass criticism 197
 Mayday Productions 194–199
 Media Development Authority 153,
 175–176, 179, 181
 Melucci, Alberto 172–173, 176, 181
 Mendoza, Brillante 192–193
 migrant irony 204, 212–217
 migration: rural-urban migration in
 Thailand 204, 206–207, 212–217;
 illegal immigrants in Sabah 122–124
 military 5–6, 8–9, 13, 18, 23–24, 29–35,
 55–57, 65–66, 78, 86–88, 97, 133,
 203, 205, 216
 Ministry of Information,
 Communication and Arts (MICA,
 Singapore) 147, 153, 175, 179
 morality 136, 144
 Myint, Mary 30
 Myint Maung 32–33
- Nation Builders* 169, 180
 Ne Win 6, 23–25, 34–35
 neoliberalism 4, 9, 14–17, 61, 66,
 73–75, 78, 88–90, 149–151, 153–154,
 163–165, 187–190, 199–200
Nerakhoon (Betrayal) 48
 New Order 13, 131–133, 135–138
Noli me Tangere 187–188
Noo Hin the Movie 203–206, 212–217
 Norodom Sihamoni 65
 Norodom Sihanouk 53–54, 65
 nostalgic parody 17, 206–212
- OCW film 189–190
 offshore call centers *see* Business
 Process Outsourcing
Oh, Saigon 75–76, 85–90
 Ondoy (typhoon Ketsana) 186, 200
One Night After the War 53–60, 67–69
Orang Kita (Our People) 12, 112–117,
 121, 123–127
Orang Kita 2 (Our People 2) 116–117
 overseas contract worker (OCW) *see*
 diaspora
- Palay, Seelan 180–182
Paloh 97, 100, 102–103
 Panh, Rithy 7–8, 53–55, 64–65, 67
 Paramaditha, Intan 132–133, 141–142
 ‘Parrot’ U Sunny 28
 phallus 66, 68
 piracy (of film) 5, 15, 78
 Pol Pot 8, 54–55
 post-Suharto era 12–13, 131, 133,
 143–144
 prostitution 10, 54–55, 68
PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin (PTI: Love
 Without Permission) 12, 112–113,
 121–125
PTI: Percintaan Tanpa Izin 2 (PTI:
 Love Without Permission 2) 123
Puteri Gunung Ledang (Princess of
 Mount Ledang) 10–11
- queer 65; *see also* homosexuality
- race *see* ethnicity
 racism 80–81, 86–87, 94, 100, 107–108
ramvong 57–58
Reamker 56–60, 63, 69
 reconciliation 75, 81–82, 86–90
 Republic of Vietnam 73–74, 81–82,
 84–86
 Riza, Riri 12–13, 130–134, 136,
 138–140, 142
 Rizal, Jose *see* *Noli me Tangere*
- Sabaidee Luang Prabang* (Good
 Morning Luang Prabang) 7, 48–50
 Said Zahari 169, 177–180
 Salem, Icy 194, 197–198

- Savanmacha *see* Hanuman
 See, Martyn 168–169, 173–182
 Seow, Francis T. 173, 177
 Shinawatra, Thaksin 17, 203, 215–216
 ShoeMart (SM) 189
Shwezayan 6, 34–37
 Sine Patriyotiko (Sipat) 194–196, 198–199
 Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) 168, 174, 177
Singapore GaGa 163–164
Singapore Rebel 15, 168–169, 173–177, 179, 181
 Socialist Republic of Vietnam 82
 Soe Hok Gie *see* Gie
 Som Ock Southiponh 7, 43–44, 47–49; *see also* *Boa Deng*
 Somchit Vongsam Ang 44–45, 47
 Star Cinema 189–190
 Suharto 12–13, 131, 133, 136, 142
 Sukarno 136–138, 142, 144
 Tadiar, Neferti 186
 Thai-Lao relations 41–42, 49–50
Tout va bien 47
 Tudla Productions 194–195, 197–199
 U Thuka 30
 United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) 95, 99–102, 105–108
Việt Kiều *see* diaspora
 Villanueva, Raymund 197–198
 weaving 47, 61–62, 68–69
 World War II (Second World War) 3, 24, 29, 32, 79, 208
Yam Yasothon 203–212, 216–217
 Yasmin Ahmad 11, 104
 YouTube 11, 15, 169, 179–180, 198
Zahari's 17 Years *see* Said Zahari

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