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Hee, Wai Siam

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Anti-Communist films sponsored by the US Government in Singapore and Malaya: on the New York Sound Masters Inc.

Wai-Siam HEE

ABSTRACT This article examines anti-Communist films made by Hollywood in Cantonese and Malay in Singapore and Malaya in the Cold War context of the "Campaign of Truth" In the early 1950s, the United State Information Agency, an arm of the State Department, secretly commissioned and funded New York Sound Masters Inc. to produce and shoot several anti-Communist films in Singapore and Malaya. In 1953, cinemas across Malaya and Singapore screened *Singapore Story* and *Kampong Sentosa*, two Cold War products of the "Campaign of Truth." In addition to analysing the ideology of these films, this article also combines declassified archive material from the US and Singaporean National Archives with primary materials from UK, US, Singaporean, and Malayan periodicals from the Cold War era in order to explore how these two films use Malay and Cantonese to narrate a Hollywood's version of the Singaporean story. As these two films have been largely passed over in scholarship and the films and archives have not been regularly accessible, records of these films are absent from histories of film and television in the US, Singapore, and Malaya. This article aims to remedy this absence.

KEYWORDS: Cold War; Campaign of Truth; United State Information Agency; Anti-Communist films; Reeves Eason; New York Sound Masters Inc.; *Singapore Story*; *Kampong Sentosa*

> Our task is to present the truth to the millions of people who are uninformed or misinformed or unconvinced. Our task is to reach them in their daily lives, as they work and learn. We must be alert, ingenious, and diligent in reaching peoples of other countries, whatever their educational and cultural backgrounds may be. Our task is to show them that freedom is the way to economic and social advancement,

> the way to political independence, the way to strength, happiness, and peace. (Truman 1950, 4)

During the Cold War era, American president Harry Truman was the key figure behind the initiation of the global "Campaign of Truth." He also made the final decision to support the State Department's allocation of huge sums of money to Hollywood directors to support the making of anti-Communist films in various regions of the world. The quote above comes from a speech Truman delivered to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 1950. He called on America as a whole, including both public and private sectors, to devote all its energy to cooperating with the government, mobilizing all channels of information (film, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc.) to vigorously promote American truths about democracy and freedom at home and abroad, declare war on global imperialistic communism, and reveal the "red lies" of Communist propaganda organs. These were the aims of the Campaign of Truth. In South East Asia, Chinese communities were the main target audience of the Campaign. On the first of July 1949, a confidential document on US South East Asia policy submitted by the Secretary of State to the National Security Committee described the eight million Chinese people living in South East Asia as a minority who threatened the entire region:

> The problem is most acute in Malaya and Siam. The Chinese settle but resist assimilation. They maintain their ties with China, operate separate schools for their children, engage in Chinese politics and remit much of their wealth to their homeland. (Secretary of State 1949, 4-5)

The report also accused the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of playing a key role in disturbing the region, providing external guidance and support to Communist movements in South East Asia. As the CCP had gained the upper hand in the Chinese Civil War, there was a concern that the Communists in South East Asia would grow in strength, posing the ominous threat of Chinese revolt in most areas of the region (Secretary of State 1949, 5). The report continued to state, "The only alternative to British rule visible at this time is Chinese domination, which would be unacceptable not only to Malaya but also to us" (Secretary of State 1949, 16).

With the USSR's first successful atomic bomb test in August 1949, the victory of the CCP in the Chinese Civil War in October, and the eruption of the Korean War in June 1950, the cultural Cold War began to get rapidly more intense across the globe. On one side, the Soviet government used various propaganda organs to unleash the "Hate America" movement of the "Peace Offensive" against the US (Belmonte 2008, 47-49). On the other side, the Truman administration initiated the anti-Communist "Campaign of Truth" across the globe, and created the Psychological Strategy Board, tasked with planning psychological warfare operations in the USSR, China, Western Europe, the Middle East, and South East Asia (Cull 2008, 67-75). When President Truman signed the Campaign of Truth act into law in September 1950, the budgets for various American external propaganda projects were increased by an unprecedented amount. The money was mainly spent on producing more and better motion pictures, improving publications and press facilities, creating larger libraries, and creating a greater volume of information materials of all kinds, tailored to the needs and understanding of specific audiences (Defty 2004, 140). The budget for the exchange-of-persons program rose from 2.6 million in 1950 to 6.2 million dollars in 1951; the motion pictures budget was increased from 2.5 million to 11.8 million dollars; the radio operations budget was increased from 8.9 million to 16.1 million dollars; the cultural activities budget was increased from 2.2. million to 3.7 million dollars; and the press and publication budget was increased from 2.7 million to 6.8 million dollars (Henderson 1969, 45). Clearly, the film production budget saw the largest percentage increase, with a more than fourfold rise.

In 1951, the State Department proposed subsidizing and underwriting Hollywood studios which were unable to produce political feature films and distribute them overseas (Cull 2008, 58). The United States Information Agency (USIA) instructed the United States Information Service (USIS), based abroad, to sponsor or produce a large number of anti-Communist films in France, Italy, and especially South East Asia. In all, 31 countries were considered to be areas of particular concern. These were countries which had either succumbed to Communist domination, or were being severely influenced by the Communists ("Gains in U.S…." 1951, 11). US experts realized that the "Voice of America" radio station was unable to complete the Campaign of Truth on its own, citing the Chinese proverb that "a picture is worth a thousand words." For illiterate audiences, moving images held far more interest than sound and text, and so the State

Department decided to seek out help from Hollywood, signing contracts to sponsor companies to make anti-Communist films (Pryor 1951, 81).

By 1954, two thirds of these anti-Communist films were made abroad, using local talent. In the first half of 1956 alone, USIS assisted in the post-production of 65 documentaries and dramas across the world (Cull 2008, 106). In 1956, the Eisenhower administration called a major meeting in the White House. Based on the idea of nurturing democracy to drive out Communism, the plan was to nurture exchanges between people in various industries both at home and abroad; there were several committees relating to film workers and actors, and many people working in Hollywood were drafted in to assist. A list of members of the film committee from the USIA archives shows that the heads of Warner, Twentieth Century Fox, and Paramount were on the committee, illustrating that most of Hollywood's major players were already cooperating with the government ("Committee…" 1956; Shelton 1957). Japanese scholar Takeshi Tanikawa (2012, 54-56) has observed that in the 1950s, Hollywood went in the direction favored by the US government, making a large number of films through a collaboration between government and business. All of these told the world that a "strong US army maintains global peace and order."

In May 1952, the State Department produced an internal classified document entitled "USIS Plan for Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia." The two key points of propaganda strategy were: firstly, to comprehensively initiate "anti-Communist" propaganda, revealing the brutal social surveillance, repression, and frequent recourse to capital punishment instituted by the CCP in China, while promoting the democratic values of the US and the "free world"; secondly, to show that the CCP had no ability or inclination to help or protect Overseas Chinese people, and that the interests of South East Asian Overseas Chinese people were diametrically opposed to those of the Communists (Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs 1952). The production of this document indicates that South East Asian Overseas Chinese people had become the number one target of the US overseas propaganda effort. This document also marks the first and only time in which the US formulated a propaganda plan based on ethnicity and not nationality (Cui 2013,122) . This article explores the extent to which the Malay film *Kampong Sentosa* (1953) and the Cantonese film *Singapore Story* (1953) implement and reflect the Campaign for Truth's propaganda strategy of targeting South East Asian Chinese communities.

In 1953, Shaw Organization cinemas in Singapore and Malaya screened *Kampong Sentosa* and *Singapore Story*. The production and filming budgets were provided in full by the

USIA. A Hollywood director, B. Reeves Eason (1886-1956) was invited to Singapore to make the films, and local Chinese and Malay actors were hired to play various roles.[1] The films were produced by Sound Masters Inc., of New York. According to a declassified letter from August 1952 held in the Singapore National Archives, Sound Master started making anti-Communist films in Singapore in May 1951, staying in Singapore and Malaya for 15 months. The strings were being pulled behind the scenes by the State Department (Newton 1952).

Reeves Eason had a strong track record of making action films, Westerns and science-fiction serials in Hollywood. Early on his career, he had directed several pro-American short films in cooperation with the US military, working with Warner Brothers. These included the Oscar-winning *Give Me Liberty* (1936), *Fighting Engineers* (1943), *Mountain Fighters* (1943), and *Men of the Sky* (1942) (Warner 1947, 24). After his death, the *New York Times* remembered him as the "first action director" ("B. Reeves Eason" 1956.). He excelled at directing action films involving animals such as wolves and horses: *The Sign of the Claw* (1926) and *Call of the Yukon* (1938) are comprehensive displays of his consummate skill at directing animals.

He was also skilled at directing low budget routine B films; film historians have concluded that his talents lay in "directing action (but not actors)"[2] (Katz and Nolen 2012, 436). It is therefore not unexpected that the two anti-Communist films he directed did not achieve much in terms of actor direction (see below for details). In addition, film historians have observed that "low budgets and speedy schedules prevented him from generating much excitement in his own films as director." As anti-Communist films had to fit into a fast-changing political situation, the director often had to make them in the shortest possible time for the lowest possible cost. This may be one reason that the State Department asked him to make these films. The budget and time constrains also meant that these propaganda films could not be made with care, factors reflected in their limited artistic merit.

These anti-Communist films, produced or sponsored by the USIA, provide a rich range of research materials in all disciplines, but they have been neglected in the US for a long time. The primary reason for this is the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which forbade any product of the USIA, including films, being screened publicly within the US borders. This act was amended in 1990, but as the relevant archives and films are not easily obtainable, records of these films are absent from histories of US film and television (Horne 2016, 409). Of course, they have also been forgotten in histories of Singaporean and Malayan film. Singapore film historians Jan Uhde and

Yvonne Ng Uhde (2010, 299-338) did not mention these films in their work *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*. The production team of these films, from the director to the backstage workers, were all foreigners without exception. Local involvement was limited to the actors. Therefore, it is hard to straightforwardly categorize these films as Singaporean films.

However, from the perspective of transnational cinema, these anti-Communist films should be seen as a surviving early embryonic form of Singaporean transnational cinema. They combine American capital and Hollywood talent and technology with local actors and shooting locations. Although Singapore and Malaya were not yet independent, these films emphasized how local people must be loyal to their home state regardless of their ethnicity. A summoning up of national consciousness is part of the motivation for this, though it is more interesting to note the way in which Cold War ideology gave an early impetus to anti-Communist themes in the national cinemas of Singapore and Malaysia. They provided a model for the anti-Communist themes in subsequent Singaporean and Malaysian national feature films, and laid an ideological foundation for the long-held anti-Communist policies of the Singaporean and Malaysian governments.

Even today, Singaporean and Malaysian governments prohibit any local films which show the MCP (Malayan Communist Party) in a positive light from appearing in the media. In recent years, Singapore and Malaysia have prevented the documentaries *To Singapore, With Love* (2013) and *Absent Without Leave* (2016) from being screened in any form in their respective countries. These documentaries, which present a positive portrayal of MCP history, feature interviews with MCP members in exile. Even though the MCP now exists in name only, the Singaporean and Malaysian governments still refuse them entry for reasons of national security. The MCP members describe their patriotic feelings for Singapore and Malaysia passionately on camera, and express hope that they will be permitted to one day return home. *Kampong Sentosa* and *Singapore Story* are important first-hand materials which impel us to further rethink how Cold War ideologies constructed national identity for Singaporean and Malaysian ethnic communities.

***Kampong Sentosa*: the Malayan people versus MCP operatives**

As early as 1950, the director of the USIS in Singapore, Henry Lawrence, published an article in *The Straits Times* which discussed the aims of the US in establishing USIS branches in

Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, and the services it provided there. Naturally, the phrase "anti-Communist" did not appear in the article, which emphasized that the aim of the USIS was to facilitate international exchanges of knowledge and provide public services. One of these public services was to provide US documentaries, films, scripts, and music held in existing US libraries for borrowing by public bodies, allowing local audiences to get to know American lifestyles and achievements (Lawrence 1950, 9). The activities of the USIS in Singapore also included covertly supporting the production of *Kampong Sentosa*, which was made in Singapore under the auspices of the "Campaign of Truth." This film was shot by a US company under secret instructions from the State Department in Washington, and told the story of "villainous Communist guerrillas preying upon these poor Malays" (Halsema and Schmidt 1989, 29).

The agent for *Kampong Sentosa* in Singapore and Malaya was the Shaw Organization. The film was screened in the organization's REX cinemas across Singapore and Malaya. At the time, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* advertised the film in this way: "The story focuses on the upheavals in Malaya. All the roles are played by Malayans, and it is a current affairs film in Malay" ("Advert…" 1953a). Filming for *Kampong Sentosa* took place in Ponggol, Singapore, accompanied by the Singaporean film censors. It successfully won the cooperation of amateur actors to perform in the film (Hall 1953,11). The story was set in a Malay village named Kampong Sentosa and a Chinese fishing village called Kampong Siak. The opening of the film proclaims in Malay that "this story was filmed in Malaya, and stars the Malayan people." Following this, the film opens with an extreme long shot of the jungle, just like anti-Communist films of the British colonial Malayan Film Unit. This leads the audience to imagine that the jungle contains hidden "*penganas*," or terrorists. The extra diegetic Malay narration for this section is given in full below:

> Throughout the jungles of Malaya, there is a murky shadow, which terrifies the people of Malaya. Here, the soil is fertile, and the people vigorous, resolute, and strong. Rice is their staple food. Rubber production has brought wealth and prosperity to society. Rich tin ore resources meet the needs of the entire world market. However, these very same jungles contain terrorists, who harass, wreak havoc, and kidnap. They have made the peaceful, happy life of the villagers

> fearful and tense. This vast jungle hides vicious terrorists. They threaten, kill, and terrorize the upstanding people of this land.

Straight away, the film sets up a binary good/evil opposition between the Malayan people and MCP operatives. The film is set after the British colonial government announced the Emergency, as a Chinese inspector dashes between Kampong Sentosa and Kampong Siak in order to urge both village heads to form "people's defense militias" to protect the property of the villagers from the MCP. To start off with, the village head, shaman, religious leader, and teacher in Kampong Sentosa are hesitant. They think that as their village is so small and peaceful it will escape the attention of the MCP. Kampong Siak, meanwhile, is somewhat wealthier, and the Chinese village leader is more supportive of forming a self-defense militia. The plot arrangement here reflects the requirement laid out in the "USIS Plan for Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia" that the personal interests of Chinese people in South East Asia should be shown as being diametrically opposed the expansion of Communist Party power in the region.

The male leads are the Malay Mat and the Chinese Ah Tong. They work in construction together, and live in Kampong Sentosa and Kampong Siak respectively. Ah Tong is the son of the Kampong Siak village head, and a very diligent worker, helping Mat build houses. Mat is in a relationship with the daughter of the Kampong Sentosa village head. Mat's long-term ambition is to save enough money to marry her, but the ring he purchased with his hard-won savings is stolen by a Chinese operative Ho Peng, sent to the village by the MCP. This inflames Mat's anger towards the MCP. At the same time, the shaman's home is ransacked by a team of MCP operatives led by the camouflage-wearing female guerilla Hong Mui. They steal the shaman's medicine, money, and rice, and tell him not to report the raid on pain of death. After this series of incidents, the village head of Kampong Sentosa finally agrees to support the formation of a self-defense militia.

Hong Mui, now wearing civilian clothes, pretends to be a villager, and intends to secretly infiltrate Kampong Siak to investigate the situation there. While she prepares for this, Ah Tong happens to row past. She lies to Ah Tong, telling him that she wants to go to the village to visit a relative, and Ah Tong takes her. The two start to become friends, and Ah Tong suddenly remarks how beautiful Hong Mui is. Hong Mui also feels attracted to the handsome Ah Tong. After that, Ho Peng gives the stolen ring to Hong Mui, grabbing her hand to show his love, but Hong Mui

slaps him, and the two break off contact. Not long after this, the leaders of both Kampong Sentosa and Kampong Siak are kidnapped by Ho Peng and the MCP and held captive in the jungle. The leader of this MCP group is called Lau Mah. Both Ho Peng and Hong Mui report to him. Hong Mui is angry at the way Ho Peng casually incites the guerillas to punch and kick the defenseless village leaders, while Ho Peng mocks Hong Mui for being softhearted, implying that she is liable to surrender to the enemy. Ho Peng later reports to Lau Mah that Hong Mui is intending to betray the MCP. Hong Mui is then interrogated and beaten by Ho Peng before being tied up to await execution. However, she manages to escape from the jungle and turns herself in at a British camp.

At the same time, the Chinese inspector has finished secretly training the people's self-defense militias. He appoints Ah Tong as the leader of the militia for Kampong Siak, while Mat is appointed as the leader of the militia for Kampong Sentosa. Guided by Hong Mui, the British troops join up with the self-defense militias and enter the jungle. After several intense firefights, they succeed in apprehending the MCP operatives, defeating Lau Mah, and rescuing the village heads of Kampong Sentosa and Kampong Siak. Hong Mui played a key part in this triumph, and the Chinese inspector suddenly reveals her true identity for the first time. She had been a British undercover agent all along, who had infiltrated the MCP forces and was passing on intelligence. Ah Tong and Mat's performance as militia leaders also came in for commendation by the British. Finally, the lovers get married: Mat marries the daughter of the village head, and Ah Tong marries Hong Mui. Both weddings are heartily celebrated by the people of Kampong Sentosa and Kampong Siak.

The didactic flavor of this film is very heavy. While the female lead Hong Mui is played in a relatively smooth and natural way, the other actors clearly appear to be reciting memorized lines, and their movements are stiff and awkward, like living puppets of the director. This could be down to the fact that the actors were all amateurs. Furthermore, the director was not especially skilled in directing actors in the first place (Katz and Nolen 2012, 436). Combined with his inability to speak any Malay, Sinophone languages, or local dialects, this meant he could not effectively direct the actors or get a feel for the local languages. In the film, all dialogue between Chinese characters is almost in Malay, as is dialogue between the Chinese MCP members. Even Chinese families use Malay to speak to one another: this is a world in which Chinese people have become thoroughly assimilated into Malay culture. The contemporary US document "USIS

Plan for Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia" clearly states that promoting assimilation had become the baseline of all US policies concerning the Chinese diaspora (Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs 1952). This film, responding to US policies, proposes assimilation as a solution to the issue of local Chinese people retaining loyalty to China. This was also the nationality policy adopted by the Malay-dominated Malayan government after independence in 1957. The film is an early expression of a Malayan national myth, centerd on Malay language and culture, later promoted in the country after independence. Cold War ideologies legitimized this assimilation discourse, which hides its racism under the cloak of nationalism.

However, most of the Chinese characters cannot speak Malay all that fluently, giving a strong impression that they have memorized their lines by rote. The Malay they speak is highly colloquial, and in grammar and vocabulary is very similar to that spoken by the Malay characters, though there are differences in pronunciation and fluency. The Malay actors perform in a similarly stiff manner, with no spark in their eyes. It almost looks as if they are being ordered to act. In addition, the MCP force in the film contains a Malay fighter, something rarely seen in other anti-Communist films. However, he does not play an important role in the film, being just a flunkey of Lau Mah's. Lau Mah's name was likely chosen for its resemblance to Mao Zedong (it is written with the same Chinese character). This Malay-speaking Lau Mah is brutal and greedy: in his conversations with other MCP members, he uses no Communist rhetoric at all. He is more like a bandit leader camped out in the jungle, who emerges from time to time to rob and pillage. This depiction fits the Anglo-American imperialist stereotype of Communist party members. At the end of the film, in the jungle battle scene, the cuts between scenes come thick and fast, while the sound of gunfire rattles the trees. This gives a strong impression of the state of war that existed throughout the Emergency, and is obviously a sequence in which the director, experienced in shooting action films, felt in his element.

Perhaps because the director had a long track record in Hollywood of making Westerns with a dramatic natural backdrop, he is also relatively successful in filming the local scenery. For example, when Ah Tong and Hung Mui are rowing on the sea together, the merging colors of sea and sky and the camerawork involved in the high angle long shot create a peaceful and beautiful effect. Elsewhere, an extreme long shot shows off the beauty of the *kelong* stilted platforms and fishing boats in the evening sun. In the shots of the stocky but strong shadow of Ah Tong jumping into his boat, the director captured something of the way that the villagers and the local

landscape merge into one. The film uses the realism of a Western to record the local rural scenery of Singapore's Ponggol area in the early 1950s. To the director and the filming team, this could not have been more novel and exotic; to the villagers, it was merely the backdrop to their everyday lives.

Local scenery aside, if the film is assessed based on its cobbled-together plot, soundtrack, and camerawork, it appears affected, empty, and dull. Overall, this is not a Hollywood film with any commercial logic. The surprising thing about it is that it was very successful in the Singaporean/Malayan box office. It was constantly trailed as the product of a "ACE American Cameramen in Malaya" ("Advertisements Column 2…" 1953), and with the press describing it as a "strong action film" ("Emergency on the screen" 1953), it enjoyed some of Hollywood's reflected glory. This is quite probably why it attracted audiences. Its first run in the REX cinema, operated by the Shaw Organization, went on for three continuous days (12-14 May 1953) with five screenings per day at different times ("Advertisement…" 1953a). On 17 July 1953 and 13 April 1954, *The Straits Times* ran advertisements inviting audiences to view this anti-Communist film in the Queens cinema, also run by the Shaw Organization ("Advertisement…" 1953b; "Advertisement…" 1954). This nearly two-hour long film, made in Singapore, was not publicly marked as a USIA product, and gained similar box office success to other Hollywood anti-Communist films (Cull 2008, 109).

At the time, a *The Straits Times* reporter investigated the film in a report entitled "What lies behind mystery of *Kampong Sentosa*?", pointing out that "how a commercial firm in America came to make a film in the Malay language in Malaya is a mystery that no one in Singapore can satisfactorily explain" (Hall 1953). The reporter pointed out that the film was "frankly anti-Communist propaganda woven into the homely life and loves of a particular group of kampong villagers" before feigning ignorance to ask:

> Was it Sound Masters altruistic gift to the world? Did they make it at the bidding of the United States Government or, possibly for some millionaire philanthropist? Neither Shaw Bros. (the agents for the film here) nor Singapore Public Relations (who gave the making of it their blessing) nor the United States Information Service in Singapore (who assigned the teams) could throw any light on the matter last week. (Hall 1953)

The reporter then interviewed the USIS acting director, who responded that he found nothing surprising about Sound Masters making the film and asked in response, "It is an American company which makes both documentary and commercial films. Why shouldn't they make a film about Malaya just as the National Geographic Magazine devoted an issue to Malay?" (Hall 1953) To round off the piece, the reporter provided a short review of the film, saying that "It is not necessary to understand Malay to appreciate the film. The photography is excellent, the story slow-moving, but it manages to sustain interest, and no attempt has been made to exaggerate the facts" (Hall 1953). Clearly, this report would have been very helpful in the promotion of the film. The reporter's insinuation that the US government was aiding the production of anti-Communist films may well have prompted his readers to go to the cinema and see the film out of curiosity.

Singapore story: "our new future is a new China" ?

Several months after the screening of *Kampong Sentosa,* Sound Masters followed up on their success with the Cantonese drama *Singapore Story,* released at the end of the year. This film was also directed by Reeves Eason, and the script was written by an American author, Glenn Tryon (1898-1980)[3], who was "familiar with the East"; the parts were played by "local Cantonese artists" ("Film news…" 1953). In an interview given in his later years, former USIS Singapore employee James J. Halsema revealed that the most important covert activity engaged in by USIS in Singapore at the time was forging contacts with future local leaders. These included Lee Kuan Yew, at that time still on the political left, and the future Singaporean president Wee Kim Wee. It is difficult to underestimate the influence that the USIS had on these future leaders (Halsema and Schmidt 1989, 24-30). Francis Stonor Staunders' research on the CIA reveals that during the Cold War the State Department was covertly courting intellectuals across the world who were disillusioned with Communism but still believed in socialism. These intellectuals, known to the authorities as the "non-communist left," were employed in spreading US-supported culture and received US aid (Saunders 1999, 62-63). Therefore, it is not surprising that the USIS would establish relations with the left-leaning but non-Communist Lee Kuan Yew. As a matter of fact, the English title of Lee Kuan Yew's own memoirs is *The Singapore Story*. Though there is as yet no documentary evidence to show that the title of his memoirs was inspired by the Cantonese film *Singapore Story*, Lee Kuan Yew's way of appraising Chinese school students, which is

clearly the perspective of an English school student, is broadly similar to the way in which the Americans in the film look upon Chinese school students. In his work, Lee Kuan Yew takes the standpoint of an English school student, and describes the Chinese middle school students, who despite their youth have learned to whip up crowds to oppose imperialism and colonialism under Communist Party influence:

> They felt dispossessed, and their lack of economic opportunity turned their schools into breeding grounds for the Communist […]. After the war, the record of its resistance to the Japanese gave the MCP a prestige that made it a powerful force among the impressionable young, and it proceeded to build up a network of cells in the classrooms. Many teachers became communist cadres or sympathisers; many overaged students whose education had been interrupted by the Japanese occupation were indoctrinated and co-opted; and the school management committees of merchants and shopkeepers were either sympathetic towards them or fearful of opposing them […]. It was a world full of vitality, of so many activists, all like jumping beans, of so many young idealists, unselfish, ready to sacrifice everything for a better society. I was deeply impressed by their seemingly total dedication to the cause of revolution, their single-minded determination to overturn the colonial government in order to establish a new world of equality and fairness. And I was to grow increasingly fearful of the direction in which their leaders were taking them. But I was also convinced that if I could not harness some of these dynamic young people to our cause, to what my friends and I stood for, we would never succeed (Lee 1998, 167-173) .

Lee Kuan Yew's standpoint throughout the entire book is that the Chinese school students' anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist movements were being directed behind the scenes by the Communist Party. The film *Singapore Story* focuses on precisely this: how middle school students at a Chinese school in the 1950s are influenced and used by the Communist Party, eventually ending in a tragedy of death and broken families.

The opening of this film describes the prosperity of Singapore under British rule in an extra-diegetic Cantonese narration. The opening highlights Singapore's position in the world and

its importance as a free trading port. As the voice over says, "everyone who has contributed to Singapore's prosperity feels pride in this achievement," the camera lingers on a British flag in the breeze, holding an extreme close-up for several seconds, hinting that this prosperity is related to the efficient rule of the British. Afterwards, the film's temporal setting on 22nd September 1951 is introduced, as Singapore's attainment of city status is celebrated by all. In addition to an imposing British troop review and youth brigades marching, there are Chinese dancing dragons and lions, float parades, fireworks, singing, and dancing. The male lead is the Chinese Singaporean cloth merchant Wang Chongde. The 22nd September 1951 also happens to be his 60th birthday. He goes into a tearoom, and while Zhang Meihua, his wife's uncle, and several other friends congratulate him on his birthday, he humorously remarks, "Look how many people have come out to celebrate this big day today. The Governor is giving a speech, there will be dancing dragons in the street tonight. All this is for my birthday! But there's no need to go to such lengths…." Following this, Wang, described jokingly as having the "air of a prosperous landlord" by his friends, claims that his good reputation is founded on his businesses and shops. However, he is worried, saying, "I have so much property, but I don't know whether in future there will be enough for my children and grandchildren to enjoy." This line prepares the ground for the hope he expresses at his birthday dinner that evening, that his three sons will inherit the property and expand the family businesses.

The rest of the film from this point on tells of how these hopes eventually come to naught. His three sons are Ah Guo, the eldest, Ah Xiang, the middle child, and Ah Zhou, the youngest. They are all middle school students at a Chinese school, and are often taken for rides in a sports car by a middle-aged Chinese man with a tie and smart clothes. This man is played by the same actor that played Lau Mah in *Kampong Sentosa*. In *Singapore Story*, too, he is an embodiment of the Communist Party. Named Cai Liang, his character is a Communist special agent. During car-rides, he indoctrinates Wang's three sons with anti-imperialist and anti-colonial thought, lending them a copy of Lu Junping's *New China* to read. He also brings them into a study group, where they are exposed to his ideas:

> You are already adults: why do people persist in treating you like children? These articles are fascinating. When you have taken the time to research them, your knowledge and interest will increase. You must be careful – never discuss our

> work with anyone else, because our work requires the utmost secrecy. If we can keep our secret long enough, we will succeed. Those who oppose us will soon realize our strength. When the time comes for us to revolt against them, we will naturally become the leaders of the people. Marxism and Leninism will prove this fact – right now, this ideology has liberated the new China.

These speeches, designed to inspire students towards the Marxism-Leninism of the new China, have a particularly profound effect on Ah Guo and Ah Zhou, while Ah Xiang is more reserved. Ah Guo is about to graduate from middle school, and after classes helps Wang Chongde do the accounts in the cloth shop. Ah Xiang and Ah Zhou help with deliveries. Later, Wang Chongde discovers that Ah Guo has made errors in the accounts, and has been reading *New China*. This makes him wary and suspicious of his eldest son, and so he decides to give the job of keeping accounts to Ah Xiang, ordering Ah Guo to take charge of deliveries. Ah Guo insists on doing the accounts, and gets into a pointless argument with his father. He secretly tells Ah Xiang to fiddle the counts, and donates the unreported money to the Communist study group. Ah Xiang is not willing to cheat his father, and starts to doubt what he is taught in the study group.

Two cross-cuttings follow. One thread shows Cai Liang in the study group calling on the young students to discard superstitious religion, and indoctrinating them with the Marxism-Leninism of the new China: “the new China is the people’s China; this world is the people’s world!” The other thread shows Zhang Meihua in the teahouse, earnestly instructing young people in traditional family values (“honesty, faith, and respect”), and the importance of developing scientific knowledge. He also criticizes the Communist Party, but not by name: “for their ideals, these evildoers will band together and destroy society. Perhaps they have some temporary power, and can bamboozle the people of the country, but in the end they will be struck down by clearheaded good people!” Wang Chongde also warns his sons not to “be taken in by this new political idealism,” but only Ah Xiang steps back from the edge of the precipice. Cai Liang works hard to incite Wang’s sons to escape to China, and threatens them by saying, “Men who do not go back to China will have to serve in the army for the Singapore government.” This statement subtly foreshadows the National Service Act implemented by the British colonial government in the 1950s. This act, published in the media on the 17th March 1954, was a response to the armed struggle against the British led by the MCP. The British decreed that “all

young males of all ethnicities between eighteen and twenty must register in preparation for attending military training, or else face punishment" (Chen 2012, 27, 37-38). This measure would later spark strong resistance among Chinese school students, and trigger collective demands for peace. A "service exemption delegation" was formed to negotiate with the British. At the time many Chinese school students were overage due to the war, and were thus eligible for national service. The British demanded that they serve, which was equivalent to demanding that they drop out of school.

The peaceful collective demands for peace were brutally and bloodily repressed by the British on the 13th May 1954, in what became known as the "513" incident. At the time, Lee Kuan Yew was serving as a legal advisor to the Chinese student service exemption delegation. He acted for detained students, highlighted the unreasonable and arbitrary actions of the military police, and taught the students how to respond to police interrogation. Lee Kuan Yew spoke and argued for the students on issues that concerned them, in particular Chinese language education, in the Legislative Council and other political forums. This ultimately won the strong support of Chinese school students for Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party, which in turn led to the party assuming power. However, these historical turning points are not reflected in Hollywood's *Singapore Story*: this film reflects more the desire of the colonial government for the people to imagine a simpler, more linear, vision of historical progression in Cold War reality.

Returning to the film, Ah Guo and Ah Zhou, having heard Cai Liang's idealized descriptions of the new China, decide to leave Singapore for China. The day after Ah Guo marries his girlfriend Xiulan, he and Ah Zhou secretly board a ship bound for China. Ah Xiang, who was originally going with them, decides at the last minute to cancel his journey. Cai Liang murders him for this. Wang Chongde and his wife loose three sons in the space of one night, and are overcome with sadness. Cai Liang repeatedly extorts money from Wang, claiming that he had knowledge of where his three sons had ended up in China but needed a large sum of money in order to bribe Chinese officials to let them come back to Singapore. Wang repeatedly falls for the trick, and is left virtually penniless, still hoping vainly that his sons will return.

When Ah Guo and Ah Zhou arrive in China, their idealism, summed up in the slogan "Our new future is the new China," is soon dented. They did not realize that Cai Liang had arranged for them to join the People's Liberation Army. The officers' barked orders and the tough military training make Ah Guo long to leave the camp. He finds out that his comrade He

Bin is about to be transferred to do clerical work in a Party office. Ah Guo leaves some personal items in the camp to imply that he has committed suicide. Actually, he killed He Bin, stole his numbered uniform, and took up the clerical position in his stead. As "He Bin," Ah Guo abuses his authority, defaming his comrades and gradually rising through the ranks to become a cadre of director rank.

Wang Chongde, who has finally seen through Cai Liang's lies, decides to visit China himself to see some relations and search for his sons. As he is telling his woes to some relations, he criticizes the Communist Party, and is reported to the authorities by one of them. He is arrested and interrogated. The official performing the interrogation is "He Bin." and though Wang Chongde immediately recognizes his son, "He Bin" remains unmoved and pretends not to recognize his father. After hearing the evidence of the accuser, "He Bin" sentences his father to death. Wang Chongde, restrained by guards, loudly curses his son for his lack of feeling and filial piety before being shot dead. Not long after, "He Bin" is defamed by someone else in the office, and also ends up being executed. At the end of the film, Ah Zhou also ends up a victim of circumstance. In the heat of the Korean War, he is killed by a hand grenade while trying to save a fellow soldier. Back in Singapore, Zhang Meihua reports Cai Liang to the police. He dies in a car crash while being chased by the police in his sports car. Of Wang's family, only two women are left: his wife and daughter-in-law. After Ah Guo leaves for China, his wife gave birth to a son to continue the Wang family line. This child symbolizes hope for the future of Singapore, implying that the film is not purely a tragedy, but entrusts the task of fighting Communism to the next generation.

This film was premiered on the 13th December 1953 at Singapore's Orient and Daguang cinemas. The *Sinchew Daily*'s "Film News" column described the film in the following way: "It tells of a tragedy befalling a Chinese cloth merchant through a twisting plot. It is extremely moving" ("Film news…" 1953). It was screened until 16 December. On the 15th, an advert in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* claimed that the film was about ideological conflict, and how greed brought disaster. The advert highlighted the fact that the film was "completely shot in Singapore, a new production of Sound Masters Inc. of the USA" ("Advert…" 1953b).

Film Bridge, a Shaw Organization publication, even claimed that the "CCP has dispatched a secret envoy to Singapore" in order to exaggerate the film's authenticity; the film was also advertised as

> a moving new Cantonese film which depicts the life of Chinese people in Singapore, describing the all-encompassing extent of a father and mothers' love. The tragedy it tells of is extremely moving: hardworking students take a wrong turn in life, and a wonderful family is enveloped in gloom as a result (*Film Bridge* 1953).

Between December 1953 and January 1954, this film was also screened in cinemas across Malaya, including in Ipoh, Kampar, Malacca, and Penang. It was even screened again in 1959 and 1961 in Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, under a slightly altered Chinese title ("Advert…" 1959; "Advert…" 1961).

The narrative mode of *Singapore Story* adheres strictly to the two key points laid out in the "USIS Plan for Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia." The first of these was to comprehensively initiate "anti-Communist" propaganda, and reveal the brutal social surveillance, repression, and frequent recourse to capital punishment instituted by the CCP in China (Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs 1952). The film exaggerates the dark side of the CCP: the father's criticism of the CCP's actions is reported through social monitoring programs, with the result that he is sentenced to death. The eldest son also builds his official career through reporting others, who are all sentenced to death; finally, he too is reported and sentenced to death. The film foresees the loss of individual liberty and the decline in democratic values resulting from the comprehensive system of social monitoring implemented by the CCP. The second was to show that the CCP had no ability or inclination to help or protect Overseas Chinese people, and that the interests of South East Asian Overseas Chinese people were diametrically opposed to those of the Communists (Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs 1952). The film uses the story of how a Singaporean Chinese cloth merchant's family is destroyed by the Communists to teach Singaporean and Malayan audiences to be on their guard against Communist threats to their life and property; the interests and wealth of the family-centered Overseas Chinese and the Communists are shown to be mutually incompatible.

Singapore Story's re-presentation of the early 1950s Chinese school students is stiff and dull in the extreme. They are like wooden puppets controlled by the Communists, reciting lines. They mutely and passively accept the orders of Communist agents, and appear to have barely any ability to organize and act on their own initiative. In comparison, the Chinese school students of the same era in Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story* are quite different: "The

students were well-organized, disciplined, and cohesive. They had remarkable self-control and were capable of mass action, of collective demonstrations of defiance that made it difficult for the government to isolate and pick out the leaders" (Lee 1998, 168). This notwithstanding, the film *Singapore Story* and Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story* both reach the same goal through different means. They both accuse these Chinese school students of being brainwashed by the Communist Party. The film greatly exaggerates the tragic fate of Singaporean students tricked into "returning to the motherland to serve" by Communist agents, while obscuring the story of the many Chinese school students who voluntarily "returned to the motherland" out of a genuine embrace of Marxism-Leninism, and the many who were deported by the British colonial government and forced to go to China.

Is this an effective political propaganda film? Compared to the cobbled-together plot of *Kampong Sentosa*, this film has a more rounded plot. A lot of thought has gone in to the major battle set piece, as the two sides exchange fire across mountains and rivers. Tanks and soldiers increase the realism of the scene, which is far more engaging than the jungle firefight in *Kampong Sentosa*. However, the dialogue in the film is just as stiff as that in *Kampong Sentosa*. The director and screenwriter did not have a feel for the local languages, while the actors were ordered to mechanically recite their scripts, which had been translated from English to Cantonese. The lines thus sound very awkward. Though the male lead Wang Chongde and his wife are played relatively naturally, the other actors are stiff in front of the camera. These Chinese amateur actors also appeared in *Kampong Sentosa*, and their performance is similarly lacking. These problems are not limited to these two films. They also occur in anti-Communist films sponsored by the State Department in other countries. At the time, a US banker called upon the US government to completely halt funding for all anti-Communist films shot overseas, as they wasted millions of dollars of taxpayers' money on films that looked as if they were made by amateurs and do-gooders while not achieving their intended aims. He felt that professionally-made commercial dramas were successfully selling the American value system and lifestyle to the rest of the world, because they were entertaining and thus netted good box offices both at home and abroad ("Castle Scores…" 1953).

Conclusion

Both films adopt a narrative technique involving a clear division between good and evil, one characteristic of Hollywood melodramas (Schatz 1981, 226-228). A binary opposition is set up between the people of Singapore and Malaya, who are "good," and the MCP, who are "evil." However, unlike the Hollywood melodrama, neither film depicts romantic relationships being sacrificed in an oppressive and unfair social environment (Schatz 1981, 222). The main dramatic thread of both films does not focus on emotional interactions between men and women, the expression of these emotions is often portrayed in a very cursory manner in the films. Therefore, neither film is a straightforward melodrama. Rather, the director devotes more effort to creating battle scenes, meaning that the films are more like action films. Both *Kampong Sentosa* and *Singapore Story* feature battle scenes. *Kampong Sentosa* re-presents British troops executing MCP guerillas, while *Singapore Story* re-presents US troops using tanks to defeat Chinese troops. Like other Anglo-American anti-Communist propaganda films, they both carry the message that powerful armies led by the US and Britain are maintaining global peace and order.

In both films, all the film workers behind the scenes are from the US or UK, while everyone appearing in front of the camera is Singaporean or Malayan. There are no important American characters in the films, and so naturally they cannot directly promote American values and lifestyles in the way that commercial English language dramas can. But, after all, the audience for these local language films was different to that for English language Hollywood films. The former were aimed at a mass audience in Singapore, Malaya, and Indonesia who could only speak local languages or were resistant to English language films. The latter were screened in Singaporean, Malaya, and Indonesian cinemas, and were primarily aimed at educated audiences fluent in English or who enjoyed viewing English language films. When the USA formulated the "Campaign of Truth" psychological warfare program, the authorities focused their attentions on local mass audiences ("Gains in U.S…." 1951). As most of this audience could not speak English, the films had to be presented in local languages in order for the "Campaign of Truth's" anti-Communist message to be understood.

Sound Master made another two films in Singapore and Malaya during this period: the color Cantonese film *Road to Kota Tinggi* (1953), and the Cantonese film *Paper Tiger* (1953c)[4] Based on the materials available at this time, *Road to Kota Tinggi*, only 40 min long, tells the story of a man who collaborates with the MCP.[5] He is wanted by local police, and to evade capture he sneaks into a Cantonese opera house while a show is being played on stage. The

depiction of the violent bandits oppressing the people, who decided to fight back and win, persuade the man to surrender and co-operate with the police, helping them catch some MCP guerrillas (*Catalog* 1954). This film successfully achieves its anti-Communist aims through its incorporation of a Cantonese opera on ancient Chinese bandits who start off by robbing the rich to feed the poor, but end up depriving the people of their livelihood. The plot of the film appears in a catalogue of 16mm motion picture films in the library of USIS Singapore, and so it is likely that that this film may have been available for viewing in the Singapore USIS library.

Road to Kota Tinggi was also screened in mobile cinemas, provided by the Selangor news department, across Malaya. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* reported that when it was screened in Tanjung Malim, "in particular, the depiction of the theater performance was very accurate; it was charming and realistic. The film won broad praise from the audience. Over a thousand people came to see the film that evening, an unprecedented crowd" ("Selangor…" 1954). The fact that over a thousand people turned out to watch an anti-Communist film shows that, while the quality of the films made by Sound Master in Singapore and Malaya was variable and insufficient to win over the educated classes, it was sufficient to attract the mainly illiterate "great masses." The help of the UK and US in circulating the films among the people, screening them for free using mobile cinemas, also ensured that the nakedly anti-Communist message of these films would be readily accepted by this relatively undiscerning audience. Over a longer period, it seems that they could have achieved the aims of the "Campaign of Truth."

After Sound Masters Inc. left Singapore and Malaya in August 1952, they did not return to make any more anti-Communist films. Their departure coincided with the later years of Truman administration, and the next year the Republican President Eisenhower took office. Eisenhower did not abandon the Truman administration's "Campaign of Truth" anti-Communist film policy, but paid a lot more attention to the issue of whether these films had had any effect in their various regions. According to a report assessing the effect of American propaganda in 44 countries issued in November 1952, US political propaganda did not have its expected effect in Indonesia. In comparison to the people of other South East Asian nations, Indonesians were more strongly anti-American, suspicious of the West, or neutral in their attitudes (Porter 1952, 8). As *Kampong Sentosa* and *Singapore Story* were only screened in 1953, this report did not touch upon their effectiveness. In any case, throughout 1953 the *New York Times* continued to feature reports arguing that these anti-Communist films were not effective, and calling on Congress to

greatly reduce the massive expenditures lavished on these programs by the Truman administration ("Citizen investigator…" 1953).

After President Eisenhower took power, he did not abandon the policy of requiring Hollywood directors to make anti-Communist films. Instead, through the USIA, he successfully invited the Hollywood producer Cecil B. DeMille to take up a position as film consultant chairman of the IIA (International Information Administration). This appointment was made in the hope that he would be able to ensure the positive cooperation of the US film industry with the State Department (Pryor 1953).[6] Two weeks later, the *New York Times* publicized a list of names provided to the State Department by the Screen Directors Guild of America. 28 Hollywood directors had been selected to sign a contract requiring them to set aside up to four weeks to make three or four anti-Communist films in support of the "Campaign of Truth's" continued assault on Communism (Pryor 1953, 34). After the names of these 28 directors were revealed, the IIA director issued a denial, clarifying that the authorities had at this stage "only made inquiries" ("Chief of…" 1953). This angered the chair of the Screen Directors Guild of America, who publicized a letter sent to him by the State Department, and claiming that the State Department's denial of the existence of the list of 28 names was rather ironic way to recognize the patriotism of the members who were eager to agree to the government's request ("Film Man…" 1953). Later, the IIA director responded that reports claiming that 28 directors had been confirmed for the project were untrue, and continued to call on the entire US film industry to lend the IIA their patriotic support. Based on this incident, it appears that the mainstream discourse in Hollywood was very willing to support the State Department in making these anti-Communist films. B. Reeves Eason's name was not on the list of 28 directors, as he had died of a heart attack in 1956 after his return to the US.

These Cold War films, made in his later years, not only implement the anti-Communist ideologies of the Truman era, but also re-present how different ethnicities in Singapore and Malaya used their own vernaculars to respond to the call of the "Campaign for Truth." The most prominent characteristic of contemporary Singaporean film is its liberal use of mixed vernaculars; this characteristic is one which is already evident in *Singapore Story*. Although there is still no scholarship exploring how B. Reeves Eason's film team boosted the development of local Singaporean and Malayan film after they left the region, they did collaborate closely with the Malayan Film Unit while making the films. After leaving Singapore and Malaya, Sound Master

also loaned some leftover equipment to the Malayan Film Unit (Newton 1952). The Malayan Film Unit, making films in various vernaculars, was a key driver in the rise of Singaporean and Malayan national cinema in the 1950s. After the establishment of Malaysia (including Singapore) in 1963, the Malayan Film Unit changed its name to the National Film Department of Malaysia (Hee 2017). Moreover, the anti-Communist themes seen in the Sound Master and MFU films have been continuously replicated in contemporary Singaporean and Malaysian national cinema, supported with vast sums of public money. Therefore, Sound Master can be seen as setting the trend in Singaporean/Malaysian cinema; the history of Singaporean/Malaysian national cinema must also be traced back to the anti-Communist films made by Sound Master. This is perhaps the only residual historical value these films have in the contemporary Singaporean/Malaysian local context.

Notes

[1]Also spelled B. Reaves Eason, as seen in the credits of his film *Call of the Yukon* (1938). However, the spelling "Reeves" was used in the credits of *Kanpong Sentosa* and *Singapore Story*, as well as in silent films such as *The Sign of the Claw* (1926). This article uses the spelling "B. Reeves Eason" throughout for consistency. In addition, some films, such as *Mystery Mountain* (1934) use his nickname, Breezy Eason.

[2] Among "many action-filled scenes he handled was the famous chariot race in the silent version of *Ben-Hur* (1926), employing more than 40 cameramen; the exciting charge sequence in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) and the burning of Atlanta sequence in *Gone With the Wind* (1939)" (Katz and Nolen 2012, 436).

[3] Glenn Tryon was an actor, director, producer and screenwriter (Katz and Nolen 2012, 1465).

[4] *Paper Tiger* was directed by B. Reaves Eason and the script was also written by him. It was only 24.79 minutes long.

[5] The credits to *Road to Kota Tinggi* show that the production company was Asia Film Productions (Worsley 1953). However, the script records for this film (Frank 1953) show that Sound Masters Inc remained behind the scenes. The director was Wallace Worsley Jr. (1908-1991). Asia Film Productions was a Hong Kong company which produced anti-Communist films. Its funding came from the US NGO the Asia Foundation, which was sponsored and supported by the State Department.

[6] The IIA is intimately related to the USIA: both are organizations under the State Department.

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Notes on contributor

Wai Siam HEE is Assistant Professor of Chinese and film at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has written extensively on cinematic and gender issues, with articles in the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, Journal of Chinese Cinemas* and *Queer Sinophone Cultures.* He is the author of *From Amorous Histories to Sexual Histories: Tongzhi Writings and the Construction of Masculinities in Late Qing and Modern China*. He has co-edited two books, including *Transnational Chinese Cinema: Corporeality, Desire* and *The Ethics of Failure* and *Memorandum: A Reader of Singapore Chinese Short Stories*. He has recently completed two book manuscripts. The first of these is entitled *Post-Malaysian Chinese-language Film: Accented Style, Sinophone and Auteur Theory.*; the second is entitled *The Cultural Production of Early Chinese-language Cinema in Singapore and Malaya Before and During the Cold War*.

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