

Political Censorship and the Contestation of Nation-Building Discourse: A Survey of Cultural Productions regarding the Malayan Communist Struggle in Malaysia After 2000

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This paper examines the development and situation of cultural productions regarding the Malayan Communist struggle in Malaysia from 2000 onward. The dispute and controversy surrounding the Communist struggle in Malaya were related to the Malayan Communist Party's position and role in the country's nation-building in which the regime's official discourse continued to place the Party as a terrorist organization, though ex-Communists claimed the Party had accelerated the nation's independence and thus demanded recognition in the country's nation-building. The UMNO regime implemented selective commemoration of the history and memory of nation-building and hindered publications regarding the Communist struggle. However, the state seemed to be more tolerant of Chinese-language Communist publications as it felt these were less influential among the Malay community. Nevertheless, the state imposed strict censorship on Communist-themed films, and several films providing alternative visions of the Communist struggle were banned outright by the Censorship Board. Thus, film censorship became the repressive state apparatus to cement UMNO's agenda. Despite heavy political censorship, a new generation of Malaysian cultural workers felt a conscientious need to diversify the nation-building discourse through their cultural creations and participation.

Keywords: Chin Peng, Communist-themed films, Film Censorship Board of Malaysia, Malayan Communist Party, nation-building, *The Last Communist*

Introduction

The year 2018 was important for the Malaysian political landscape. The ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN; National Front), which had ruled the country since its indepen-

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dence from the British in 1957, was defeated for the first time by the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope), led by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Even though the tables were turned in 2020 during the so-called “Sheraton Move,” which saw the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan government, the 2018 general election marked a major change from the hegemony of the dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the de facto ruling power within BN. Historically, UMNO maintained its power by manipulating interethnic political conflicts and championing ethnic Malay rights and interests, positioning itself as protector of the rightful indigenous “owners” of the country (Vasil 1971, 2).

In this changing political landscape, civil society groups seized the opportunity to push the political boundaries and appeal for a more egalitarian political system and greater freedom of speech. During the 2018 Cooler Lumpur Festival held in Kuala Lumpur, the organizers decided to screen a banned documentary film about the Malayan Communist Party (MCP, sometimes also referred to as the Communist Party of Malaya) titled *The Last Communist* (*Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*, 2006), directed by the Malaysian independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad. Although this documentary survived the scrutiny of the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia in 2007, it was eventually banned after the Malay-language newspaper *Berita Harian* criticized the Censorship Board for releasing a film that supposedly paid tribute to an MCP leader—in this case, the life and struggle of the late Chin Peng (the alias of Ong Boon Hua), the MCP’s long-serving secretary-general. However, the organizers failed to obtain permission for the screening (Azril 2018). While the filmmaker and the organizers had anticipated more relaxed censorship enforcement under the new regime, the topic of the Communist insurgency, the main target of repression during the so-called Malayan Emergency—which began in 1948 and lasted for 12 years—was still deemed sensitive and controversial for Malaysian politics and society.

The banning of *The Last Communist* was part of the political censorship of MCP-related cultural productions in post-independence Malaya/Malaysia. Under this premise, this paper examines the development and situation of cultural productions regarding the Communist struggle in Malaysia after 2000. First, this paper will present a background overview of the intertwining of the Communist struggle, nation-building, and the ethnic politics of Malaysia, which was demonstrated in the regime’s selective commemoration of the history and memory of nation-building and the road to independence. Next, it will explore the selective tolerance of MCP-related publications according to language. Third, it will conduct a comprehensive discussion on the censorship of Communist-themed films in Malaysia. Special attention will be given to the roles of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Film Censorship Board as the state apparatuses in fortifying the ruling regime’s

official discourse and power status quo. Last, it will highlight the efforts of the new generation of Malaysian cultural workers in the reinvention and diversification of the national imaginaries of the country's Communist past and the nation-building discourse. Overall, this paper tries to show that the histories and memories of the Communist struggle have been in a contested state in which the ruling establishments seek to fortify their power position by marginalizing and silencing the decolonization contributions of the Communists and the Left, while the latter struggle tremendously to reclaim their rightful place in the country's attainment of independence. This contestation is demonstrated in the area of cultural productions such as films, literature, and stage performances.

Communist Struggle and Contestation of the Nation-Building Discourse

Generally, the Communist struggle is a terrain of "memory-contestation" in contemporary Malaysian politics (Show 2020). Memory has become an integral element in the politics of remembering and forgetting (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003, 2), in which the regime relies on forging an exclusionary rightist Malay nationalism. The dispute and controversy surrounding the MCP are related to the Party's position and role in the country's nation-building. From a broader perspective, the MCP's history and Communist activities are an essential element of Malaysia's political, social, and economic development. The MCP formed the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) to assist the British in their fight against the Japanese occupation during the Second World War but British suppression of the Party's postwar activities eventually drove it underground (Stockwell 2006, 284–285). After the war, the MCP allied with a variety of groups, including the leftist political coalition PUTERA-AMCJA (Pusat Tenaga Rakyat [Center of People's Power] and the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action), and through various fronts and alliances negotiated with the returning British on various matters, including independence. However, the British preferred working with less radical elements, such as the eventual first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman (leader of UMNO), and members of his Alliance Coalition (the forerunner of BN, which replaced the Alliance in 1973) (Cheah 2009). The MCP formed its Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) and launched its armed struggle in 1948, when a state of Emergency was declared by the British. The armed confrontation between the two belligerents cost tens of thousands of lives, including many civilians. Many of the prisoners taken during this undeclared war by the British were deported to China, as the majority of the Communists were ethnic Chinese. By eliminating the Communist threat and supporting the pro-British

UMNO and its Alliance Coalition, the British successfully retained their economic foothold in post-independence Malaya. The Alliance Coalition negotiated the terms of independence with the British. A constitution consolidating the Malay political supremacy was scripted, and Malaya achieved independence in 1957. Although the Communists demanded recognition and a place in the country's nation-building by claiming they had weakened the dominance of British imperialism (Communist Party of Malaya 1980, 18) and forced the British to the bargaining table (Chin *et al.* 2003, 493–494), the UMNO-led former regime's official discourse continued to place the MCP and its participants as terrorists and saboteurs. Even though the MCP officially terminated its armed struggle in 1989 after signing a peace accord with the Malaysian government, facilitated by the Thai military at Hat Yai in Southern Thailand, the resulting historical scars continued to be a taboo in Malaysian politics.

Generally, the Communist struggle is politically controversial because it is heavily intertwined with the politics of ethnicity in Malaysia. Scholars generally agree that Communism was first brought to Malaya by the radical faction within the Kuomintang, during the period of the first united front between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party as initiated by Sun Yat-sen in the 1920s (Hanrahan 1954, 7; Lee 1996, 22; Cheah 2012, 14). The earliest Communist activities emphasized fighting for the rights and upgrading the status of laborers—especially Chinese labor. Although fighting for labor rights was the MCP's main objective, the Party tried to speak to general Chinese interests. Thus, scholars have had few problems with defining the MCP as a “Chinese organization” (Yong 1991, 646; Lee 1996, 8; Belogurova 2019, 85). Although there was the existence of the Malay 10th Regiment during the Emergency, it was considered a minor force compared to the ethnic Chinese Communists. Hence, the communal “Chinese versus Malay” narrative came to dominate the Communist struggle's historical discourse, and the events of the Emergency could be conveniently spun as the “outsider immigrant” Chinese attacking and killing the “indigenous” Malays (Short 1970, 1081). This made it easier for the ultranationalist Malays to frame the Communist movement as an invasion by immigrants trying to seize political power from the Malays. Additionally, this “Chinese uprising” was treated as grounds for suspicion of Chinese loyalty to the Malaysian nation-state, adding obstacles to ethnic Chinese seeking their rightful status in the nation-building and hindering their efforts of establishing roots in the land. Concurrently, the Communist past has been frequently exploited by ultranationalist Malays, especially powerful figures from UMNO, to legitimize the its self-appointed role as the guardian of Malay interests from the domination of the Chinese.

Thus, UMNO and right-wing Malay nationalists have tried to skew history and memory to legitimize their primary status in nation-building and Malay ownership of the

land. At the same time, the Malay victimhood during the Emergency and the revival of Communist ideology have been frequently used as fear tactics to lure continued support for the regime from Malaysians, especially Malays. Hari Pahlawan (Warriors or Heroes Day) is celebrated on July 31 every year to commemorate the Malay soldiers who helped to defend Malaya from the Japanese invasion and those who lost their lives during the Emergency fighting the Communist insurgents, while the MCP-led MPAJA resistance and the Chinese hardship under Japanese brutality are marginalized from state commemorations and are not integrated into national memories. The National Monument erected in Kuala Lumpur in 1966 also constituted Communists as enemies of the state and solidifies the Muslim Malay dominancy (Blackburn and Hack 2012, 258). Secondary school textbooks simplify Communists as brutal and dangerous terrorists associated with Chinese interests, while portraying Malays as the only active resistance forces. These textbooks also highlight that Malays were not interested in Communism as Communists did not believe in God and tried to achieve their objectives through violence. The MPAJA's anticolonial role is briefly mentioned in a single paragraph in the textbooks, while the photograph captions also imply that the Chinese-dominant MPAJA was another protentional colonizer (Ting 2009, 46–47).

This “management of the past” by the regime creates a great challenge for the Chinese community in commemorating their ancestors' anti-Japanese efforts. Generally, it is almost impossible for the Chinese-dominated MCP to be considered and included as the country's “liberation war heroes” in the national narrative. In the recent past, some Chinese Malaysians have highlighted the wartime MPAJA's contributions in fighting the Japanese. They have tried to curate their own commemorations by setting up monuments in a Chinese cemetery park and organizing their own event to honor those who sacrificed their lives for the nation's decolonization, even though the state has contested the erection of these monuments (Wong 2007). Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack (2012) have shown that these commemorations never entered the national sphere, and their memories were hardly nationalized. However, they note that Chinese commemorations are better tolerated if they are curated in a pure “Chinese language setting” in which the messages hardly reach non-Chinese Malaysians and those who cannot read and speak Chinese, and commemoration spaces are limited to “Chinese spaces” such as a Chinese cemetery park where Muslim Malays do not visit; thus, their impact on other ethnicities, especially Malays, is minimal (Blackburn and Hack 2012, 278–285).

Constraining the MCP's Legacy in Publications

Although a certain form of commemoration occurs in Malaysia, all activities related to the MCP or Communism are still tightly monitored and under heavy state surveillance. Since Communism is regarded as something from the past and its influence on the general Malaysian public is minimal, the state still tries to use every means and opportunity to reduce and suppress Communist and MCP discourse; a prime example is the state's treatment of MCP leader Chin Peng. Chin Peng, who was branded public enemy number one during the Emergency, was prohibited from setting foot on Malaysian soil by the Malaysian government although the agreement of the 1989 Peace Accord allowed all former Communists to enter Malaysia at least for a short-term trip (*Malaysiakini* 2013a). After Chin Peng's passing in Bangkok in September 2013, the Malaysian government barred his ashes from being brought back for fear that they would be used to commemorate and inspire a monument in his remembrance (Anand 2013). Although Chin Peng was not permitted to return to Malaysia—alive or dead—his memoir, *My Side of History* (Chin *et al.* 2003), can be accessed in the country despite some resistance from the authorities during the early period of its publication. Chin Peng's 527-page memoir, co-authored by the Singapore-based writers Ian Ward and Norma Miraflor, was the Communist leader's effort to tell "his side of the history" regarding the Communist struggle and the Emergency. The book's publisher stepped over a sensitive line, provoking a negative response from the Malaysian government. When the book's first consignment was transported to Malaysia from Singapore, it was seized by Malaysian customs, who claimed to be following government orders. However, the government later allowed the book's distribution (Wong 2004a). In 2004 the volume was translated into Chinese. Nevertheless, the underlying controversy resurfaced as the publisher filed a lawsuit against the Chinese-language newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau* for breach of contract as the newspaper was assigned to serialize the book's Chinese version. At that time the newspaper was owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association, UMNO's partner in the BN coalition. The newspaper refused to serialize Chin Peng's memoir after it received "a verbal caution and written advice" from the Ministry of Home Affairs. The publisher and newspaper later reached an out-of-court settlement, and the newspaper agreed to resume its commitment to serialize the memoir (Wong 2005).

Another book, *Faces of Courage: A Revealing Historical Appreciation of Colonial Malaya's Legendary Kathigasus Family* (Kathigasus *et al.* 2006), was also challenged by the Malaysian authorities in 2006. The book's protagonist, Sybil Kathigasus, was a Eurasian nurse during the Second World War who aided the anti-Japanese movement with medical supplies and information and was later captured and tortured by the Japanese. Published

by Singapore's Media Master, the same publisher as Chin Peng's memoir, the book includes Sybil Kathigasu's memoir, an essay by Chin Peng about his contact with Kathigasu, and also a research report by Norma Miraflor and Ian Ward. The customs authorities in Johor Bahru, on the Malaysian side of the Malaysia-Singapore border, seized a consignment containing twenty copies of the book that were intended for press reviewers in Malaysia. According to a news report, the customs officers seized the books mainly because the name "Chin Peng" appeared on the cover. According to Ward, the publisher and co-author of the book, *Faces of Courage* was submitted to the Ministry of Home Affairs for approval, but no formal decision was received from the ministry. Thus, the book is not officially banned and can be accessed by readers in Malaysia (Wong 2006).

Chong Ton Sin, the owner of the Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD), a progressive independent Malaysian publisher of academic books with a critical perspective—including memoirs of ex-Communists and research on the Communist struggle and leftist movements in Malaya—asserts that the topic of Communism and leftist movements gradually became less sensitive after the 1989 Peace Accord. Before that, any publication on the MCP or even Mao Tse-tung was deemed politically sensitive, and the publisher risked a jail sentence. The Ministry of Home Affairs, which is in charge of monitoring the publishing culture, has since relaxed its grip on publications regarding MCP and Communism. Instead, it is more focused on publications about religion, especially Islam, and those that are directly critical of the ruling regime and its policies. Thus, most of the Communists' memoirs and research on the Communist struggle published by the company are left untouched by the authorities; no books have been officially banned except for one, the Malay-language version of *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-colonial Struggle* (Khoo and Crisp 2004), an oral history of female Communist cadres who participated in the Malayan anticolonial struggle. Although the Malay-language version of the book was sold for years, it was banned in 2017, when Ministry of Home Affairs officers inspected a book fair.¹⁾ As the English and Chinese versions of the book are not officially banned, the question of language became an important factor for the regime in banning a certain publication that involved MCP. In other words, the UMNO-dominated regime is more sensitive toward Malay-language publications on Communists and Communism as the publications directly engage with Malay readers, who allegedly possess a weaker command of English and cannot read Chinese. It is obvious that the regime is trying to keep Malays away from a deeper understanding of the Communist struggle and confining them to the view of Communists

1) Personal communication, Chong Ton Sin, September 24, 2020.

as alien saboteurs and terrorists.

A similar censorship pattern can be observed in the memoirs of Malay Communists. In 2004, *Utusan Malaysia*—a Malay-language newspaper at the time owned by UMNO—published a few letters from readers questioning the appropriation of the National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), which bore the responsibility for upholding Malay nationalism and enhancing the use of the Malay language in academia, to publish the Malay-language memoirs of two Malay Communist leaders, Shamsiah Fakeh and Ibrahim Chik. The letters urged the university management to investigate the publication's motive and eventually led to the forming of a university committee to probe into the issue (Wong 2004c). Malay-language publications from a government-funded university were deemed too controversial in the eyes of certain anti-Communist Malay quarters. The issue halted other publication projects on Malay Communists and radical movements by the university, and some projects were transferred to SIRD.²⁾

On the other hand, Malaysian Chinese-language publications on the MCP and Communism continued to appear. In 2004, Tiong Hiew King, a timber tycoon in East Malaysia who was also the owner of the Malaysian Chinese-language newspaper *Sin Chew Daily*, launched a Chinese-language book on the MCP titled *The Evergreen Mountain: A Journey of the Communist Party of Malaya* (青山不老——馬共的歷程) (Liew 2004). The book features interviews by journalists with Chin Peng and former Inspector-General of Police Rahim Noor, who was involved in the Hat Yai Peace Accord. Written by journalists and edited by the editor-in-chief of the daily, the book also includes profiles and biographies of Chinese and Malay MCP leaders (Wong 2004b). As the Chinese-language newspaper with the biggest readership in Malaysia, *Sin Chew Daily* tried to tap into the hot topic among the Chinese community when Chin Peng was denied entry into Malaysia.

At the same time, Malaysian Chinese publishers continued to publish stories and autobiographical writings by ex-Communist cadres who shared their experiences participating in student and union movements, the armed insurrection, and their life in the jungle. Some of these writers even had columns in Chinese-language newspapers to share their experiences participating in the Communist struggle. A comprehensive survey of the contents of these publications is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be emphasized that these publications have been left undisturbed by the authorities because they are read primarily by Chinese readers and circulate within Chinese cultural circles, which confirms Blackburn and Hack's (2012) observation regarding the Chinese commemorations discussed above. Commemorations and publications are tol-

2) Personal communication, Chong Ton Sin, September 24, 2020.

erated if their influence is limited to the Chinese community and avoids direct engagement with Malays.

The situation is the same with 21st Century Publisher, which belongs to the 21st Century Malaysia Friendship Association (21世紀聯誼會), an association of ex-Communist cadres. The association has published many Chinese-language autobiographies, memoirs, historical accounts, political viewpoints, and analyses on the MCP and MNLA since 2002. In addition to hard copies, the publisher puts its publications on its official website to take advantage of the relatively free Malaysian cyberspace. Unlike the case of print media, the BN regime pledges not to censor online content, as a way to attract foreign investors into the Multimedia Super Corridor, a project launched by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad during the 1990s (Abbott 2001, 104). However, Show Ying Xin, who has studied the contents of 21st Century Malaysia Friendship Association publications, finds that the association's efforts to contest the official nation-building discourse lean toward defending Chinese rights, memories, and identity from the Malay hegemony, which paradoxically tightens the link between Chinese and the Communist struggle (Show 2020, 113–114). While this development may be seen as a limitation in changing the impression of a “Chinese uprising” in the Communist struggle discourse, the publisher's “Chinese-reader-targeted” and “Chinese-identity-oriented” tendencies do spare its publications from serious state harassment. However, the first volume of *Picture Album: History of Communist Party of Malaya*, which was launched to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Chin Peng's passing, was banned in 2018 by the newly elected government. The picture book features archival photographs of British colonial Malaya, the beginning of the MCP, and the union activities and the role of the MPAJA in fighting the Japanese during the Second World War. The photographs are captioned in Chinese, English, and Malay. Despite the first volume's ban, 21st Century Publisher launched the second volume of this picture book in 2019 in conjunction with the Hat Yai Peace Accord's 30th-anniversary commemoration. Nevertheless, the issue of “smuggling” Chin Peng's ashes into the country, which occurred at the same time, was too controversial,³⁾ and the attention it generated overshadowed the launch of the book. Thus, the authorities left the book undisturbed (Phoon 2019).

Why was the picture book banned but text-based publications spared? Was it

3) In September 2019, a group held a press conference stating that Chin Peng's ashes had been brought back to Malaysia and scattered into the sea and jungle near his birthplace, fulfilling Chin Peng's final wish to return to his homeland. As expected, this announcement provoked a negative response from UMNO, which was on the opposition front. UMNO attacked the newly elected government for changing history by allowing the ashes to be brought back, and demanded that action be taken against those involved. Some retired police associations held a small rally to protest the “revival of Communism” in the country (Faisal 2019).

because photographs and visuals possess a greater ability to breach cultural barriers and are more influential than written words? If so, similar censorship may also be applicable to film as an audiovisual medium. This explains why the Ministry of Home Affairs of Malaysia is very sensitive about films portraying the MCP.

The Banning of Communist-Themed Films

In May 2006, *The Last Communist*, which features a “searching for Chin Peng” theme, was banned from public screening. Prior to the ban, the film was granted a U rating (suitable for all ages) and passed for release without any cuts by the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia. However, the screening was limited to Golden Screen Cinema International Screens, which owned three cinemas with digital projection facilities at the time—two in Kuala Lumpur and one in Penang. Nevertheless, the film was banned by the Ministry of Home Affairs two weeks before its release, after the pro-UMNO conservative newspaper *Berita Harian* published a series of articles accusing the film of glorifying Communism and Chin Peng, even though the newspaper critics and Malay politicians interviewed in the articles had not watched the film. Director Amir Muhammad was then required to conduct a special screening session for the Special Branch unit of the police force, and the Special Branch did not voice any objection to the contents of the film. For a few consecutive days, *Berita Harian* published articles such as interviews with UMNO politicians, pro-UMNO academicians, and filmmakers condemning the director’s motives and questioning the decision of the Censorship Board to approve the film. In her interview, the head of Puteri UMNO—the UMNO female youth wing—questioned the Censorship Board as she insisted the film glorified the Communist leader while there were many more credible people to commemorate instead. The entertainment editor of *Berita Harian*, Akmal Abdullah, who was also running a film comment column in the newspaper, questioned the motives behind the film’s being screened only in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, which he labeled as “Chinese majority areas.” He further commented that Malay filmmakers should make films about the struggle of heroes from their own race (*Malaysiakini* 2006).

In response to the ban, another special screening session was organized for members of the Malaysia Parliament. Many politicians who attended the screening felt that *The Last Communist* was inoffensive and did not endanger public order. However, then Minister of Home Affairs Radzi Sheikh Ahmad, who was from UMNO, defended the ban by asserting that the documentary failed to portray the violent side of Communists, especially the violence of Chin Peng, and could create misconceptions among Malaysians

regarding the Communist struggle. The minister even equated Chin Peng to Osama bin Laden: “it will be like allowing a film portraying Osama bin Laden as a humble and charitable man to be screened in the United States” (Lim 2006). Thus, Malaysia made history by banning a film for not containing enough violence.

Even though Amir Muhammad and the production company appealed the decision, the ban continued. Soon after, Amir resorted to alternative film distribution channels, such as independent bookstores and online streaming services. Amir, a Muslim of Indian descent, in his defense of his film criticized *Berita Harian* for being “ethnocentric and semi-fascist” (*The Sun Daily* May 9, 2006). His subsequent documentary on ethnic Malay ex-Communist members who had settled in Southern Thailand, *Village People Radio Show (Apa Khabar Orang Kampung, 2007)*—which can be considered a sequel to *The Last Communist*—was also banned. The sequel was banned by the Film Censorship Board for several reasons, including the following: “it only shows the opinions and stories from the Communist’s perspective,” “it blatantly criticizes Malaysian Government while insulting the monarchy and the Malays,” and “it touches on the sensitivities and bitter memories of security forces and the victims of Communist atrocity” (Amir 2007).

In August 2013, a feature film titled *The New Village* suffered a similar fate to Amir’s film as it was prohibited from public screening even though it had been reviewed by the Film Censorship Board the year before and been given the green light for screening with no cuts. The film was directed by the Chinese filmmaker Wong Kew Lit and produced by the Malaysian satellite broadcasting giant Astro in collaboration with the director’s production house, Yellow Pictures. As implied by its title, the film’s backdrop is the large-scale resettlement of Chinese squatters in concentration camps named New Villages during the Emergency. The film is a love story between a girl who has been resettled in the titular New Village and a boy who has decided to join the Communist forces in the jungle. The Film Censorship Board eventually reversed its decision after Malay right-wing groups alleged, based on its short trailer, that the film glorified Communism. The UMNO mouthpiece newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* published an article by Awang Selamat, the nom de plume of the paper’s collective editorial opinion, accusing the filmmaker of presenting a “skewed perspective” of history to rejuvenate the campaign calling on the authorities to allow Chin Peng to return to Malaysia (Chin Peng died in Thailand the same year). The article asserted that the trailer showed Britain’s ill treatment of the Chinese while ignoring the predominantly Malay members of security forces killed by the Communists, thus glorifying Communism and the armed struggle. The article also questioned the Censorship Board’s supposed double standards for allowing a film that rewrote history to be screened while postponing the screening of what it saw as the historically accurate Malay(sian) Patriotic Film (discussed in the next section)

Tanda Putera (Ng *et al.* 2013; Yiswaree 2013). Thus, the banning of *The New Village* became more dissentious as it coincided with the postponed screening (three times) of the controversial *Tanda Putera* (Dir. Shuhaimi Baba, 2013), which depicted the May 13, 1969 ethnic riots that took hundreds of lives. The human rights NGO leader Kua Kia Soong slammed *Tanda Putera* for adhering to the UMNO agenda and pinning the riot's responsibility on the Chinese, especially those associated with the Communists and leftist political parties (Kua 2013, 33–34). He also contended that *Tanda Putera* was never banned but strategically withheld by UMNO to avoid losing votes in the 2013 general election (Kua 2013, 38).

Wong Kew Lit and the producers never launched a massive and aggressive defensive campaign against the assaults. They released a press statement asserting that the film was mainly “a period feature film in Mandarin that depicts a forbidden love story,” a token of remembrance for those living in the New Villages during the Emergency (*Malaysiakini* 2013b). Producer Leonard Tee told the Chinese-language press that the film's true intention was to let people know about the history of the New Villages, and not to judge whether decisions taken during this particular period of history were right or wrong, while hoping that the new generation of Malaysians would appreciate the current peaceful environment (*Sin Chew Daily* August 5, 2013). The producers' appeal to the Censorship Board's decision was not successful.

The New Village was part of the boom of commercial local Chinese-language productions in films and television beginning in the new millennium. The setting up of Chinese-language channels on satellite television and the flourishing of Chinese Malaysian artists and filmmakers were enabled by the willingness of Chinese Malaysian audiences to support local Chinese-language productions. Thus, it would not be wrong to say that *The New Village* catered mainly to Chinese Malaysian audiences, given that the topic of New Villages is deeply embedded in Chinese Malaysian history and identity. Although the film was ingrained in the Chinese cultural sphere and targeted Chinese Malaysian audiences, it was banned due to complaints raised by anti-Communist ultra-nationalist Malays. However, two Chinese-language books relating to the film—a novel extracted from the film and film production notes—were never banned and can still be openly purchased in bookstores. This proves that the ruling establishment is much more sensitive toward cinematic productions than Chinese-language text-based publications.

In February 2017 a documentary titled *Absent Without Leave*, which chronicled the history of the Communist struggle in then-Malaya through interviews with ex-Communists, was prohibited from cinema screenings and DVD distribution in Malaysia. The film was banned by the Film Censorship Board for “having elements which may be negative for national development” after it was submitted for the Malaysia International

Film Festival. As a protest against the ban, the production company held a special screening event on Facebook, and the documentary was made available free of charge for a week on YouTube (*Malaysiakini* 2017). This documentary was directed by Lau Kek Huat, a Malaysian-born filmmaker based in Taiwan. In the documentary, Lau tries to trace his family history, especially that of his grandfather, who has been mysteriously absent from the family narrative. In combing through the family stories, the documentary slowly reveals that Lau's grandfather was involved in the Communist struggle in Malaya. The documentary later tries to give a more complete account of Communist history by interviewing exiled ex-Communists residing outside Malaysia.

Lau was disappointed with the ban as it blocked the film from engaging with the Malaysian public, which was his main intention in bringing the film to Malaysia. He denied that the documentary was trying to worship or glorify the MCP and Communism. Instead, he intended the film to be a bridge for communication between various entities that had suffered equally during the Emergency so that wounds could be healed and interethnic reconciliation could be possible (Kuan 2018). His next project, *Boluomi* (2019), his first feature film, again confronted the political taboo of the Communist struggle in Malaysia. *Boluomi* was meant to pair with *Absent Without Leave*. Lau made the film as a gesture of gratitude to the ex-Communists he interviewed in *Absent Without Leave*, and he tried to make use of the stories and information he had gathered during the fieldwork and documentary shooting for his first feature film (Chang 2020). *Boluomi* utilized a dual narrative pattern juxtaposing a story of the relationship between a male Malaysian student and a Filipino female worker in Taiwan set in the 2000s, with the story of a mother and her son during the Malayan Emergency. The 2000s part is a semi-biographical story of Lau as a Malaysian student in Taiwan, while the other is inspired by the experiences of his grandfather and father during the Emergency. Like its predecessor, *Boluomi* was banned; the Censorship Board contended that 27 of its scenes contained elements that “contradict with national policy and tarnishes the government’s sovereignty.” Thus, the film was not allowed for screening, in order to preserve social harmony (HummingBird Production 2020). As a result of the ban, Lau’s films have never been able to generate intensive public engagement and discussion in Malaysia.

Film Censorship as a Means to Safeguard the Regime’s Political Power

According to Robert Rosenstone, visual media such as television and film are important for human understanding of the past in the “postliterate” world, in which people are literate but consume more visual media (Rosenstone 1995, 46). The Ministry of Home

Affairs, which directly controls the Film Censorship Board, is more sensitive toward films depicting visual representations of the Communist struggle. The above-discussed films were accused of glorifying Communism and its leaders and potentially resurrecting Communism in a country where its ideological foothold was already lost. As in the case of the criticisms directed against Amir Muhammad's films, the accusations were made by those who had not even watched the whole film. As a result of these accusations, the Film Censorship Board had to respond and banned the films. Government bodies like the Film Censorship Board normally choose not to go against anti-Communist sentiment and are likely to support the status quo set by the regime in power.

Film censorship in Malaysia is basically a legacy of the British colonial government. While emphasizing the need to hinder Communist ideology from influencing the Malayan people, the colonial censorship practice was to make film a medium to assert colonial ideology and promote the British image in the colonies (Stevenson 1974; van der Heide 2002, 119–122). A former head of research in National Film Development Corporation Malaysia mentioned that British film regulations “shaped the present situation that governs and controls the communication industry in general and the film industry in particular” (Balaraman 2005, 25). The public broadcast service of the newly independent Malayan government (Malaysia was formed in 1963) even adopted the British “colonial service model,” which was originally meant to safeguard the colonial power (Karthigesu 1987, 76). After Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965, a new Censorship Board was set up in Kuala Lumpur in 1966 and new censorship legislation was enacted based on the Cinematograph Films Ordinance of 1952 drafted in Singapore (Wan Amizah *et al.* 2009, 44). The Malaysian Censorship Act, which was amended in 2002, requires films (including those that are intended for broadcast on television and satellite channels) to be submitted to the Censorship Board for inspection before they can be exhibited and made available to the public (Saw 2013, 59; Chang *et al.* 2015, 236). The Malaysian film censorship guidelines contain a section on “Ideology and Politics,” which prohibits “films praising or spreading the teachings of Communism that will arouse the sympathy of audiences toward Communism.” Along with other conditions, such as “films containing ideological propaganda that is inconsistent with the *Rukun Negara* [the national ideology that was created after the 1969 racial riot to promote national unity],” “films that are detrimental to the political climate of the country,” “films that are detrimental to the image of the country,” and “films that may incite social tension,” films can be banned and censored for political reasons (Saw 2013, 59). However, the guidelines are arbitrary and inconclusive. This vagueness potentially contributes to the misuse of censorship for political motives. Moreover, the Minister of Home Affairs has the absolute discretion to override decisions made by the Censorship Board, and his decisions cannot be appealed

or challenged in court (Saw 2013, 41; 61–62). Similarly, *The Last Communist* witnessed the Minister of Home Affairs' decision to ban it after the uproar in the Malay language media. This ministerial post was held by UMNO politicians during the two controversies, and the two ministers did not hesitate to restrain discourse on the Communist insurrection in order to uphold the party's ideology and interests.

Stuart Hall (2016) has contended that although political hegemony is maintained through the manufacture of social consent, coercive devices will always be implemented to ensure consent's stability and dominance. As he asserts, "The moments of coercion and consent are always complementary, interwoven, and interdependent, rather than separated elements. Most systems of exploitation are maintained by the double modalities of coercion and consent; they are both always present" (Hall 2016, 171). Hence, film policies and regulations no doubt function as "repressive state apparatuses" (Althusser 1971) to ensure the dominance of the official nation-building discourse. The Ministry of Home Affairs and the Film Censorship Board play their roles as state apparatuses in fortifying the regime's status quo, hampering film workers' creativity and freedom of expression, and preventing film workers from expressing alternative (read: subversive) ideas.

This rhetoric of glorifying and reviving Communism unequivocally operates within the ethnic politics of Malaysia. Even though there was a regime change in 2018 and a reversion in 2020, any regime in power—no matter how ostensibly reformist it appears—is sensitive to knowledge and cultural production, especially in the Malay language, which potentially alters the general Malay perception of Malaysia's Communist past. Furthermore, the loss of UMNO and BN in the 2018 General Election was related to the government 1MDB (1Malaysia Development Berhad) investment fund scandal and the new pro-Malay party formed by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to compete for the Malay electorate (Funston 2018; Malhi 2018). Thus, it is rather naïve to consider the election's result as a sign of a totally new nation-building pathway and a diminution of the nation's ethnic politics. The new regime that took power was eager to maintain the official nation-building discourse and the ethnic-preferential system in order not to upset the Malay electorate, as any changes carried the risk of offending the anti-Communist Malay faction and consequently losing their political support. This is why all bans remain, including those on newer films about the Communist past such as *Boluomi*.

In contrast, films that adhere to the official nation-building discourse are always spared from the scissors of the Censorship Board. A good example is *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2019), adapted from the novel of the same name by the Chinese Malaysian author Tan Twan Eng. Commissioned by the Malaysian film production company Astro

Shaw but directed by a Taiwanese (Tom Lin Shu-yu), the film has a pan-Asian appeal. It stars Malaysian-born Angelica Lee Sin-je (who launched her entertainment career in Taiwan), Japanese actor Hiroshi Abe, Taiwanese veteran actress Sylvia Chang Ai-chia, and English actors Julian Sands and David Oakes. Although set in pre-independence Malaya, the film is not about the MCP or Communism but centers on the relationship between a Malayan Chinese woman and a mysterious Japanese gardener, who the film later reveals to be connected with the fate of the woman's sister, who suffered brutality at the hands of the Japanese army during the Second World War.

However, there are indeed two scenes portraying the Communist "rebels" during the Emergency, depicting them as terrorizing the protagonists and their British friends while searching for gold left behind by the Japanese army. This representation definitely fits in with the state-sanctioned image of Communists as terrorists and saboteurs. To increase its historical relevance, the film also includes flashbacks showing Japanese tyranny during the war and mentions Chinese resettlements in the New Villages during the Emergency. Nevertheless, like the original novel, the film does not feature a single Malay character or representation of Malay politics, even though it is set in the chaotic period when different Malay political entities fought and negotiated with the British for decolonization. Although creative license is always accepted in film adaptations, this film's production team chose to stay true to the book in order to avoid touching on Malay politics and Sino-Malay tensions, which have continued to haunt the nation since the pre-independence period. With its adherence to the official discourse of the Communist struggle, the film received favorable treatment from the Censorship Board and was allowed to be screened in Malaysian cinemas during the Chinese New Year festive period in 2020.⁴⁾

Besides censorship and outright banning, the ruling establishment has extended its grip on national film production through sponsoring film projects: Malay(sian) Patriotic Films (Lim 2011) such as *Bukit Kepong* (Dir. Jins Shamsuddin, 1981), *Leftenan Adnan* (Dir. Aziz M. Osman, 2000), *Embun* (Dir. Erma Fatima, 2002), *Paloh* (Dir. Adman Salleh, 2003), *1957: Hati Malaya* (Heart of Malaya; Dir. Shuhaimi Baba, 2007), and *Tanda Putera* mentioned above. These films are usually screened in August and September when the nation celebrates Independence Day on August 31 and Malaysia Day on September 16. Besides *Paloh*, which is considered to be more ideologically challenging for its "problematizing Malay(sian) history" (Lim 2011, 97), all the films mentioned above try to incite rightist Malay nationalist sentiment by upholding the Malays' ownership of

4) I wish to thank Dr. Lim Kien Ket of National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University for his suggestion to include *The Garden of Evening Mists* in the discussion.

the land. In these films, the Malays generally—and UMNO specifically—struggle tremendously to defend their rights and their motherland from the encroachment of foreign colonizers, invaders, and immigrant communities (see Khoo 2006; Lim 2011; Blackburn and Hack 2012, 265–276). Thus, the state is fully aware of the propaganda value of the film medium. These films have been used as a medium for the regime’s top-down approach in transmitting and canonizing the official version of the nation-building past via the remediation of the narrative template, in line with the mainstream historical discourse and school curriculum. Utilizing the twin apparatuses of censoring films and sponsoring patriotic films, the regime tries to dominate the representation of the Communist past while curbing rational discussion and debate regarding the Communists’ role in the nation-building process.

Reimagining Nation via Cultural Creation

Despite state pressure and suppression, a new generation of Malaysian multiethnic cultural workers and activists feel a conscientious need to renegotiate the national imaginaries by revisiting the nation’s past, which ties in with the issues of nation-building and the Communist struggle. They try to diversify and pluralize the nation-building discourse by deconstructing Cold War stereotypes while giving opportunities to Communists and leftists to voice their memories, aspirations, and frustrations. These cosmopolitan, middle-class, and progressive-minded cultural workers and activists are based mostly in the urbanized capital of Malaysia—Kuala Lumpur. They have tried to liberate the nation-building discourse from the jailhouse of the regime’s perspective while embracing new interpretations and expressions of national histories and memories. For Khoo Gaik Cheng, the interest and willingness of the younger generation of Malaysian cultural workers to “fill the gaps in Malaysian history” (Khoo 2010, 253) emerged because this generation carried less of a historical burden and emotional baggage about the past compared to the older generations:

This generation did not experience firsthand the contempt and violence of British colonialism and the Japanese Occupation. For these comparatively young citizens, the idea that one would readily toil in the jungle for over thirty years and fight and die to defend an abstract notion such as “freedom from oppression” is far removed from their urban comforts and daily reality. Distanced experientially and temporally from the emotive propaganda of the times, they are able to revisit a past with some detachment and curiosity. (Khoo 2010, 254)

Besides the films and documentaries mentioned above, another documentary worthy of note is Fahmi Reza’s *Ten Years Before Independence (10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka)*, (2007),

which engages with the history of the formation of the leftist coalition PUTERA-AMCJA. The documentary features interviews with elderly coalition participants who were still alive at the time. Unlike Amir Muhammad and Lau Kek Huat, Fahmi uploaded his 35-minute documentary online for free streaming and download as a way to dodge the Censorship Board. He even organized “underground screenings” in higher learning institutions, independent bookstores, NGO facilities, and art appreciation clubs. His main intention was to engage with Malaysian audiences and encourage discussion and questioning of the Malaysian nation-building history (Surin 2007).

Some Malaysian art workers have also participated in this consciousness-raising process through their creations. A fine example is the “documentary performance” titled *Baling (Membaling)* (*baling* means “throw” in the Malay language and is also the name of the town near the Malaysia-Thailand border where the peace negotiation between the MCP and Alliance Coalition were held in 1955), which was produced by the Malaysian theater company Five Arts Centre and toured various Malaysian states and international art festivals from 2005. The stage performance, which was choreographed by the theater artist Mark Teh with the visual design by Fahmi Reza, reconstructed the peace negotiations between Chin Peng, Tunku Abdul Rahman, and David Marshall (then chief minister of Singapore) by asking the performers to recite the peace negotiation’s declassified transcript. Different sets of readers were invited to read the same transcript, and sometimes performers switched roles. Occasionally there were improvisational acts, such as chairs thrown at the performers, to interrupt the reading process. Using different reading formats and tactics, audiences were invited to think about how the ghosts of the past continued to haunt the present by questioning the meanings of “freedom, loyalty, terrorism, reconciliation, surrender, sacrifice and independence” (Five Arts Centre n.d.). At the same time, the performance “create[d] a space for Chin Peng to appear as a legitimate political subject” (Rajendran 2020, 89) and assigned some weightage for Chin Peng next to his negotiation counterparts.

Five Arts Centre also curated an Emergency Festival in 2008 to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Emergency. The festival featured exhibitions, art installations, and stage performances dealing with the Internal Security Act, the introduction of identity cards by the British, the New Villages resettlement plan, and the repatriation of Chinese Communist sympathizers to China. Although the event was under surveillance by plainclothes police (Iwaki 2016), it did not stop the art workers from constructing “an intriguing re-examination and creative storytelling of the Malayan Emergency” (Choo 2008).

Besides, young Malaysians set up civil groups and organizations such as Malaysia Muda (Young Malaysia), Imagined Malaysia, Amateur, and Projek Dialog to draw atten-

tion to the problem of the lack of contestation in the official historical narrative. They organized talks, dialogues, and exhibitions and published online journals and articles to raise Malaysian awareness regarding the nation's alternative history. One example was an event titled "A People's History of the Malayan Emergency," held in July 2018 in Kuala Lumpur to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the start of the Malayan Emergency. The event was organized by Gerakbudaya, a subsidiary company of SIRD, with assistance from the above-mentioned civil groups. The event tried to tap into the changing political atmosphere in the aftermath of the 2018 General Election. It featured an exhibition; a forum discussion; singing and poetry performances by ex-MCP members; and the screening of another documentary by Fahmi Reza, *Revolusi '48* (Revolution '48), featuring talking heads of ex-MNLA veterans residing in Southern Thailand.⁵ The event also had a forum titled "Should We Rewrite Our History Textbooks?" to discuss how the state projected the nation-building past. On the third day of the forum, the two speakers—, Fahmi and Fadiyah Nadwa Fikri, a Malay human rights activist lawyer—raised the question of the marginalization of the Communist and left-wing movements in Malaysian history textbooks, especially with respect to nation-building and the country's independence. However, halfway through the session a few angry participants raised their voices and questioned whether the speakers were trying to justify the atrocities committed by the MCP during the Emergency while dishonoring the soldiers and policemen who died fighting the Communists.⁶ In the three days following the forum, *Utusan Malaysia* carried news items on the event on its front page with headlines such as "Nilai semula buku sejarah, iktiraf PKM" (Revisit the textbooks, recognize MCP), "Wajarkah perjuangan PKM ditulis semula?" (Should we rewrite the MCP's struggle?), "Komunis bukan pejuang" (Communists are not freedom fighters). The newspaper tried to divert the focus of the event to the "recognition of Communists" while giving the impression that the organizers and speakers were Communist sympathizers. The organizers then held a press conference and issued a statement to refute the newspaper's accusation. They clarified that the event's purpose was not to advocate for the "recognition of Communists" but to encourage dialogue regarding whether the leftists' and Communists'

5) Fahmi Reza considered the documentary "incomplete" because he was not able to include Chin Peng's accounts: Chin Peng was too old to enunciate proper sentences when the shooting team reached him (I was a participant in the screening session when Fahmi explained his "failure").

6) This conflict also related to a digitally doctored poster for the event circulated online a few days prior. The poster contained a provocative sentence: "Semua dijemput hadir ke forum perbincangan mengiktiraf komunis, orang Melayu dan bekas tentera juga dijemput hadir" (All are welcome to the forum that discusses the recognition of Communists; Malays and ex-servicemen are also welcome). The organizer denied having produced such promotional material. This doctored poster was allegedly a manipulative tactic by the anti-Communist faction to discredit the revisionist-oriented forum.

participation in nation-building should be included in the writing of Malaysian history (Cheong 2018; Khaw 2018).

Thus, the ultranationalist Malays and the anti-Communist faction tried hard to contest the revisionist approach of the country's nation-building discourse. Nevertheless, the ultra-rightist Malay nationalist agenda never had a full grip on the political beliefs of all Malays, especially the younger generation. Members of this generation are more critical minded and long for a more integrated Malaysian society. They feel that something should be done to broaden ethnically polarized mindsets. For instance, Fadiyah Nadwa Fikri and Fahmi Reza are among the core Malay public intellectuals who feel an urgent need to search for the Malaysian identity by confronting Malaysia's past, especially where Communists and leftists sought to play a role in decolonization. Their interests are mostly motivated by their longing for a Malaysian society that is less ethnically and religiously divisive.

In the aftermath of the forum clash in 2018, Fahmi Reza again teamed up with Five Arts Centre and Mark Teh to choreograph another "documentary performance" titled *A Notional History* in 2022. Besides Fahmi, this performance had two other Malay performers—the stage actor Faiq Syazwan Kuhiri and video journalist Rahmah Pauzi. Using a multimedia approach—including songs, archival visual and audio footage, newspaper clippings, secondary school history textbooks, examination papers, and also the talking heads of ex-MCP members from Fahmi's *Revolusi '48*—it aimed to interrogate the selective erasure of the histories and memories of the Emergency. By utilizing the dark-colored stage floor as a chalkboard resembling a classroom setting, the performers crafted reflective history narratives and memories regarding the Communist struggle that were dialectically related to the archival visuals and school textbooks projected on the screen. By doing this, the performance tried to critically engage the audience and "investigate and speculate on the possible histories for a different Malaysia, intersecting the personal, the national, and the notional" (Five Arts Centre 2022).

Conclusion

For Fiona Lee, the media assault and the ban on *The Last Communist* can be understood not only as a regime's attempt to strengthen its exclusionary Malay nationalist sentiment and maintain its power status quo, but also an attempt to evade a ghostly past that "ironically reproduce the conditions for its haunting" (Lee 2013, 94). The histories and memories of the Communist struggle still haunt the nation with questions such as "Who fought for independence?" and "Who is the legitimate owner of the country?" A nation

can be considered a “mnemonic community” that needs a representation of a “suitable past” for its nationalist movements and to establish a sense of continuity for future generations. However, remembering always occurs “in tandem with forgetting” (Miształ 2003, 17). The ruling establishment has long implemented the “management of memory,” in which the nation-building past has been selectively remembered and forgotten. The regime has tried to dictate the memory of independence and buttress its legitimacy via institutional means, such as the National Monument, national commemoration rituals, museum exhibitions, school textbooks, and media representations in, for instance, patriotic films. Generally, even since the disbandment of the MCP, anti-Communist sentiment has been fanned by political opportunists to increase their political capital. The role of the Communists in resisting the Japanese occupation is still a subject of dispute, and the Chinese nature of the MCP is still being manipulated to demonize the Chinese and marginalize them as immigrant Others.⁷ UMNO managed to sustain political support from the Malay community by casting itself as their “protector,” successfully defending their sovereignty from infringement by immigrants and the Communist insurgency. The BN and subsequent regimes have been willing to maintain the Communist bogey to sustain their political support from the Malay community.

After the 1989 Peace Accord, the topic of Communism and the MCP has become less sensitive. A certain level of commemoration, discussions, and publications is tolerated without much political interference—unless there are complaints, objections, or serious efforts to conform with the Malays’ mindset regarding the Communist struggle. Chinese organizations and cultural circuits have tried to battle the official discourse through their own commemorations and publications to tell their side of history. Filmmakers also try to engage with the vigorous push-and-pull of remembering and forgetting the nation’s past through their cinematic illuminations and imaginations. While some mainstream filmmakers (like those involved in patriotic films) continue to get government funding and work collaboratively with the state to produce films supporting the official discourse and national myth that secure the power of the regime, some independent filmmakers such as Fahmi Reza, Amir Muhammad and Lau Kek Huat try to retain their editorial independence and utilize film as a medium of political intervention to advocate for oppositional meanings and memories. They create spaces and opportunities for subordinated communities like the Chinese to speak back and fight for their

7) For example, at the 2018 convention of a conservative Muslim group, the Gerakan Pembela Ummah (Ummah Defenders Movement), one of its leaders openly expounded that the MCP army targeted only the Malays who resisted the Japanese and the British. The leader repeatedly asserted that minorities could potentially threaten the status of Islam and would try to seize political power from the Malays (Syed Jaymal 2018).

legitimate place on the road to independence. Although their films are officially banned from open screening in Malaysia, these filmmakers have tried to reach audiences through alternative platforms and mediums such as online video streaming services. Their act of recording is the act of remembering, and remembering becomes an act of resistance, of reframing values and instigating critical thinking.

Thus, the new generation of Malaysian cultural workers have put their efforts into the reappropriation of nation-building memories to construct a meaningful bridge between past and present. Although the ghosts of ethnic segregation still haunt Malaysian society, the forgotten, neglected, and denigrated leftist and Communist past has been recalled, reconnected, and reclaimed. At the same time, fresh and progressive discourses, memories, narratives, art curations, films, literature, and stage performances have been produced to challenge the ruling regime's hegemony. By revisiting and engaging with the past, these cultural workers try to inspire transformative political thinking and action in order to potentially nurture a more integrated Malaysian society that embraces ethnic and cultural pluralism.

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